

SUSTAINING THE CONVERSATION: MEDIA, INFORMATION FLOWS AND CONFLICT IN LIBERIA

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ACRONYMS

ALICOR	Association of Liberia Community Radio
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
ELBC	Liberian Broadcasting Commission
LMP	Liberia Media Project
LNP	Liberia National Police
NEC	National Elections Commission
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PUL	Press Union of Liberia
UNMIL	United Nations Mission in Liberia

1. INTRODUCTION

Perceptions of peace and security define the reality of peace and security for people across Liberia and these are defined by the type and quality of information they can access. The country does not have a history of good or free access to information. Most Liberians relied on word of mouth, traditional messengers/town criers or foreign radio stations even before the disruption of the 1989-2003 conflict. Outside of Monrovia and a few coastal towns, there has never been a good transport or broadcasting infrastructure. Only a few towns had their own electricity grid and connections to the wire telephone network before the war destroyed them. The pre-war state – single-party dominated until 1980; military-based thereafter – was intrusive with regard to media freedoms. During the 1989-97 war, the state broadcasting system was barely operational, most private media houses and journalists went out of business or into exile and those which remained had to seek arrangements with or protection from the armed factions which carved up the country. Between 1997 and 2003, private media owned by President Charles Taylor became dominant, allegedly financed from state coffers. Media critical of his elected government were intimidated, fined or shut down. The period since then has been one of quite rapid decompression, albeit Liberians remain poorly informed by global or even regional standards.

While access to information appears to have been revolutionised by the post-war combination of liberal governance, technological advances, private investment and international activism, there are many examples of how increased flows of information have provoked or stoked conflict as well as worked to prevent, manage or resolve it. This briefing summarises research conducted in Liberia in 2010-11 in an attempt to answer three questions:

- How do Liberians access information about their communities and nation?
- How does the type of information they are able to access contribute to or undermine peace in Liberia?
- What are the challenges to Liberian media in providing reliable information within the present context?

It concludes with some brief recommendations to the European Union and the wider donor community on how Liberian media might be supported to provide reliable and conflict-sensitive information as Liberia not only undergoes technological, economic and social change but begins a shift in its fundamental dependence on foreign partners.

2. METHODOLOGY

This report is based primarily on two workshops held in Liberia in May-June 2011. Both were attended by media and youth-group representatives and explored the challenges of conflict-sensitive reporting in the context of Liberia's 2011 electoral period. The first workshop was held in Gbarnga, Bong County, focused on community radio (the dominant information medium in most hinterland areas), and brought together reporters and producers from ten member stations of the Association of Liberia Community Radios (ALICOR) located in Bong, Lofa and Nimba counties in central and northwest Liberia. The second workshop was held in Monrovia, Montserrado County, and included journalists working in print and radio from the capital. These workshops were preceded and supplemented in 2010-11 by interviews with media professionals in and from Bong, Gbarpolu, Grand Gedeh, Lofa and Montserrado counties, as well as findings from the Liberia Media Project (LMP), which included additional community radio stations in Grand Kru, Maryland and River Gee counties.¹ Additional research was conducted in Monrovia in November 2011 following the general elections.

Additionally, the following section on media availability and alternative sources of information benefited greatly from the University of California, Berkeley School of Law Human Rights Center's 2010 survey of public attitudes.² This survey was based on a random sample of 4,501 adult respondents from all 15 Liberian counties conducted in November-December 2010 and thus provided quantitative data otherwise impossible to gather directly in the course of this research.

1 The LMP was an Alert-led initiative between 2004 and 2010, funded by Comic Relief. The other LMP partners were Justice and Peace Commission of Liberia (JPCL), Press Union of Liberia (PUL), Centre for Justice and Peace Studies (CJPS), and Flomo Theatre Productions.

2 P. Vinck, P. N. Pham, T. Kreutzer (2011). *Talking Peace: A Population-Based Survey on Attitudes about Security, Dispute Resolution, and Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Liberia*. Human Rights Center, University of California: Berkeley.

3. MEDIA AND INFORMATION FLOWS IN THE LIBERIAN CONTEXT

The flow of information in Liberia has undoubtedly improved since the end of the war. 66% of Liberians felt that their access to information had improved between 2005 and 2010. Perceptions of improved access are strongest in the west, with only the three most southeasterly counties reporting on balance that things had worsened or stayed the same. That said, the majority of Liberians feel very poorly or not-at-all informed about events in Liberia as a whole. Liberians feel much better informed about events in their local community.

