

Linda Nassanga Goretti

Peace journalism applied: An assessment of media coverage of the conflict in Northern Uganda

Kurzfassung: Der vorliegende Artikel befasst sich mit einer Analyse der Berichterstattungen über den Konflikt in Norduganda so wie den friedensjournalistischen Konzepten, die sich aus den Ergebnissen der Analyse ableiten lassen.

Als Untersuchungsmaterial dienten die Berichte einer privaten und einer staatlichen Tageszeitung über einen Zeitraum von drei Jahren. In der Studie wurden folgende quantitative und qualitative Variablen erhoben: Häufigkeit der Berichterstattung über den Konflikt, journalistische Form der Berichtserstattung (Nachrichtmeldung vs. andere Form), Autor (Journalist vs. nicht-Journalist), Stellenwert und Platzierung des Berichts, Ausgewogenheit vs. Parteilichkeit der Berichterstattung, Sprachstil und Haltung, inhaltlicher Fokus, Beachtung von Friedensbemühungen und Verwendung von Bildern.

Die Einleitung beschreibt zunächst Annahmen über Konfliktkonzepte und Erklärungsmöglichkeiten für die Ursachen andauernder Konflikte in heutigen Gesellschaften. Basisannahme ist, dass die Macht- und Ressourcenverteilungen innerhalb einer Gesellschaft von deren Mitgliedern unterschiedlich gerecht empfunden werden. Diese Interpretationsunterschiede bieten die Basis für Konflikte, die im Verlauf zu Bürgerkriegen eskalieren können. In diesem Rahmen werden im Folgenden die Hauptursachen für Konflikte auf dem afrikanischen Kontinent erklärt. Weiterhin liefert der Artikel spezielle Informationen über den Hintergrund des Konflikts in Norduganda, wo seit der Machtübernahme durch Präsident Museveni im Jahr 1986 bürgerkriegsähnliche Zustände herrschen. Ein Überblick über die Publikationsformen zeigt, dass die meisten Berichte über den Krieg in Form von Nachrichtmeldungen publiziert wurden, und es nur in seltenen Fällen ausführlichere Features gab. Damit wird deutlich, dass die Nachrichtenmedien bzw. die entsprechenden Journalisten zu großem Teil sowohl dafür verantwortlich sind, was die Bevölkerung über den Krieg erfährt als auch dafür wie der Krieg in der Öffentlichkeit wahrgenommen wird. Aus dem Vergleich einer regierungsnahen und einer privaten Tageszeitung wurde deutlich, dass die regierungsnahen Zeitungen größtenteils verzerrt zu Gunsten der Regierung berichtete und damit klar Partei ergriff, während die private Zeitung einen versöhnlicheren Ton anschlug und in ihren Berichten Informationen beider Konfliktparteien berücksichtigte. In der privaten Zeitung fanden auch Friedensaktivitäten Berücksichtigung, wenngleich jenen der Regierung überrepräsentiert waren.

In der anschließenden Evaluation dieser Formen der Berichterstattung widmet sich die Autorin den entsprechenden Konsequenzen. Eine Stärke jeder Form der Medienberichterstattungen über den Krieg wird darin gesehen, das Interesse der Bevölkerung an dem Thema zu verstärken. Auf der anderen Seite konnte die Autorin über die Betrachtung von Art und Inhalt der Berichterstattung eine starke Selbstzensur der Journalisten beobachten, die einer friedensorientierten Berichterstattung über den Krieg im Weg steht. Diese Selbstzensur wird teilweise durch die Anti-Terror-Verordnung erklärt, welche es zu einem Staatsverbrechen macht, für Terroristen potentiell nützliche Informationen zu veröffentlichen. Neben dieser Verordnung werden jedoch noch weitere potentielle Störfaktoren in der Umsetzung des Friedensjournalismus diskutiert. Abschließend gibt die Autorin praktische Empfehlungen, wie der Friedensjournalismus zur Unterstützung des Friedensprozesses in Norduganda besser umgesetzt werden könnte.

Abstract: The paper explores how peace journalism has been applied in Uganda basing on an assessment of findings from a survey on the media coverage of the conflict in northern Uganda. The paper analyses the findings from the print media coverage of 2 newspapers for 3 years that were used as sample.

The analysis considered several quantitative and qualitative variables including: frequency, type of stories (news vs non-news), authors of stories (journalists vs non-journalists), placement/prominence of story, balance in the story, information sources, language and tone, focus, peace initiatives and use of photographs.

