

# The Somali Media and their Peace-Building Potential

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## I. Introduction

One of the key issues to be interrogated by media researchers in relation to conflicted societies is the extent to which the media serve to escalate or reduce the overall conflict situation. The argument goes that the media either escalate the conflict by accentuating disagreements, foregrounding confrontations, and lending air time to forceful voices, or, conversely, reduce the conflict by shunning extremism, giving room for alternative voices and visualizing peaceful solutions. For several reasons, the media situation in and around Somalia provides an interesting ground for discussing these issues. For one, the long-lasting Somali conflict has been a recurrent issue for both the local and the international media. In addition, the extraordinary situation of the growing Somali diaspora has provoked a media engagement that in a special way treats issues of conflict through civic-driven, transnational media channels. Within this backdrop, it is the aim of the current article to discuss the role of the extended Somali media in relation to the local conflict situation. By “extended Somali media,” I point to both the local media in Somalia as well as diaspora media channels that are situated abroad but are still heavily concerned with Somali issues in their content.

Within media and conflict research, a particular movement, namely “peace journalism,” has received increased attention over the last few years. In short, peace journalism seeks to challenge conventional journalism by working actively for peace through the media. The move-

ment has gained momentum as a result of criticism raised against conventional media operations in the coverage of the so-called global war on terror, a critique that echoes several decades of disappointment with the global media and their coverage of national and international conflicts.<sup>1</sup> Against this backdrop, peace journalism claims to be an alternative to the traditionally conflict-oriented news paradigm. Thus, it is necessary in this article firstly to introduce peace journalism and how the concept challenges conventional journalism in theory and practice. Then, secondly, I will discuss the functions of the extended Somali media environment from a peace and conflict perspective. Since both the diaspora media and local media channels in Somalia may be seen as potent proponents of peace journalism, the article aims to use these media forms as entry points to evaluate some of the key tenets of peace journalism. On the basis of this discussion, the article will conclude with some critical remarks about the peace journalism ideology on the level of principle.

## II. Traditional Journalism vs. Peace Journalism

Peace journalism was formed as the antithesis of a traditional journalism paradigm. The main problem with traditional journalism, according to peace journalism, is that it fuels conflicts rather than diminishes them. This is presumably a consequence of traditional journalistic criteria, which tend to focus on superficial, visible attributes of conflicts instead of internal and more complex explanations. According to Gadi Wolfsfeld, the media are mainly governed by four values when selecting news, and none of them are apparently very helpful in understanding the dynamics of conflicts.<sup>2</sup> The demand for *immediacy* means that long-term processes receive no attention in the media; the need for *drama* means that moderate voices and dialogue get suppressed; the push toward *simplicity* means that complex explanations are ignored; and, lastly, the underlying *ethnocentric* focus means that the material is presented from an outsider's perspective with no attempt to understand other people and cultures.<sup>3</sup>

Critical remarks against so-called "war journalism" were initially posed in the 1960s by the Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung, who also coined the counter practice and term "peace journalism." Galtung is especially critical of the way in which the media associate conflict with violence. He maintains that conflict does not necessarily equate to physical violence, even though this is the underlying assumption of the dominant media logic. Two other types of violence—struc-

tural and cultural violence—are ignored by the media because they do not correspond easily with classic news conventions.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the years, Galtung has become even more sceptical of the media's contribution to conflict resolution. In a telling reference, he informs us that during the course of forty-two years, he has mediated in conflicts in forty-eight countries, sometimes with success, and the reason for the success is that he has "avoided any contact with journalists."<sup>5</sup>

In the 1990s and 2000s, several renowned Western journalists gave their support to the peace journalism project. The prominent BBC correspondent Martin Bell, for one, was frustrated by the way the Western media reported during the Balkan conflict—as if they were commentators on the sideline of a football match. Meanwhile, ethnic cleansing was going on in Bosnia. As an alternative practice, Bell proposed a *journalism of attachment*.<sup>6</sup> Bell argued that the journalist should abandon the ideal of an objective *rapporteur* and instead take a stand and be actively engaged in the conflict. He concludes that he can no longer "stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor."<sup>7</sup>

