

# Report Public Evening Event

Berlin Summer Dialogue 2018

sef:

## Building Peace through Media Engagement? The role of local media in armed conflict

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**Media professionals are under pressure in many countries around the world: 33 journalists and media staff were killed and more than 300 were arrested in the first six months of 2018 alone. Around 45 per cent of the world's people have no access to a free press, according to the latest World Press Freedom Index. However, access to information is vital, particularly during armed conflicts. How can the local media operate under these conditions? What are the opportunities for – and limits to – peace-oriented reporting during conflict? These questions were explored at a public evening event – part of the Berlin Summer Dialogue – which took place in Berlin Town Hall on 29 May 2018. The discussion was chaired by Ute Schaefer, Deputy Director of DW Academy.**

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### The political environment puts pressure on free speech and press freedom

As State Secretary Christian Rickerts from Berlin's Senate Department for Economics, Energy and Public Enterprises reminded the audience in his welcome speech, "Truth is the first casualty of war". For that reason, he said, it is important to advocate tirelessly for the human right to a free press and free speech. Contrary to the popular perception, it is less the large media companies but the local professionals – journalists, camera operators and production teams – who play a significant role during conflicts. In her opening speech, Dr Elke Löbel, Commissioner for Refugee Policy at the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) in Bonn, also emphasised the importance of press freedom as the foundation of a democratic society.

Reverend Geraldine Fobang, Station Manager of local CBS Radio Buea, reported from her own experience of the Cameroonian government's increasing efforts to clamp down on press freedom. In the South West region of Cameroon, there is armed conflict between the French-speaking majority and the Anglophone minority, which has been simmering for years. Journalists who report on the conflict are placed under surveillance by the government, which recently adopted new laws on terrorism that are also targeting journalists. One journalist was sentenced to 15 years in jail by a military tribunal for reporting on the crisis. Reverend Fobang was adamant that she would not be intimidated: "As a professional journalist, I have a duty to cover what is happening, even though these are often matters that politicians would rather leave in the dark."

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### Conventional or peace journalism?

Reporting in armed conflict is not only about uncovering abuses, however; it is also about sensitivity. Dr William Tayeewa, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Journalism and Communication at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, pointed out the key difference between conventional and peace journalism. Conventional journalism tends to be driven by the maxim "If it bleeds, it leads". This kind of sensationalist reporting may improve ratings or increase the readership, but it can also fuel conflict and violence. Conflict-sensitive peace journalism adopts a different approach: its purpose is to give all the warring factions a voice. A style of reporting that facilitates dialogue can thus help to build a better understanding among conflict parties and ensures

that media coverage does not exacerbate crises. Local media and citizens' radio are particularly suited as dialogue platforms as they work on behalf of their communities from the grassroots up. For Nicolas Boissez, Head of Communication and External Relations at Fondation Hirondelle in Lausanne, peace journalism is no different from solid, good-quality reporting: "Journalism should focus on the facts and

challenge, especially since reliance on funding from political sources or conflict parties undermines media credibility.

## Professionalising the media

Another key factor in boosting the credibility of the journalistic offer is the provision of high-quality training for young journalists. With so much unquestioned sharing of information on social media, fact-based journalism is becoming even more important. In countries of the Global South and in conflict settings, radio is the only source of information available to many people: only the elite has access to social media, said Reverend Fobang. Even so, news distributed through these channels can worsen conflicts. Through her local radio station, she therefore attempts to check possible fake news and corrects the information if necessary.

## Local media play a key role in conflicts

As the examples from Uganda and Cameroon showed, local media in particular give a platform to all groups within society and can thus facilitate dialogue, for example among conflict parties. Every voice is heard and can contribute to the debate. Citizens' radio stations, which are often supported by local communities, have a good sense of the topics of relevance at the grassroots. However, these stations too must operate in accordance with journalism's professional ethics and maintain their political independence. All the participants therefore regarded programmes to improve professional standards among local journalists as a priority issue.

To sum up, peace journalism can support compromises and de-escalation of armed conflicts. However, as the discussions showed, it is also essential to identify innovative and sustainable funding models for local media and peace journalism projects, many of which are currently dependent on external support from international organisations and would be forced to close down if it were withdrawn.



Ute Schaeffer (Chair), Dr William Tayeebwa, Rev Geraldine Fobang and Nicolas Boissez (l.t.r.)

verify their accuracy. And it should give a voice to local communities – to all groups within society, in fact. All of this is a challenge during conflicts."

## The search for sustainable funding models

Another major challenge for peace journalism is funding, a point emphasised by Dr Tayeebwa. He referred to the example of a print media and TV broadcasting organisation in Uganda: "Their business model is very successful because it relies on sensationalism. But their style of reporting, which is highly dramatic, inflames and often unwittingly escalates conflict." By contrast, many peace journalism programmes in Uganda are supported by external donors, including some German NGOs. If this funding is withdrawn, the media projects are often forced to close down. Nicolas Boissez agreed that identifying sustainable and independent funding is a major



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