The introduction gives an overview of the concept of conflict and why we continue to have conflicts in society. The paper posits that since all people in society cannot have the same definition of a situation all the time, especially regarding the distribution of power and resources, disagreements and conflicts arise, which in extreme cases escalate into armed conflicts or wars. The paper looks at the major causes of conflicts in Africa and gives a background to the conflict/war in Northern Uganda, where the fighting has been going on since 1986, when President Museveni took over power. A synopsis of the findings showed that most of the coverage on the war was done by journalists in the form of news stories, with a few feature articles. This implies that journalists are largely responsible for what people get to learn about the war. Depending on the way journalists report about the conflict, people's perceptions will be influenced accordingly.

The analysis showed that the government paper was largely biased towards government and confrontational in its reports, while the private paper used a more conciliatory tone and was more balanced by using various sources for their stories. There was fair coverage of peace initiatives, although this focused most on government efforts. An evaluation of the coverage showed that this had its strengths and weaknesses. While the media had helped in raising awareness about the war, there was self-censorship amongst the journalists, partly due to the Anti-terrorism Act, which makes it a capital offence if a journalist gives information that can aid terrorism. The paper looks at some obstacles that prevent journalists from giving objective reports when reporting on conflicts/wars. The paper concludes with some recommendations on how peace journalism can be consciously applied to contribute more meaningfully to the peace building process in Northern Uganda.

Introduction

It is important to appreciate the concept of 'conflict' in order to place the discussion in context. Conflict has been defined differently by different scholars, but generally has to do with a situation of disagreement over an issue which may destabilise peaceful and harmonious co-existence. Howard (2003:6) defines conflict as 'a situation where two or more individuals or groups try to pursue goals or ambitions which they believe they cannot share'. Conflict may also be viewed simply as a situation where there is an absence of peace and harmony. Conflicts are often linked to war, but not all unstable situations lead to armed conflicts or wars. Usually only under extreme conditions do conflicts escalate into war.

There have always been conflict situations, even as far back as biblical times. We may well ask why no one has ever solved the problem of conflict. One reason could be that because people are so different, they tend to interpret situations differently. Due to divergent perceptions, it is often hard for them to reach a common understanding, and conflicts thus tend to arise. Definitions of situations or events strongly influence people's socio-economic and political status in society. Those in the higher strata tend to impose their definitions on those in lower strata, who may not always accept the same definition.

Because all societies experience some forms of disagreement and conflict, conflict has come to be regarded as a universal societal possibility. There is no society where all members are always in agreement on all aspects of the system, especially regarding the distribution of power and resources. So it is important to look at how conflict management can promote peaceful co-existence. Since journalists report on the important events in society, they will inevitably find themselves having to report on wars and/or conflicts.

Before delving into an evaluation of conflict coverage, the paper looks briefly at the major causes of conflict, specifically in Africa, after which some background is given for the conflict/war in Northern Uganda. The paper examines some perspectives on the concept of peace journalism in the context of the principle of objectivity demanded of professional journalists. An overview is offered of Ugandan media, followed by a synopsis of findings from a research project on media coverage of the war in Northern Uganda. Based on this, the coverage is evaluated, identifying its strengths and weaknesses as means of promoting peace. Finally, recommendations are made for better use of peace journalism to contribute more effectively to the peace-building process in Northern Uganda.

What are the major causes of conflict in society?

The causes of conflicts and wars vary from society to society and over time. These are as varied as the many conflict situations that arise, since no two situations are likely to be identical. David Francis (2004), Director of the African Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Bradford, identifies 6 common causes of conflict and wars in Africa. These are: self-determination, secession, interstate, superpower-orchestrated, identity-based (ethnic-religious wars) or resource-based ones.

A study conducted in Uganda on Conflict Management Skills for Sustainable Decentralisation (Nkurunziza, 2002:6) reached similar conclusions. It was found that under the decentralised system of governance, conflicts were due to: high levels of corruption, limited resources, ignorance about the decentralised system, personal interests of leaders, religious differences, political differences, weak regulatory legislation, socio-economic disputes and mistrust among leaders.

Africans have become wary of the overly simplistic ideas about conditions in Africa held by many in the Western world. Allegedly Africans 'are lazy, violent, have no capacity to manage their economies, enjoy killing each other, etc.' Unfortunately, the recent history of Africa does little to dispel these misconceptions. Otherwise how can we explain the perennial food shortages and civil wars? In Uganda, for instance, fighting has been going on in the northern part of the country for the past 21 years! A journalist should be acquainted with the dynamics of conflict and war situations, if he/she is to do meaningful analytical reporting under such conditions.