Former Sky News reporter Jake Lynch has been in the forefront of the new peace journalism project. Through the network Reporting the World and together with Annabel McGoldrick, he has regenerated the peace journalism ideology as outlined in the primer "Peace Journalism."<sup>8</sup> A main problem in contemporary journalism, according to Lynch, is that the dominant media channels forward a polarized view of conflicts by drawing a predetermined demarcation between the good and the bad, hero and enemy. Lynch maintains that there are always more than two sides to a conflict. Peace journalism is therefore particularly careful to give a voice to the excluded and marginalized.<sup>9</sup> The "objectivity" norm is targeted as a main reason for harmful media coverage. It is a paradox, according to McGoldrick, that professional journalists maintain that they are objective but still end up with war journalism that instinctively supports warfare.<sup>10</sup> This is presumably a consequence of an inherent drive in journalism culture that favors official sources, polarization, and individual incidents above processes.<sup>11</sup> The belief that "objectivity" exists has become a natural part of media culture. Lynch has observed in his courses in peace journalism that students take for granted that journalistic objectivity exists and that the primary task of the reporter is to find facts and simply report them.<sup>12</sup> Lynch and McGoldrick maintain to the contrary that it is impossible to be objective in reporting because journalists make value decisions from

beginning to end, starting with the selection of material and sources (the gate-keeping function). By this token, the authors do not accept the criticism that peace journalism should have an agenda as opposed to other journalistic activity, because “any report has an agenda.”<sup>13</sup>

Peace journalism has received uneven responses from professional media organizations and the academic community. Media researcher Thomas Hanitzsch argues that the way the peace journalism movement uses the criticism against the objectivity norm is based on a misinterpretation, and that it is instead Johan Galtung and his associates who convey a “naïve epistemological view on media coverage.”<sup>14</sup> Hanitzsch argues that peace journalists fail when they claim traditional war journalism instinctively conveys a distorted representation of reality. Quite to the contrary, there is growing acceptance among journalists that news does not reflect reality as such but is a selective representation of current events.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the journalistic environment has for a long time accepted that fully objective reporting is impossible. Referring to practical news work, Hanitzsch faults the peace journalism movement for overstressing the impact of the individual journalist. Hanitzsch points out that there are a number of structural constraints that delimit the impact of individual journalists; for example, the shortage of resources as well as editorial decision making. Hanitzsch also fundamentally objects to the perception that the role of professional journalists should include being “peacekeeping forces.”<sup>16</sup> On this point he is supported by the senior BBC correspondent David Loyn, who declares that it is not the task of journalism to initiate peace talks. Loyn argues that the peace journalism movement is not correct when claiming that traditional war coverage obscures the essence of conflicts; to the contrary, traditional journalism is illuminating. In fact, Loyn concludes that, “the opposite of peace journalism is good journalism.”<sup>17</sup> To improve conflict reporting, one should sharpen the tools one already has instead of creating new ones, he maintains.

From Nordic academia, Stig Nohrstedt and Rune Ottosen support peace journalism as an alternative to classic war journalism. They also have some critical appraisals of the movement. The criticism is not primarily aimed at the reporting of individual conflicts, but at a wider global discourse characterized by the global war on terror and the appended “fear society.”<sup>18</sup> Within this line of thought, the commitment of strong international powers (in particular, the United States) to the global war on terror is well emphasized. The global news agenda is consequently assumed to be “highly influenced by PSYOPS (psycho-

logical operations) and perception management.”<sup>19</sup> In order to counter this propaganda on a fundamental level, peace journalism needs to expand from the fairly narrow media arena and collaborate with other actors, for example the Peace Research Institute Oslo, argue Nohrstedt and Ottosen.