TABLE 1: PERCEIVED LEVEL OF INFORMATION (% NOT AT ALL OR VERY LITTLE INFORMED ABOUT)

	Bomi	Bong	Gbarpolu	Grand Bassa	Grand Cape Mount	Grand Gedeh	Grand Kru	Lofa	Margibi	Maryland	Greater Monrovia	Nimba	River Gee	Rivercess	Rural Montserrado	Sinoe	TOTAL
Community events	41	23	30	20	40	36	39	28	26	39	42	33	37	30	39	33	34
National events	71	61	61	52	72	61	74	51	43	64	44	54	72	76	52	70	54

Source: P. Vinck, P. N. Pham and T. Kreutzer (2011). *Talking Peace*, pp.22-24.

3.1 AVAILABILITY OF MEDIA

Liberia has a relatively open media environment but, as with so much in the country, there is a huge differential in access to information between the capital and its environs and the rural hinterland. Radio is the one medium which penetrates the entire country, although as yet no domestic network has truly national coverage. The southeastern half of the country, where population density is very low and there are few roads, is notably deficient in access to media.

TABLE 2: CONSUMPTION OF MEDIA BY TYPE BY COUNTY (% OF ADULT POPULATION EVER ACCESSING)

	Bomi	Bong	Gbarpolu	Grand Bassa	Grand Cape Mount	Grand Gedeh	Grand Kru	Lofa	Margibi	Maryland	Greater Monrovia	Nimba	River Gee	Rivercess	Rural Montserrado	Sinoe	TOTAL
Radio	89	79	77	82	85	68	61	74	86	75	93	85	67	66	89	75	83
TV	18	8	11	18	26	16	9	11	25	15	69	21	13	4	44	8	32
Newspapers	17	8	6	23	15	18	6	9	26	13	61	24	12	7	37	8	29

Source: P. Vinck, P. N. Pham, T. Kreutzer (2011). *Talking Peace*, pp.22-24.

Broadcast media Radio is the pre-eminent medium in Liberia and virtually the entire country has reception of at least one local, national or international radio station. Some 83 percent of Liberians listen at least occasionally to the radio, with half of this total listening every day. 63 percent of Liberians report that radio broadcasts constitute their primary source of information on national and local events. The main radio station is UNMIL Radio, established and run by the Public Affairs section of the UN Mission in Liberia peace support operation, listened to by 58 percent of Liberians. Reception covers every county. Star Radio, which was established by the Swiss Fondation Hironnelle and partially funded by foreign donors and widely syndicated, was the second most widely received radio station in 2010 but has since ceased to broadcast. Also popular nationally are the UK-based BBC World Service, the US-based Voice of America, and the state-operated ELBC, which has limited reception outside the northwest. In addition there is a large number of private FM radio stations in Monrovia and a few other towns. A network of three or four dozen community-owned radio stations covers much of the rest of the country for at least several hours a day, often including syndicated programming produced by UNMIL and, until 2010, Star Radio. National and commercial radio stations broadcast mostly in standard and simplified English, with limited programming in local languages. Community radio stations broadcast mainly in Liberian English and any of Liberia's 16-or-so local vernacular languages.

Television remains very much a minority medium confined to Monrovia and the towns. Less than one third of Liberians watch any television, though this number rises to 69 percent in Monrovia. Beyond the northwest coast, fewer than 20 percent of Liberians have any access to television. Transmission by "national" networks, one state and at least four private, is almost solely in English and confined to Monrovia and its vicinity; however, satellite dishes receiving international programming enable viewing in other parts of the country. Whereas radios run on batteries, there is no mains electricity outside central Monrovia so any television owner must have access to a generator.

Print media While Liberia has a diversity of privately owned newspapers, their circulation is very limited. At least 18 newspapers are published weekly or more frequently; however, none has a print circulation of more than approximately 3,000 copies. Only 29 percent or half of literate Liberians ever read a newspaper. Availability of print media is strongly linked to transport infrastructure. Outside Monrovia, circulation is highest in counties which have a paved road connection to Monrovia to facilitate distribution. Reflecting tiny markets of readers and advertisers and a lack of presses or newsprint, no significant newspapers are printed outside of Monrovia and distribution, even in larger towns, is highly erratic.