Background to the conflict/war in Northern Uganda

Uganda can be broadly divided into 4 regions; Northern, Western, Eastern and Central. Under democratic governance, each region is supposed to be represented in the government, but in practice the President's home region tends to dominate both the government and the economic sector. This creates problems in sharing the 'national cake', as each region competes for its due share. This has resulted in conflicts fuelled by ethnic differences like the current conflict in Northern Uganda, which has been going on since 1986.

Although Uganda is said to be steadily recovering from the turmoil of dictatorial rule and economic decline, the different parts of the country are not benefiting equally from the peace concluded by the National Resistance Movement government. There has been fighting in the northern part of the country ever since President Museveni came to power in 1986 after 5 years of armed struggle.

Whereas the other regions of the country enthusiastically welcomed the new government, it was different in the North. The ouster of former President (Obote), who was from the North, meant that his followers lost their powerful positions in the army, ministerial posts, ambassadorships, control of semi-state bodies, etc. Each government makes its own appointments, which are often based on nepotism and are used to reward its supporters.

Some of the soldiers in Northern Uganda refused to lay down their arms. Various groups continued to wage war against the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government. Some later surrendered, but the *Lord's Resistance Army* (LRA) under Joseph Kony is still fighting. The government's *Uganda People's Defence Force* (UPDF) has so far failed to end the fighting there.

Apart from the many lives lost, the abduction of children, the maiming and killing of civilians, rape and defilement, planting of land mines, attacks on Internally Displaced Persons camps and killing civilians, ambushes on vehicles, including transports of medicine, food and other humanitarian assistance, the war has destroyed much of the region's infrastructure, leaving hardly any economic activity still going on. A large part of the region is very insecure, and many people have been moved to Internally Displaced Persons camps, which are overcrowded and suffer from poor hygienic conditions.

Reporting on conflicts and war situations using peace journalism

The media are key weapons in any war or conflict situation. Each of the warring parties tries to win public support through the media. The competing sides manipulate the media in an effort to mobilise populations by concealing the grim realities of death and atrocities, while they demonise their enemies. This is especially true of state-controlled media. These are exploited to churn out hate rhetoric, distorted facts and floods of propaganda, fanning the flames of fear and hatred of 'the enemy', while glorifying the national struggle and its leaders (IWPR, 2004:168). Media can, however, also be used positively to promote conflict resolution through peace journalism.

Peace journalism focuses on media influence, rather than on the mere presence of professional news media outlets. The media thus become facilitators of positive change, rather than mere disinterested professional observers/reporters (Howard, 2002:4).

One of the cardinal principles of journalism is objectivity, which means that a journalist reports as an outsider or non-participant in news events. However, this viewpoint has changed over time, whereby journalists are no longer just conveyors of information or neutral observers of society, but rather directly engaged actors (IWPR, 2004:168).

The concept of objectivity during conflicts and wars has been a subject of intensive debate among communication practitioners. Based on his long experience as a BBC war correspondent, Martin Bell (Hojjer et al. 2004:13) rules out the possibility or need for 'objectivity' in war reporting, arguing that objectivity cannot stop the suffering and massacre of innocent civilians. Bell has been supported by others like Michael Ignatieff and Noam Chomsky (ibid.), who view this type of journalism as 'humanitarian intervention'. Others hold contrary views, e.g., John Pilger (ibid.), who insists on the principle of objectivity, reasoning that journalists could otherwise fall into the 'propaganda trap' by not exposing 'the real interests' of the parties involved or the 'true face of the war'.

Although the two schools of thought differ in their interpretation of objectivity, what really matters is to focus on the rationale behind this principle. Ideally, it should ensure that the media serve the public interest. In respect to peace reporting, the interpretation of objectivity depends heavily on how a journalist defines his/her role or social responsibility. Howard (2003) ably sums this up in the introduction to *Conflict Sensitive Journalism*: 'Professional journalists do not set out to reduce conflict. They seek to present accurate and impartial news. But it is often through good reporting that conflict is reduced'.

From this perspective, Galtung (Opubor, 2001:30) explains that good reporting on conflict is not a compromise or a matter of taking a little news from both the left hand and the right, but rather it favours peace journalism as opposed to what he calls 'war journalism'. He affirms that peace journalism stands for reporting truthfully on the views of all sides in disputes, as opposed to being a mere mouthpiece for propaganda and misinformation.

Peace journalism should not be viewed from what the Institute of War and Peace Reporting calls the 'agenda-setting approach'. In the latter, the journalist plays an important role as an agent of change, depending on how he/she 'colours' the article with language, tone and choice of terms. The journalist should instead work towards promoting cross-community dialogue, with a view to building bridges across confrontation lines, identifying areas of agreement rather than discord and highlighting positive, often non-official developments on the ground (IWPR, 2004:172). The journalist's aim should thus be to strengthen the peace-building process.