Thus, one observes that peace journalism has joined forces with various other research disciplines through the mutual criticism of current global media constellations, implying that peace journalism should be further developed within an activist reporting tradition. This approach is also the preference of various African media research affiliates who consider peace journalism an ally of sensible African reporting.

### **III. Peace Journalism in Africa**

One of the most prominent advocates of an African version of peace journalism is the Zambian media researcher Fackson Banda. According to Banda, peace journalism is part of a larger project that aims to free the media from the bonds of Western-inclined libertarian media regimes.<sup>20</sup> Like Lynch and McGoldrick, Banda maintains that it is misleading to criticize peace journalism for being biased, because all journalism is inevitably personally, institutionally, systemically, and societally biased. The important question, asserts Banda, is rather with whom one should side. He chooses “the poor, the hurting, the weak, the marginalised, the politically disenfranchised.”<sup>21</sup> This must become an integrated part of African journalism education, insists Banda, as media students should be equipped “with the existential and constructivist insights as to why journalistic autonomy should be directed towards peace-building.”<sup>22</sup>

Peace journalism has been tried out on the practical level in numerous African contexts, although quite differently from the approach advanced by Banda and the original peace journalism advocates. The focus tends not to be on traditional, large mass media channels, but on small media such as community radios, usually in conjunction with other forms of communication, for example, group discussions. In this regard, peace journalism may primarily be viewed as a sub-discipline of communication for development, which is an established area within Development Studies. One of many examples of such applied peace journalism is the use of community broadcasting in Southern Chad, where there have been longstanding conflicts between pastoralists and nomads over rights to territory and water resources, habitually

with weapons involved. The dispute has been the subject of radio programs with follow-up sessions in which listeners meet to talk about the problems under the guidance of the project organization, *Médiation entre Éleveurs et Cultivateurs* (Mediation between Nomads and Pastoralists). It is difficult to determine the effects of the radio programs, but local responses appear to be positive.<sup>23</sup> On one occasion, for example, a radio team set up a football match between two groups who had not communicated with each other before. The end result was that after the match they sat down over a coke and discussed common concerns for the first time. Leaflets and posters were also part of the particular project. Peace journalism along these lines thus involves a wide variety of means of communication and assumes a broadened conceptualization of journalism.

In Uganda, a study investigated the role of peace journalism versus more traditional mass media in the reporting of the Northern Ugandan conflict, a sharp dispute that erupted in 1986. Two national newspapers were studied during three different years. Both newspapers mainly dealt with the conflict by means of shorter articles; only occasionally were longer articles published. The state-run newspaper, *The New Vision*, turned out to be more confrontational in the reporting than the private *The Monitor*, a finding which is surprising in the African context given that official media channels usually try to minimize conflicts while the private media tend to amplify them. In the Ugandan case, however, the coverage of the conflict in the state-run newspaper should be read in light of the government's interests in the conflict. Nevertheless, the study concludes that both the private and the government publication fell short in journalistic professionalism, such as the lack of balance.<sup>24</sup> In conclusion, the researcher has the following advice for media practitioners who want to engage in constructive peace journalism: Emphasize objective and unbiased reporting; utilize investigative journalism; serve the entire population rather than isolated group interests; be quick to make decisions in the newsroom; use informal sources; avoid confrontational and biased language.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, none of this advice is foreign to traditional journalism. It is therefore pertinent to ask whether peace journalism, when elevated from the textbooks and applied in reporting practice, is in actuality only another name for good quality traditional journalism.

This leads us to Somalia, which provides an interesting test case of conflict journalism versus peace journalism. Few countries in Africa are more conflict-ridden, and few places pose more challenges for jour-

nalists than Somalia.<sup>26</sup> According to a study from 2008–09, Somalia is presented as the second most conflict-ridden country by international broadcasters, only superseded by Iraq.<sup>27</sup> Media channels reporting on Somalia, either domestically or from abroad, cannot ignore issues of conflict. Thus, the country provides a potent case for assessing theories of media and conflict.