ICT and 'New' media Liberia is among the world's least connected nations in terms of internet access, thanks to the destruction or theft of its entire landline telecommunications infrastructure during the war and the general lack of electricity. Internet connections therefore rely on expensive satellite links, meaning that internet cafes are uncommon, even in Monrovia. Internet connectivity is very slow and reportedly significantly worsens during times of high demand for information, for example the electoral violence in November 2011. Internet access via mobile telephones is currently possible in Monrovia but prohibitively expensive for all but a few. Web-hosted social media are thus barely accessed. While most newspapers regularly publish their stories online, this is aimed at the highly influential Liberian diaspora. Indeed, a number of Liberian news sources are run by journalists based in the US and little received in Liberia itself. All this may begin to change with the arrival of the first fibre-optic cable connection in November 2011. Within the next decade the cable-fed mobile network is likely to expand to become the primary means for Liberians to access and disseminate information, although few Liberians are currently aware of these possibilities.

3.2 ALTERNATIVE SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Despite the high penetration of radio across Liberia, over one third of Liberians rely on friends, family and local leaders to provide them with information about the outside world. This may be a matter of word of mouth within communities, of traditional messengers or of village meetings, but it is increasingly a case of communicating with family and friends who have moved to town via mobile telephones and text messages. At least one third of all Liberians – or well over half of adult Liberians – own a mobile phone, which are very widely used to transmit news or rumour. However, not all of the rural population lives within reception range and the lack of connectivity is predictably worst in those areas without access to formal media.

TABLE 3: MAIN SOURCE OF INFORMATION (%)

	Bomi	Bong	Gbarpolu	Grand Bassa	Grand Cape Mount	Grand Gedeh	Grand Kru	Lofa	Margibi	Maryland	Greater Monrovia	Nimba	River Gee	Rivercess	Rural Montserrado	Sinoe	TOTAL
Radio	69	52	66	63	60	52	31	54	70	52	77	64	35	37	72	46	63
Friends/Family	30	32	29	27	39	41	61	35	25	39	18	29	54	54	23	49	29
Local Leaders	0	14	1	7	0	5	4	8	4	4	0	5	4	6	3	3	4
Other	0	2	4	3	0	2	5	3	1	5	5	3	7	3	2	3	3

Source: P. Vinck P, P. N. Pham, T. Kreutzer (2011). *Talking Peace*, pp.22-24.

Differentials in reliance on friends and family for information are strikingly apparent by location, wealth, education and gender. Access to formal media is directly correlated with wealth and education, meaning that the poorer and less educated a Liberian, the more likely he or she is to rely on casual information sources. Women are more than three times as likely as men to rely on family and friends for information. Reflecting work balances, ownership of radios, literacy and command of English, media consumption in Liberia is disproportionately a male activity.

4. INFORMATION, PEACE AND SECURITY IN LIBERIA

Three post-war innovations have sharply increased Liberians' access to information: the commitment of the 2005-elected government to open media and freedom of speech; heavy investment in national and local radio stations by UNMIL and international NGOs; ongoing rapid expansion of mobile telecommunications access through private investment. However, the provision and receipt of information remains a double-edged sword: rumour, threats and fear have the potential to flow just as quickly as well-sourced information, often utilising the same media. The following sections present examples of positive and negative flows of information as reported by respondents consulted by Alert in 2010-11.

4.1 THE STABILISING ROLE OF INFORMATION

Notwithstanding the relative disconnectedness of Liberia from the rest of the world and great inequalities in access to information within the country, contemporary Liberians live in an information-rich environment compared to previous generations or their own experience during the war. The rapid spread of mobile phones and FM radio in the last decade has had a stabilising role in the intrinsic sense of opening access to information, but has also necessitated examples of specific good practice as the media, citizens and community leaders seek to build peace and counter information which might otherwise stoke conflict. Five examples may be proposed: firstly, media contribute to resolution and reconciliation where there has been conflict. This they may do by thorough and impartial investigation and presentation of the facts of a story or by giving opposing sides equal time to present their views. Many radio stations and newspapers were also involved in promoting popular participation in or reporting on hearings in support of the 2005-9 Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Secondly, media contribute to conflict management, where a situation has threatened imminent violence. Most often they do this through rapid response broadcasting of facts to counter inflammatory rumours spread by word of mouth or, increasingly, by text message. In many cases, local leaders – administrators, chiefs or elected politicians – have used local radio to appeal for calm and the dispersal of mobs. Examples cited include a radio appeal by the district commissioner of Vahun, Lofa County, to disperse an angry group of women engaging in public disorder in the village of an alleged perpetrator of domestic violence and the calming of tensions between leaders of secret (Sande) societies and angry parents over the initiation of their daughters via genital cutting in Nimba County following an appeal by the county superintendent. Radio Kintoma in Voinjama, Lofa County, was reportedly resuming emergency broadcasts in September 2010 to counter widespread rumours of an imminent invasion from Guinea.