Sabiiti (2001) offers a guide to what she terms 'a peace-builder's perspective' that could be applied in peace journalism. These include:

- Understanding the scope of the conflict
- Skills in conflict analysis (source of conflict at different levels, surface or symptomatic, demands and positions)
- Root causes of the conflict (interests and needs of the various groups)
- Impact of the conflict (the players and their motives, roles and attitudes)
- Skills in transforming conflict (communication skills, negotiation skills, co-operation, mediation skills, reconciliation)
- The ability to distinguish the people from the conflict, so that the journalist is tough on the conflict but soft on the people/victims

Overview of the media in Uganda

Print media

After independence, apart from *Munno* (a newspaper published in Luganda), most newspapers folded, while new ones were founded. The government has always published a government newspaper, but with a change of names under different regimes – *Uganda Argus*, *Uganda Times*, *Voice of Uganda* – the present one is called *The New Vision*.

Before the media laws were liberalised in 1983, the government-owned newspaper had no serious competitors. Although there was no specific legislation barring new newspapers, the environment was not conducive to their operation. With media liberalisation and a more tolerant government, several private newspapers are currently being published.

There are three English-language dailies, including the government-owned *The New Vision*, with the highest circulation of about 30,000 copies. An independent paper, *The Monitor*, which has a circulation of about 26,000 copies, closely follows it. Another daily, *The Red Pepper*, has a circulation of about 18,000. A daily published in Luganda, *Bukedde*, has a circulation of about 20,000. Weekly papers include: *The East African*, a regional paper owned by the Nation Group of Kenya, *The Weekly Observer* and *Sunrise*.

The government has also tried to publish in regional languages, but without much success, as the circulation is still mainly within the regional towns and does not reach out into rural areas. There is *Orumuri* for the Western Region, *Bukedde* for the Central, *Etop* for the Eastern, and *Rupiny* for the Northern.

Broadcast media

Radio

After the media were liberalised and Radio Uganda, which was previously the only radio station, lost its monopoly position, over 150 FM stations were set up. Whereas Radio Uganda offers a variety of programmes in 28 languages, including English and Swahili, the new FM stations mainly broadcast commercial and entertainment programmes. Although the equipment used by Radio Uganda is obsolete, it has an important advantage over the other stations, because it covers the whole country, unlike the FM stations, which broadcast only within a limited range. With government support and funding, Radio Uganda can afford to obtain news countrywide, particularly through the Information Officers stationed upcountry.

Television

Like Radio Uganda, government-owned Uganda Television was for a long time the country's only television station. After liberalisation, 10 other private stations began broadcasting. Except for Uganda Television, which mainly carries local programmes, the bulk of the programming offered by the other stations consists mainly of imported English-language programmes.

Media coverage of the war in Northern Uganda

The analysis of media coverage of the war in Northern Uganda presented here is based on findings from a study of coverage of the northern war made in January – February 2004. The study, commissioned by the Media Foundation for West Africa (Kadiilo, 2004), analysed coverage over 3 years: 1998, 2000 & 2003, focusing on five media organisations. For print, *The New Vision* and *The Monitor* were chosen, as they are the national dailies and have the highest newspaper circulation. While *The New Vision* is government-owned, *The Monitor* is an independent, private paper. For broadcasts, 3 radio stations were used: the government-owned Radio Uganda, Rhino FM and Radio North. The latter two are privately owned.

This presentation will focus on news coverage in the print media. A content analysis was done of articles providing information on the war in Northern Uganda. The sample consisted of the first six months of the three years and was further progressively narrowed down to a week of each month (i.e., 1st week of January, 2nd week of February, 3rd week of March, etc.). The analysis considered several quantitative and qualitative variables, including frequency, type of story (news vs.

non-news), authors of stories (journalists vs. non-journalists), placement/prominence of story, balance in the story, information sources, language and tone, focus, peace initiatives and use of photographs.

Synopsis of the findings

In each paper, 425 articles were analysed. *The New Vision* had more coverage, with 253 (60%) articles, while *The Monitor* had 172 (40%) articles. Of these, news stories constituted 77%, while features constituted 13%. Articles written by non-journalists (opinion pieces, editorials, commentaries and letters) made up 9%. This analysis shows that most of the media coverage of the war was done by journalists, as it was mainly presented in news stories and feature articles. The implication is that journalists are largely accountable for the media reports on the conflict in Northern Uganda.

An analysis was made of the balance in the articles, based on how much coverage the *Uganda People's Defence Force* (government forces) received, as opposed to the rebel forces of the *Lord's Resistance Army*. The major focus of each story was used to assess this, e.g.: Was the main actor in the article the *Lord's Resistance Army* or the *Uganda People's Defence Force*?