#### **IV. The Media Situation in Somalia**

The extraordinary situation for the media in Somalia must be seen in light of the prevailing schisms in the country. Despite the fact that hardly any sub-Saharan nation is more ethnically homogenous than Somalia (an estimated 99.9% are Sunni Muslims and 85% regard themselves as Somali), the state of affairs has been more or less chaotic since the military regime of Siad Barre ended in 1991. The situation in Somalia was conflict-ridden even before 1991, but in a different way than today. In the present day, Somalia is in reality divided into two distinct zones, or arguably three. Somaliland, in the northwest corner of Somalia, has declared independence and has started to arrange autonomous elections (the last presidential election was in June 2010), despite no other nations recognizing the state.<sup>28</sup> Somaliland remains the only part of Somalia with fairly stable media operations. Puntland, to the northeast, although it declared its autonomy, has some way to go before it reaches stable governing structures. South and Central Somalia, with the capital city Mogadishu, are home to most of the population and host most of the armed violence in the region. Clanistic lords and radical Islamic groups are competing for control, with al-Shabaab as the most commonly cited faction during the past few years. Formally, and only so, a Transitional Federal Government (TFG) is in power in the Somali Republic.

The media situation is both similar to and different from the situation in other African countries. The print media are very weak, as is the situation in the entire sub-Saharan Africa (with the exception of South Africa). There are several explanations. One major reason is that Somali was only transcribed as a written language in 1972, and the time has been too short for a Somali literate tradition to grow significantly. In the wait for a more vigorous publication culture, broadcasting (particularly radio) has acquired the position as the main mass medium. The situation for print journalism hardly became any better when Siad Barre (in power from 1969 to 1991) instructed the Depart-

ment of Information to keep tight control on all print publications. Only one newspaper was published, namely the official outlet, *Xiddigta Oktobaar* (October Star). When the military regime was overthrown in 1991, a wealth of publications came on the market, akin to the situation in other regimes that left authoritarianism behind and entered democracy. Several such examples are Ethiopia,<sup>29</sup> Mongolia,<sup>30</sup> and the Baltic region.<sup>31</sup> However, most newspaper titles in these “sudden” democracies tend to be short-lived. Today, there are about fifteen newspapers in Somaliland and fifty in the rest of Somalia. Though it may sound like a decent number, many of the newspapers only come out once a week and the circulation figures are usually less than 1,000 copies. Most newspapers contain only eight pages and are printed in A4 size, with the exception of some papers in Somaliland, which are full broadsheets. Newspaper distribution is poor outside of the big cities. These facts notwithstanding, one should not underestimate the impact of the publications that do come out. A glimpse at the newspapers shows that they have an overwhelming focus on politics, even to the extent that they have been criticized for not containing enough sports and entertainment.<sup>32</sup> They are widely read by the small elite—the highly educated and well-positioned segment of the population—which explains why most Somali newspapers are published in the English language. Also, Somali culture has an oral tradition, which encourages people to pass on news verbally in a systematic manner.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the newspaper material becomes redistributed in a second circle. Of current Somali newspapers, three are state owned while the rest are private. Regardless of ownership, the newspapers are closely tied to the interests of the owner. Most private newspapers are critical of the government. The newspapers are commonly viewed as mouthpieces of different political interests rather than objective news channels.<sup>34</sup>

Television came to Somalia in the year 1983, which is late compared to other African nations. Of today’s four television stations, only one is state owned (Somaliland National Television in the north of the country). In addition, there are stations abroad that broadcast Somali programs via satellite. International television networks, particularly Arab channels, constitute a large part of television consumption in Somalia.<sup>35</sup> Somali television stations have very limited resources, proving that low-cost television production is indeed possible. To this end, it is convenient for the stations that there are no functional copyright laws in Somalia. Pirate syndication of international programs, for example



football matches, therefore constitutes an important element of the broadcasting schedule.