Thirdly, the Liberian media can play an important role in conflict prevention and early warning by giving ordinary people the chance to voice their concerns and fears and to hold their leaders and even development partners to account. Talk shows on national and community radio frequently discuss an issue of importance and give listeners the opportunity to call in and raise their questions and concerns. In a number of border communities where FM radio broadcasts in vernacular languages like Krahn, Kpelle, Loma, Mandingo, Kissi or Gola, this allows perspectives to be shared from inside Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea or Sierra Leone.

Fourthly, the media play a crucial role in peacebuilding and confidence-building within communities by raising awareness of issues which cause conflict at various levels. Radio has again been most prominent in this endeavour as the UN and NGOs sponsor production of content – drama, jingles, features and discussions – which seeks to highlight issues like land rights, or seeks to change behaviour such as domestic and sexual violence. Isolated

from the rest of Bong County by forests and bad roads, Radio Jorwah devotes considerable energy to promoting good relations across the Guinea border, broadcasting news and information in Kpelle, the common language.

Fifthly, the media play a key role in building relationships between citizens and the state through the sharing of information and holding public officials and policies to account. Print media are well placed to disseminate debates and contents of laws or elections, while radio stations are better placed to explain issues and procedures to the illiterate majority. Examples include the role of the media in explaining and promoting voter registration, and the May 2011 agreement between the Association of Liberia Community Radio (ALICOR) and the National Elections Commission to disseminate information on the August 2011 referendum. The media are also crucial in educating citizens in how to access or demand services, including access to security and justice.

4.2 THE DESTABILISING ROLE OF INFORMATION

The other side of rapidly widening access to information in Liberia is the speed with which rumour can spread discontent and fear, either through poorly-sourced or -reported journalism or “citizen journalism” at the most basic level, spreading misinformation or hate speech through mobile phone messages. Additionally, there is the destabilising influence of contracting access to information, for example when a new regulation hits the media or when a trusted source of information is removed from the scene.

The rapid spread of incendiary rumour through mobile phone calls and text messages appears to be the greatest challenge posed by Liberia’s contemporary information environment. Whereas in Kenya after the 2007 elections text messages were used to record acts of violence and spread messages of peace, in Liberia they are often used to mobilise young people to violence or confrontation. This does not need to involve complex use of secure technology or encoded messages, since the Liberian state has no capacity to monitor telecommunications, unlike public broadcast media or newspapers. The situation is worsened by the fact that, in response, the police and administration lack radios and usually have no budget for telecommunications or even to use their own phones.

Rumour and violence in Voinjama in February 2010

On 24th February 2010 violence broke out in Voinjama, the main town of Lofa County, largely between Muslim Mandingo and Christian Loma youth. While divisions between the town’s communities have deep roots exacerbated by alignments with rival factions during the civil war, the spark for the 2010 beatings, shootings, looting and arson came via the misreporting of an incident some 60 kilometres to the southeast. A missing female student was found dead outside the village of Konia, allegedly in a sacred forest, with signs that she had been killed or that body parts had been removed for ritual purpose. High school students from Zorzor reportedly confronted local Muslims, accusing them of sacrificing the girl to sanctify their new mosque; however, leaders of Loma and Mandingo communities resolved the protest before these rumours caused local violence. Nevertheless, the incident appears to have been reported via mobile phone to Voinjama as the stoning of praying Muslims and the burning of the village mosque, which provoked Muslim youth to attack the Christian quarter and attempt to burn several churches. As often occurs in Voinjama, there were false rumours of armed reinforcements supporting Mandingo youth from Guinea, prompting many families from both sides, as well as surrounding villages, to abandon their homes. To compound the situation, Voinjama’s community radio station was unable to broadcast on the day of violence due to a lightning strike on its transmitter and Zorzor’s radio station, which can normally be received in Voinjama, was forced to transmit at reduced power and thus its broadcast radius was reduced.

