



4. State of the Media – Literature Review

4.1 Mbayo (2006)

In his article entitled *Status of the Media in English-Speaking West Africa*, US-based Sierra Leonean academic Richard Mbayo proposes that the general literature on Sierra Leone (including literature on economic realities) must be looked at in reviewing the media over the past decade. The UNDP *Human Development Report 2004* listed Sierra Leone as the poorest country in the world (UNDP, 2004). As well, there are the legacies of the more than ten years of civil war to contend with, and the current difficulties of government inefficiency, mismanagement and corruption. The state of the media needs to be evaluated with these contexts in mind.

While the decade of war was in some respects disastrous for the media, Mbayo believes that it also helped bring about revolutionary changes in the ownership of some media outlets – encouraging private ownership in newspapers, radio stations, TV and Internet. However, argues Mbayo, in spite of the achievements in liberalisation of media ownership and control, the struggle for a second, perhaps more significant freedom – the right to free expression of ideas through established channels of public communication – continues to be elusive, putting media practitioners at perilous odds with political authorities.

Mbayo also discusses efforts to build a democratic space in the country, including efforts to restructure civil-military relations, the creation of democratic institutions and the rebuilding of physical structures. He argues that adjusting the psyche of a deeply divided community, which has become accustomed to years of militarisation, displacement and war, requires a sustained process of trust-building and re-education. This is where the media, and media development initiatives, can play a major role. However, before media organisations and personnel can discharge this important responsibility they, too, need to be re-educated about their role in reconciliation and peace-building. This is particularly the case because the media also suffered abuses during the days of war – newspaper offices were burnt and personnel were maimed, or even killed. The media were caught up in the web of war, making it difficult to establish the neutrality or non-partisanship of the media, even the independent media. The media's credibility was seriously undermined at the hands of the fighting factions, both government and rebels.

In the current fluid and high-risk environment of Sierra Leone, the media can (and do) play an important role, either contributing to further hatred, extremism, conflict escalation and a return to violence by engaging in unprofessionalism and bad practice or, alternatively, promoting tolerance, moderation, conflict transformation and peace-building. The question is: how can the constructive role of the media be supported?

4.2 Richards (1996)

The vast majority of Sierra Leoneans are avid consumers of the radio stations, newspapers, films, television programmes and videos that are available to them. According to Paul Richards in *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone*, many Sierra Leonean newspapers are lively tabloids (at times containing more political opinion than factually-based news) with low circulations, produced in difficult circumstances to a low technical standard. Successive governments have tried to control their (at times) unruly political spirit. The privately-owned media have long had to tread carefully when reporting on the activities of government. During the war, journalists were assaulted and/or jailed (or even killed) for their reports on the activities of the armed factions. Journalists have been branded as unpatriotic and unprofessional, as rabble-rousers, rebel collaborators and rebels. The media have also contributed in some small part to the current situation. The undue antagonism some media show towards national leadership and other unprofessional media behaviours are divisive.

The local media are, however, obvious agents for bridging the gap between the government and the people. In an environment where the government is, for various reasons, slow to articulate fully or initiate the process of change or rebuilding, the media must play a crucial role in maintaining the dialogue between the government and civil society.

4.3 I.B. Kargbo, personal communication, April 2006

In an interview with the author of this report in April 2006, Ibrahim Ben Kargbo, President of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ), argued that the generally low level of professional skills, coupled with the weak economic and technological base of most media institutions (more than half of the country's estimated 500 or so practising journalists may not have had competent professional training before setting out to practice), contribute to the difficulties the country's media face in playing a constructive role. In spite of recent efforts to introduce media studies courses into universities, the issue of professionalism (or the lack of it) of the emerging post-war media practitioners is still a serious concern.

4.4 Bibliography

International League for Human Rights (ILHR) (2001) *'Killer' bills and decrees: The Sierra Leone media's struggle for survival*. Retrieved April 2006, from <http://www.ilhr.org/ilhr/reports/killerbills/index.html>

Mbayo, R. (2006) The status of the media in English-speaking West Africa. *Standard Times*, 7 April, p.8

Richards, P. (1996) *Fighting for the rain forest: War, youth and resources in Sierra Leone*. Oxford: James Currey

4.5 Individuals consulted during the research

I.B. Kargbo, President, Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, personal communication, April 2006

R. Mbayo, Media Academic, Bowe University, personal communication, April 2006

Key findings

- The civil war was in some respects disastrous for the media, with infrastructure destroyed and many journalists killed. However, it also led to the opening up of the media to some extent, including the beginnings of private sector participation in broadcasting.
- The media have a vital role to play in re-establishing dialogue between government and citizens.
- Improved and more frequent training opportunities are needed for journalists if they are to play their necessary dialogue-building and democracy-building roles.