

“Journalists find themselves in a tight corner”

Interview with Rev Geraldine Fobang on local journalism in armed conflicts

What are the main challenges for local media in times of conflict?

I come from the South West and North West region of Cameroon, where there is an armed conflict between the Anglophones and the government. From my local experience, one of the biggest challenges for journalists is that they are not financially viable. Because of this, they tend to turn to politicians in the government and write sensationalist reports to have something to take home at the end of the day. In addition, the Cameroon government has adopted

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new laws on terrorism in the wake of the Anglophone crisis. These laws are also targeting journalists. They are being hushed, they are being convicted and condemned, and they are now also being charged under terrorism laws instead of civil law. Just recently, the Anglophone journalist Mancho Bibixy was sentenced to 15 years in jail by a military tribunal for speaking about the Anglophone crisis. And he’s not the only one: there have been other journalists who have been locked up in jail because they reported on the Anglophone crisis. This is challenging for all reporters and journalists as it creates an atmosphere of fear which prevents them from reporting on the crisis. You know the facts but you are afraid to tell the truth. Press freedom has been stifled by the government. It puts journalists in a difficult situation: if you do not report in favour of the government, they may come after you, but if you report too much in favour of the government, the secessionists (Anglophones) may come after you. In general, journalists find themselves in a tight corner in Cameroon because of the armed conflict.

Another difficulty is that we do not have many trained journalists. A lot of them are amateurs and dilet-

tantes in the profession. They lack the methodology and ethics of journalism. With them spoiling it, it is sometimes difficult to fix from a professional point of view. They tend to report in a sensationalist style which appeals to a lot of people. But it creates big challenges and difficulties in a conflict situation.

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In what way are social media challenging traditional media?

Another big challenge that we are grappling with is the use of social media. It sometimes seems as if social media are overturning the tables of traditional journalism. We are struggling to handle fake news and what I call the “breaking news syndrome”. With this new technology, many people – so-called citizen journalists – are disseminating their information from their bedrooms, sometimes to a wider audience than traditional media can reach. But they do not know the facts and often do not understand the impact of their stories. They also lack moral responsibility. Perhaps they just don’t care. But they certainly lack any understanding of how they are harming others with their videos, photos or language. Some use hate speech and have no concept of how it affects others. The greatest challenge for us in traditional journalism is to counter the information and speed by which hate speech is being disseminated on social media. As a traditional journalist, you take time to gather the information,

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go to the editorial room, write your story, cross-check your facts – and by the time you publish your story, the “citizen journalist” will already have written and

“When we see fake news being distributed, we take it up on our own pages and provide verified facts for opinion-leaders and those who already have access to the internet.”

shared his story. The damage may already have been done before you are able to react. So we are struggling all the time to repair what social media have done. However, in Cameroon it is not that much of an issue at present, since many people do not have access to the internet yet. Many still depend on local media for their information, and we are still gaining ground. But we also offer our services on Facebook, Whatsapp and Youtube

How do you make sure you provide a platform for inclusive journalism?

I’ll be frank: at the Christian Broadcasting Service Radio, a community radio station, we pride ourselves on being the pioneer of peace journalism in Came-

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ron. We make reporters and editors aware of their responsibility to find an alternative choice of words, so that they use sober language which does not heat up the conflict. We also provide an inclusive platform to bring everyone on board. When we report on the conflicts in Cameroon, we do not only talk with government officials to hear their story, but we also try to bring them into a dialogue with the opposition, the secessionist or marginalised Anglophones. We also offer programmes where people can call in and share their views. That way, we

provide the community with a moderated platform to exchange ideas and views.

What is special about a community radio station?

We struggle to make the community know that their radio is 90 per cent owned by them. When they understand that they own the radio, it increases their interest and commitment. However, there is also the struggle to sustain the radio programme. But even if they do not have the financial means to support our work, they can support us with food or plants from their farms. Sometimes, they drop by and leave some cocoyam on our doorstep. In addition, we apply for grants from the local council or Parliament to continue our programmes. To foster deeper mutual understanding, we put the council members and politicians in touch with the community and bring them together for face-to-face interaction. That way, they see that they are accountable to their community, and we give a voice to those who would be voiceless without us.

“We give a voice to those who would be voiceless without us.”

Rev Geraldine Fobang

Rev Geraldine Fobang is a Pastor with the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) and Station Manager of the Christian Broadcasting Service (CBS) Radio Buea, FM 95.3 MHz. The Cameroon Community Media Network (CCMN) is committed to building the capacities and advancing the rights of community media practitioners in Cameroon. The network assists journalists and community media to respond to communities’ communication needs and establishes peace journalism as an alternative to conventional journalism. As President of the CCMN, she organises and facilitates capacity building workshops on peace and conflict-sensitive journalism. She is currently involved in the training of community media reporters on election reporting.



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