Standards of journalism in Liberia are variable and journalists certainly have to overcome a huge range of challenges to good, conflict-sensitive conduct, as the next section discusses. However, instances of hate speech or incitement to violence have been few in the post-war era thanks to a variety of factors which include the close monitoring of media by UNMIL, the heavy dependence of many radio stations on consciously sensitive UN and NGO funding and programming, the lack of clear ethnic (if not religious) majorities and the cosmopolitan nature of many media houses. However, there is a tendency towards sensationalising crime and drugs stories which may undermine perceptions of peace and security. An additional problem is self-censorship and under-

reporting of critical political issues, where some journalists may expect to be paid for writing positive stories about politicians instead of holding them to account through serious, investigative reporting. Indeed, the Liberian media is probably also reluctant to investigate or significantly criticise the conduct of those international organisations which fund them directly or indirectly. Issues affecting women may also be under-reported given the relative male domination of the profession, especially at higher levels, although female journalists are relatively well represented in the post-war generation, and internationally funded radio programming places relatively high importance on issues such as countering gender-based violence and promoting equal opportunity.

Allegations of hate speech in the 2011 elections

The Press Union of Liberia (PUL) has a Code of Conduct for journalists which, among other things, forbids “hate speech”. The Liberia Media Center, a joint initiative of the PUL and the Partnership for Media and Conflict Prevention in West Africa, nevertheless reported that radio stations participated in and allowed inflammatory messages and opinions to be aired in the run up to the 2011 elections. President of the Female Journalist Association of Liberia (FEJAL) Torwon Sulonteh-Brown recounted that inflammatory music, opinions and name calling on the radio was frequent. An example of this was Love FM, a pro-opposition station, calling Truth FM “Kigali Radio.” Supportive of the ruling Unity Party, Truth FM’s use of talk shows in which presenters discussed a party or person without allowing the opposing party to participate or respond was criticised by the opposition and media monitors. Allegations of hate speech were used by the government to forcibly suspend broadcasting by Love FM and TV as well as other media houses ahead of the 8th November presidential run-off, after they broadcast footage of the police using deadly force to suppress a protest by supporters of the opposition Congress for Democratic Change.

There is rarely such a thing as an information vacuum, as shoddy information tends to rush in where reliable information is most scarce. Informal information – be it rumour or “citizen” journalism – tends to concentrate where formal media are absent. In Liberia this can be a particular problem as access to media is often subject to interruption due to the fragile nature of the economy and infrastructure. Radio is relied upon by the majority but is subject to atmospheric conditions, storm damage, technical failure, power outages, financial shortfalls, and even the supply of fuel or batteries for transmitters or receivers. Collapses in coverage can cause considerable uncertainty and the proliferation of rumour, as happened during the Voinjama violence of February 2010. Similarly, sudden government intervention to suspend or close stations can cause consternation and arguably stoke tensions, as during the response to opposition protests in Monrovia ahead of the November 2011 presidential run-off election.

5. CHALLENGES TO MEDIA IN LIBERIA

Liberian journalists face enormous challenges in trying to pursue good practice in gathering, analysing and disseminating information widely and objectively. While the situation is greatly improved in terms of freedom of movement and freedom of speech in relation to the wartime period, like so much in post-war Liberia, media are heavily dependent on foreign funding and the international presence in Liberia. As ever, the challenges faced within Monrovia tend to multiply the further one travels from the capital.

Sustainability Financial viability and independence are the primary challenges faced by almost all media in Liberia, given the extremely fragile state of the economy and the tiny number of paying consumers. The media on which most Liberians rely, including UNMIL and community radio stations, are wholly or partially funded by non-commercial, usually foreign sources. Thus, downsizing and withdrawal of UNMIL, as well as the substantial UN and NGO humanitarian presence in the medium term, potentially presents a significant challenge to the sustainability and professionalism of Liberian media, especially beyond Monrovia. With the exception of some FM radio stations around the capital, commercial media houses struggle to sell enough advertising or subscriptions to be commercially viable, maintain their equipment and employ professional journalists. Consequently, few media houses have a national network of professional correspondents and local media struggle even for the transport or telecommunications for their reporters to investigate stories out of town.