On average, there were more stories on the *Lord's Resistance Army* (64%), as compared to 36% for the *Uganda People's Defence Force*. *The New Vision* focused more on the *Uganda People's Defence Force*, with 52%, and devoted only 48% of its articles to the *Lord's Resistance Army*. *The Monitor* focused 80% of its articles on the *Lord's Resistance Army* and only 19% on the *Uganda People's Defence Force*.

One cannot fail to notice the big differences in the focus of coverage. *The New Vision* had a difference of 4% between coverage of the *Lord's Resistance Army* and the *Uganda People's Defence Force* (in favour of the latter). *The Monitor* had a difference of 61% (in favour of the *Lord's Resistance Army*). *The New Vision* was more balanced in its coverage of the fighting forces.

The differences can be partially explained in terms of ownership. It is hardly surprising that a government paper would devote more coverage to the *Uganda People's Defence Force* and less to the *Lord's Resistance Army*, with a narrow range of 4%. One could question the high coverage of the *Lord's Resistance Army* in *The Monitor* and the very low coverage of the *Uganda People's Defence Force*, with a range of 61%.

	Lord's Resistance Army			Uganda People's Defence Force		
	N.VISION %	MONITOR %	AVRG. %	N.VISION %	MONITOR %	AVRG. %
1998	48	73	61	52	21	37
2000	19	88	54	81	12	47
2003	77	80	79	23	25	24
AVRG.	48	80	64	52	19	36

Table 1: Focus on the forces involved in the fighting

Examining the placement of the articles, it was found that *The Monitor* had more front page stories, with 24%, while *The New Vision* had 16%. Considering that usually political and business stories dominate the front page, the stories were given relatively high prominence.

	NEW VISION					MONITOR				
	1998 (%)	2000 (%)	2003 (%)	AVRG. (%)	RANK	1998 (%)	2000 (%)	2003 (%)	AVRG. (%)	RANK
UPDF	41	31	34	35	1	17	28	19	21	3
LRA	2	0	2	1	5	13	8	3	8	5
Local Res.	11	6	14	10	4	32	36	10	26	1
Dist. &govt.	22	46	28	32	2	21	12	33	22	2
Others	24	14	21	20	3	15	16	30	20	4
All of above	0	3	1	1	5	1	0	6	2	6

Table 2: Major sources of information in war reports

Another variable examined in the study was the sources of information used in war coverage. While on average the *Uganda People's Defence Force* /Army was the most important source, this held only for *The New Vision*, with 35%, compared to

21% for *The Monitor*. The major sources for *The Monitor* were local residents, with 26%, in contrast to 10% for *The New Vision*.

District and government officials were second highest for both, with *The New Vision* having 32%, and *The Monitor* 22%. In order of importance of the sources, for *The New Vision* the *Uganda People's Defence Force*, district & government officials, other players and local residents stood out, while the *Lord's Resistance Army* and all the other mentioned sources were in last place. For *The Monitor*, the ranking was: local residents, district & government officials, the *Uganda People's Defence Force*, other players and the *Lord's Resistance Army*, while all the other mentioned sources were last.

A comparative analysis shows that *The New Vision* relied most on the *Uganda People's Defence Force* or Army sources, while *The Monitor* relied more on local residents as sources. The distribution is more evenly spread for *The Monitor* than for *The New Vision*. For instance, the *Uganda People's Defence Force* plus district & government officials account for 67%, which is over half of the sources for *The New Vision*. For *The Monitor*, this is 43%, which is less than half of their sources.

Both papers had relatively few reports that relied on the *Lord's Resistance Army* as their source. *The New Vision* had 16%, while *The Monitor* had 8%. We can conclude that *The Monitor*, which drew on a broader spectrum of sources and used more reports from non-governmental sources, offered more objective reporting.

The language or tone used in the reports was analysed and grouped into the categories confrontational, biased or conciliatory. Confrontational articles took the stance that there was a 'zero-sum' conflict going on and used negative, emotionally charged words to characterise one of the sides, such as 'rebels', 'terrorists', etc., which tends to aggravate rather than reduce mistrust and fighting. Other articles were biased in that they were slanted heavily toward one side (*Lord's Resistance Army* or *Uganda People's Defence Force*). These portrayed one side positively, while neglecting to give information on the other side's position or portraying it negatively. Other articles took a conciliatory tone, seeking to encourage a 'win-win' attitude in the interest of all sides and encouraging peaceful conflict settlement.