Professionalism Maintaining professionalism is a difficult task for Liberian journalists given the prevailing nationally low educational standards, the huge dearth of formal education which existed through most of the war years, and the relatively low social status of and economic rewards for contemporary journalists. While there are now courses available in journalism and communications at the University of Liberia in Monrovia, Cuttington University in Gbarnga and some other private institutions, the pool of qualified journalists is mostly employed in the capital in print, radio and televisual journalism. Community radio stations on which so many Liberians rely for information have few if any formally trained journalists, producers and managers, and often rely on NGOs or the UN for vocational and on-the-job training.

Equipment and maintenance Broadcasting is a capital-intensive activity which suffers in the Liberian context from both the cost of acquiring production and broadcast equipment, and the difficulty of securing and maintaining technical equipment with very few technical specialists, and grave difficulties in physically accessing radio stations. For example, if a radio station in Grand Kru county suffers a technical failure and has to call in a technician, this means (at best, in the dry season) a three-day journey by dirt road from Monrovia in each direction: a full week's work. In the wet season, when broadcasters are most likely to suffer rain-, wind- or lightning-related failures, much of the country is inaccessible for months. For many community radio stations and their listeners, the reality is in fact frequent and sustained interruptions to broadcasts while technical support or finances are sought. Pooling support resources through initiatives like the Liberia Media Project, Search for Common Ground's Talking Drum production studio or ALICOR does not fully surmount the problem of physical isolation. Newspapers suffer a lack of printing presses outside of Monrovia and most papers within Monrovia lack their own presses, relying on a single firm of printers. Technical breakdown of a single press could therefore put several newspapers out of circulation indefinitely.

Power and infrastructure Liberia's appalling roads mean that distribution of print media is greatly curtailed beyond Monrovia and a few towns on paved highways. Newspapers reach the rest of the country rarely, if at all. All media rely on electricity for dissemination. While there is some use of solar power, the primary source of

electricity outside the capital is from generators which rely on the roads to bring in diesel fuel. In a best case scenario, as in Vahun, Lofa County, community radio can utilise the generation and transmission resources of a cellular telecoms provider in return for leasing community land to the telephone company. Cellular telecoms technology allows individuals to access information directly elsewhere in the country and is a vital tool in the provision of inputs to local debates via call-in shows. However, without internet connections, access to the worldwide web is prohibitively expensive for any media organisation in the hinterland.

Political patronage and interference In general, post-war Liberia has enjoyed a positive reputation for press freedom. Nevertheless, Liberia continues to have an expectation of political patronage, and electoral periods bring high stakes for incumbent politicians and their challengers in all parts of the country. The suspension of Ambrose Nmah, director of the state ELBC, allegedly in response to the station's coverage of an opposition rally during the 2011 elections, was a warning sign of growing partiality. As elsewhere in the world, many media houses are owned by politicians or their relatives and may even be subsidised to propagate a pro-candidate or party message. New newspapers always emerge at election time with dubious commitment to journalistic standards. Pressure on community radio in the hinterland can be intense in the form of political pressure on or inducements to their boards and journalists. These radio stations are part of their communities and may find it hard to resist pressure exerted through chiefs and elders connected to national politicians. Other forms of inducement can be more subtle; for example, a politician using his money to repair a community radio station's antenna, with support potentially compromising the station's mandated neutrality. More commonly, media houses of all sizes see elections as their primary opportunity to make money via political advertising – selling coverage to the highest bidders. A newspaper, radio station or journalist that adheres strictly to equal coverage of candidates is liable to miss the opportunity to secure funding to report over a much longer period.

Intimidation, violence and litigation Less apparent than the culture of political patronage is the practice of intimidation or harassment of journalists. While far less common than during the years of violent conflict, threats of violence against journalists do persist at a low level under the elected government, and were especially apparent during the later stages of the 2011 election campaign. Media houses perceived to support both of the main candidates in the 2011 presidential elections reported threats or intimidation and the premises of Love Media, a radio and television station owned by an opposition politician, suffered an arson attack on 17th October.³ More prevalent is the use or threat of litigation against journalists. This can be a particular problem for media houses which lack the financial resources to defend themselves and have little confidence in the independence of the judiciary and regulatory bodies. The consequence is a culture of self-censorship and a particular reluctance to scrutinise the government by investigating allegations of corruption.