Most articles in *The New Vision* were confrontational, accounting for 41% of the reports, while for *The Monitor* this was only 22%. In the case of *The Monitor* reports, most were conciliatory, accounting for 73%, compared to 36% for *The New Vision*. The biased reports were 23% for *The New Vision* and 5% for *The Monitor*.

	NEW VISION				MONITOR			
	1998 (%)	2000 (%)	2003 (%)	AVRG. (%)	1998 (%)	2000 (%)	2003 (%)	AVRG. (%)
Confrontational	31	46	45	41	23	4	40	22
Biased	43	10	17	23	9	4	1	5
Conciliatory	26	44	38	36	68	92	59	73

Table 3: Tone used in the war articles

A comparative analysis shows that almost 2/3 of *The New Vision* reports were either confrontational or biased, while 1/3 were conciliatory. For *The Monitor*, it was the opposite, with over 2/3 being conciliatory and less than 1/3 confrontational or biased. Because a large percentage of the reports in the government-owned paper (*The New Vision*) used as sources the *Uganda People's Defence Force* or the Army, which are directly involved in the conflict, it is not surprising that most of them were confrontational or biased.

The major source of *The Monitor* reports was local residents, who have borne the brunt of the conflict. These appear to be tired of the fighting and want a peaceful settlement or negotiation rather than a military solution.

	NEW VISION				MONITOR			
	1998 (%)	2000 (%)	2003 (%)	AVRG. (%)	1998 (%)	2000 (%)	2003 (%)	AVRG. (%)
Abductions	45	30	45	40	35	23	27	28
Killings	25	33	25	28	46	54	49	50
Displacement	25	27	25	26	19	23	23	22

Table 4: Coverage of civilians in the war zone

The survey also analysed the amount of media coverage devoted to civilians in the conflict zones. Both papers focused more on abductions and killings, with *The New Vision* having 68% and *The Monitor* 78%. Less space, 26% in *The New*

Vision and 22% in *The Monitor*, was devoted to the displacement and/or plight of civilians, especially in the Internally Displaced Persons camps. It was also noted that *The New Vision* gave more coverage to displacements, although most of it was event-based, while *The Monitor* offered more analytical feature articles.

The study also explored media coverage of the various conflict-resolution efforts by actors including the government, local leaders, NGOs, foreign missions, etc.

	NEW VISION				MONITOR			
	1998 (%)	2000 (%)	2003 (%)	AVRG. (%)	1998 (%)	2000 (%)	2003 (%)	AVRG. (%)
Government	27	45	29	34	86	40	62	63
Local Leaders	40	18	42	33	7	40	25	24
Other Actors	33	36	29	33	7	20	14	14

Table 5: Coverage of peace initiatives

Both papers gave the most coverage to government peace initiatives, with *The New Vision* having an average of 34%, while *The Monitor* had 63%. *The New Vision* had a more even distribution in its coverage of all peace initiatives, with a range of only 1%. *The Monitor* largely focused on government initiatives, with a range of 49% between government initiatives and those of other actors.

The study found that photographs were minimally used. *The New Vision* used more photographs (17%) than *The Monitor* (6%).

General evaluation of coverage

Strengths

The media have helped to raise public awareness of various issues related to the conflict in Northern Uganda, both within the country and outside. The media reports have generated public debate on socio-economic and political issues in the country.

Through disclosures in the reports, the media have played a major role in promoting transparency and holding the government and other institutions accountable. The media have also contributed to strengthening the observance of human rights, especially through reports on the situations of children and women in Northern Uganda and the conditions in the Internally Displaced Persons camps.

Informed by reports on the suffering of the population and the destruction of infrastructure in the Northern region, other Ugandans and the world at large have come to appreciate the plight of the people in Northern Uganda, particularly that of vulnerable groups such as children, women, the disabled and the elderly. This has encouraged various institutions for humanitarian and other forms of assistance to provide aid to the victims in the North. Reports on the atrocities committed have provoked international condemnation of rebel leader Kony and his *Lord's Resistance Army*.

The government-owned paper (*The New Vision*) has begun devoting space to a variety of different groups, including the rebel groups in Northern Ugandan. This has helped change its image from that of a mouthpiece for government propaganda to that of a more balanced, objective paper. Similarly, the private paper (*The Monitor*) now gives space to government views, so that it is no longer seen as merely an anti-government paper.

The coverage has reflected an improved level of professionalism compared to the past. Often in the past, the government paper largely covered only pro-government activities, while the other papers concentrated on criticising government programmes.

Weaknesses

In most conflict and war situations, balanced coverage often necessitates 'muckraking' about the secrets of powerful, influential, highly-placed public actors. Often, however, journalists are afraid to provoke the powerful and either avoid such stories or censor their reportage and do not analyse controversial issues in depth and objectively.