Aid dependence Liberian media are heavily dependent on the commitment of international partners to the country's post-war recovery. This takes numerous forms: international NGOs (INGOs) and charitable trusts provide major financial and technical support to community radio and journalistic training; employment notices from UN agencies and INGOs are the major source of advertising revenue for newspapers and the same organisations are the most stable source of subscriptions for newspapers; community radio stations mostly rely on revenue from UNMIL or other internationally sponsored radio stations to produce their jingles or educational programming. There is also provision of media monitoring, including the prevention of hate speech or incitement to violence, and support for freedom of expression from UNMIL. As with so much else in Liberia, the integrity and sustainability of national media in the wake of UNMIL's mooted drawdown after 2012 are in question.

3 'Violence and intimidation against media in run-up to second-round election', *Reporters Without Borders*, 20th October 2011. Available at http://en.rsf.org/liberia-violence-and-intimidation-against-20-10-2011_41255.html

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Liberian access to information has been revolutionised by the activities of the government, private sector and donors since the end of the 1989-2003 war. However, this new openness is both patchy and fragile. While profit incentives and technological advances are likely to continue to fill in the gaps and improve the quality of private communication, such as adding mobile internet to mobile telephones, there are indications that the government's commitment to freedom of speech and media may be waning in its second term. Moreover, the media on which most Liberians outside Monrovia rely is unsustainable in the present economic climate should there be any weakening of foreign donor commitment to peacebuilding in Liberia. With the slow downsizing of UNMIL's presence expected from 2012 and donors' likeliness to shift from recovery to development, this commitment is already wavering. Legacies of distrust, partial reconciliation, physical isolation and a widespread belief in the supernatural provide a fertile breeding ground for rumour in the Liberian context and it may be difficult for the country's evolving formal media to keep up with, let alone stay a step ahead of, destabilising information.

The following recommendations are provided to the EU and other donors, who can play an important role in strengthening the capacity of media and information providers to promote peace, security, development and prosperity, and help to strengthen democratic norms and values:

Strengthen the professionalism and conflict-sensitive reporting capacity of Liberian media. The EU and other donors could assist Liberian media organisations, professional associations and academic institutions to strengthen the professional development of their staff. This could include as a priority the provision of training in conflict-sensitive reporting and broadcasting, and the democratic role of the media in holding the government to account. It could also include support for the dissemination of the Freedom of Information Act of October 2010 and existing codes of conduct drawn up by PUL or other professional associations. Technical staff of radio stations also require training and support to strengthen their capacity to source, operate and maintain recording, editing and broadcasting hardware. It is crucial that this support is extended evenly across the country, with particular attention paid to meeting the needs of community-based media in otherwise poorly-connected areas. Incentivising experienced professional journalists to work outside Monrovia and to both be co-located with and mentor community journalists in local radio stations would be one way of achieving this. Establishment of regional media resource centres through PUL or ALICOR could also contribute to promoting collaboration and the decentralisation of knowledge, training and technical capacity.

Assist Liberian media organisations to develop business plans and sustainability strategies. The EU and other donors could greatly strengthen the economic viability of a diverse and open Liberian media sector by providing training and mentoring in business development and financial planning for media organisations. Compared to basic journalism and production, this is an underdeveloped area, especially outside of Monrovia. Community radio stations in particular would benefit from support to identify and access alternative sources of advertising or revenue in order to sustain their operations and maintain their independence.

Work with the Liberian government, media, civil society, the UN and other international actors to understand and anticipate the impact of the drawdown of UNMIL on the provision of reliable information. The EU and other donors could support the future provision of reliable information through free media by working with Liberian and international specialists to better understand the consequences for information flows regarding the impending drawdown of UNMIL and the likely shift in donor priorities away from Liberia in its second decade of peace. This could include research on media houses' dependence on UN and INGO advertising and

messaging, and the succession plans for UNMIL Radio in the longer term. It could also include the strengthening of the capacities of the Liberian government, the nascent Independent Broadcasting Regulator, and civil society to monitor the media for “hate speech” or incitement to violence, to protect the independence of the media and the safety of journalists, and to operationalise commitments to freedom of information.

Identify opportunities to harness mobile telephone networks and mobile internet for peacebuilding and conflict early warning and response. The EU and other donors could contribute to the future peace and security of Liberia by concentrating on the emerging media, which will increasingly influence how Liberians receive information in the coming years. Mobile phones are already ubiquitous and mobile internet is likely to spread rapidly as a source of news, rumour and means for wide social networking. Harnessing these networks to disseminate peace-reinforcing messages, to rebut destabilising rumours, and to connect citizens to the state and security service providers – including as a means for early warning and response – is a major opportunity for the peacebuilding sector.

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EARLY WARNING

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