Due to the nature of the war situation, journalists are largely dependent on the army for their security. For instance, they have often used army helicopters and other vehicles to cover the war in Northern Uganda. This compromises their independence and autonomy to do their own investigations on the ground and to write objective reports.

The choice of language and/or terminology poses still another problem for journalists. For instance, the government is very hostile to papers that claim there is a 'war' going on in Northern Uganda. President Museveni and other officials insist that there is only an 'insurgency by bandits/thugs and terrorists' who do not know why they are fighting. "Calling Kony's escapades war is being extravagant with words; at most this is a terror campaign," President Museveni has said. (Kony War: Diplomats in Trouble. *The Weekly Observer*, 25-31 March 2004)

Another weakness is revealed by the controversy over the pictures included in news reports. The media have often been accused of insensitivity because they publish emotionally disturbing atrocity pictures. Cases in point are pictures showing corpses scattered on the ground (*The New Vision* 23 February 2004) and a photograph of a badly scalded child (*The New Vision* 24 February 2004).

It has often been said that the first casualty of war is truth. This has been very evident in reports on the numbers of dead, which mostly do not tally. Depending on who was killed, government sources give higher totals for *Lord's Resistance Army* fighters killed and lower numbers for civilian dead, while the *Lord's Resistance Army* boasts of higher numbers of *Uganda People's Defence Force* soldiers they have 'demobilized'.

After an attack on the Barlonyo Internally Displaced Persons camp on 21 February 2004, Army Spokesperson Major Bantariza claimed that 80 civilians were killed (*The New Vision* 23 February). *The Monitor* (23 February) put the number of dead at 192, based on information provided by the area MP, Charles Angiro, whereas *The Monitor* reporter who filed the story said he had personally counted 173 bodies. Another report in *The New Vision* (23 February) estimated a total of 186 dead. Later the bodies were exhumed and pathologists counted 143 bodies (*The New Vision*, 17 March). For the journalist who uses several sources, it is difficult to establish and report the correct number of dead. The public is equally at a loss in deciding which figures to accept or whom to believe.

The expenses involved in doing an investigative report in a conflict or war situation are quite high. Often journalists depend on stage-managed events, press releases or information from press briefings given by the Information Department, the Spokesperson from the Ministry of Defence and various government officials, as well as briefings by various political groups.

The government has sometimes intimidated journalists by labelling them 'terrorists'. This is a serious charge in Uganda. Under the Anti-Terrorism Act, any journalist who aids terrorists by revealing sensitive information is committing a capital offence, which could result in a death sentence. This greatly increases self-censorship among journalists.

Recommendations for better peace journalism in Uganda

Journalists should take their privileged position seriously and exercise the attendant power responsibly, especially in reporting on conflict and war situations. We need no reminders of the role that Radio Mille Collines played in fuelling the genocide in Rwanda. The media should encourage peace and reconciliation through peace journalism, rather than reporting in ways that perpetuate the conflict or war situation.

Training in investigative reporting should be a prerequisite for all journalists. Most objective, balanced reports require some degree of investigative research, so journalists reporting on the war in Northern Uganda need skills in the right way to obtain information, including interviewing skills.

Upholding media ethics is another key issue in peace journalism. While journalists know that conflict reporting differs from reporting under normal conditions and is fraught with ethical challenges, they should never forget their duty to serve the public interest, rather than narrow individual or group interests.

One strategy could be through networking, where journalists share experiences locally as well as between different countries. Apart from learning from each other, there will be synergies among different media which will have an increased impact on the peace-building process. As pointed out by Conciliation Resources Media and Conflict in Africa, more focused investigation by working journalists of regional, national and community-level conflicts can increase their contribution to the prevention or resolution of potentially devastating social and political conflicts (www.c-r.org/prgs/aficmed.shtml). The Northern Uganda Journalists Association needs to be revitalised, as it is no longer very active.

Journalists should acquire public relations skills to help them obtain information even from sources that are hostile and uncooperative. In describing his experience in war reporting, Ugandan journalist Shaka Ssali, editor of the Voice of Africa at the VOA, points out that news reporting on conflict is much harder than it might seem. He explains that the media must learn from people on the ground, the victims themselves, the government that makes the decisions and the opponents involved in any conflict. He cautions journalists against arrogance and advocates the exercise of humility as the best way of obtaining information from the public (Sabiiti, 2001).

Journalists should acquire the ability to weigh alternatives and make quick judgements. As in many other conflict situations, there is not always time to refer decision on what to include or exclude to an editor, especially with the broadcast media, e.g., when doing live broadcasts or 'on location' reporting.

Even if access to information in the possession of the government is constitutionally guaranteed under Article 41 of the Constitution and the Access to Information Act, government officials do not always release information, claiming that it may jeopardise national security or that it can cause public disorder. Journalists need to establish contacts with unofficial sources and obtain information from local people. When informants ask to remain anonymous, this wish should be respected, since disclosure could endanger the lives of the sources or their family and friends.

Journalists should always be mindful of the language, tone and words they use. These should not be confrontational or biased in such a way as to increase the divisions among the parties to a conflict. Journalists should avoid words that prejudice their public, such as 'terrorist, rebel, fanatic', etc. As pointed out under 'Guidelines for Conflict Sensitive Journalism' (Howard, 2003:16), such words imply taking sides and make the other side seem stubborn and unwilling to negotiate. It is advisable that the parties concerned should be referred to with the names they themselves prefer.

Conclusion

Change always affects people differently, depending on their socio-political and economic situation. Journalists consciously or unconsciously report about change and any resulting conflicts in society. It is therefore imperative that journalists be acquainted with the social, political and economic systems with which societies are organised. As is often pointed out, a journalist should be a 'Jack of all trades', meaning that he or she should be able to report on a wide range of topics. To acquire this competence, journalists must sharpen their sense of curiosity by keeping themselves informed on current affairs at the local, national, regional and international levels. This will enable them to become more analytical when reporting on conflicts with a view to encouraging peaceful solutions.

It is not possible for everyone to obtain first-hand information in conflict and war situations. Journalists should never forget their responsibility to keep the public informed in ways that do not escalate conflict or war situations. Their aim should be to contribute to resolving conflict or war peacefully; in other words, journalists should be able to practice peace journalism.

References

- Francis, David (2004): From Tribal Wars to Conflict Over Diamonds. Understanding Conflict Analysis in Africa. In: *The Insight* (6). Faculty of Arts, Makerere University. Kampala.
- Hojjer, B. Nohrstedt, S.A. & Ottosen, R. (2004): 'Media and the War on Terror'. In: Nohrstedt, S.A. & Ottosen, R. (eds.): *US and the Others: Global Media Images on the War on Terror*. NORDICOM. Gottenborg University. Gottenborg.
- Howard, R. (2002): *An Operational Framework for Media and Peace Building*. Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society. Vancouver.
- Howard, R. (2003): *Conflict Sensitive Journalism*. International Media Support & Institute for Media Policy & Civil Society. Copenhagen.
- Institute for War and Peace Reporting (2004): *Reporting for Change: A Handbook for Local Journalists in Crisis Areas*. London.
- Kadilo, G. (2004): Research Report on Media Coverage of the Conflict in Uganda. Commissioned by Media Foundation for West Africa. Mass Communication Department, Makerere University. (Unpublished).
- 'Kony War: Diplomats in Trouble'. *The Weekly Observer*, March 25-31, 2004.
- Nkurunziza, R.K.D. (2002): Conflict Management Skills for Sustainable Decentralisation. In: Nkurunziza, R.K.D. (ed.): *African Journal of Leadership and Conflict Management* (1). Leadership and Conflict Management Centre, Makerere University, Kampala.
- Opubor, A.E. (2001): Civic journalism and Community Media: Issues in the Ethics and Professionalisation of Communication. In: Chudi, U. (ed.): *Handbook on Journalism Ethics. African Case Studies*. Media Institute of Southern Africa. Windhoek.
- Sabiiti, S. (2001): What Role Should the Media Play in Conflict Transformation and Peace Building? Paper Presented at a Public Lecture, Department of Mass Communication, Makerere University, 5 November.
- The Monitor*: 1998, 2000, 2003. Monitor Publication. Kampala.
- The New Vision*: 1998, 2000, 2003. The New Vision Publishing House. Kampala.
- www.c-r.org/prgs/aficmed.shtml. Conciliation Resources. Media and Conflict in Africa.

On the author: Linda Nassanga Gorette is a senior Lecturer and Coordinator Masters Programme at the Mass Communication Department, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda. Her area of academic interest/research is Development Communication, specializing in: gender and media; environment; peace and conflict; reproductive health; children; population; media policies and regulation. Dr. Nassanga is a member of the following professional bodies: Africa Council on Communication Education; Africa Network for Environment Journalists, East Africa Media Institute; Uganda Media Women's Association and Faculty of Arts Research & Higher Degrees Committee.

eMail: nassanga@masscom.mak.ac.ug; website: <http://masscom.mak.ac.ug>
Phone: 041-543919 (Office), 041-290423 (House), 0772-503878 (mobile)