Radio, however, is the most important mass medium in Somalia (as in most of Africa). Radio is cheap, both for the producer and the recipient, and fits a variety of program formats. There are about twenty radio stations in Somalia, although surprisingly only one in Somaliland, where the governing structures are most functional. The reason is that the self-proclaimed government in the North is afraid of freeing the airwaves for dissent or clanistic lords. In this regard, the authorities cite the consequences of letting extremist forces use the media to spread hatred in Rwanda in 1994.<sup>36</sup> To be expected, the political opposition is critical of this policy. Radio is regarded as an important medium for anybody who wants to convey a message, be it news, debate, or public service information. In Central and Southern Somalia, on the other hand, licenses for radio stations are not such a big issue. The Transitional Federal Government tolerates the many FM stations on the market, probably because they may serve as a critical corrective to the most extreme Islamist factions, even though many stations are connected to a specific kin group. The fourteen FM stations in Mogadishu appeared in the international media in 2010 when they were instructed by the Hizb al-Islam militia to stop broadcasting music because it allegedly contravenes Muslim law. All stations, except for state-owned Mogadishu Radio and Bar-Kulan, the station of the African Union, adhered to the ban to the dismay of the Transitional Federal Government. The threats against the radio stations went as far as a news presenter receiving a complaint claiming that he read the sports news with such a melodic voice that it could have a seductive effect on women.<sup>37</sup>

Few dependable statistics exist of radio listening patterns in Somalia, but we can assume that a fair part of the population has access to radio and listens at least twice a week.<sup>38</sup> In the cities, FM stations are the dominant radio type, while rural dwellers must rely on shortwave (or medium wave). Shortwave radio signals are capable of reaching long distances and may be broadcast from the other side of the globe. Both Voice of America and the BBC World Service have very popular broadcast services in Somali. BBC began broadcasting in Somali as early as 1957, while Northern Somalia was still a British protectorate.<sup>39</sup> Internationally produced programs have been retransmitted on local FM stations for a number of years. To the Islamist groups, however, the Western radio programs represent a provocation. Thus, in 2010,

al-Shabaab instructed all local radio stations to end the transmissions of Voice of America and BBC on the basis of alleged colonial and anti-Muslim bias.

Somali journalists are under constant pressure. They work in by far the most dangerous place to be a reporter on the African continent. In the period 2007–10 alone, 21 journalists were killed in Somalia, mainly in Mogadishu. The killings occur either when journalists report from armed conflict zones or in situations in which their media house is targeted by those who try to damage a media operation belonging to an opposing faction. Interestingly enough, the largest journalist association in Somalia, the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ), is well organized and very active, in contrast to most journalist associations in Africa. The General Secretary of NUSOJ, Omar Faruk Osman, became the President of the Federation of African Journalists (FAJ) in 2010. However, in Somalia there is friction among journalists as well, and the other local journalism associations, particularly those connected to journalists in exile, protested heavily when the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) accepted NUSOJ as the official organization for journalists in Somalia.<sup>40</sup> The role of journalists in exile illustrates both the contestations that exist between different Somali groups and the importance of taking into consideration the activities of the diaspora (Somalis abroad) when discussing the Somali media situation.

In summary, the media landscape in Somalia largely resembles that of the rest of Africa: a weak newspaper structure and urban television profile, accompanied by substantial radio consumption. When it comes to the so-called new media, usage has grown significantly, considering that Somalia is impaired in a number of ways. In the year 2000, Somalia was the last of the African nations to establish a national Internet service provider (ISP). Today, however, the Internet is inexpensive and easily accessible in all heavily populated areas, even though only one percent (100,000 inhabitants) are regular users.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Somalia has been in the forefront in the use of mobile telephones. The need for contact with Somalis abroad has been an important reason for the growth in digital technology. For example, the Somali diaspora has developed a distinct system for money transactions from the West to Somalia (e.g., Dahabshiil Money Transfer and Exchange), which is considered a safer alternative to the informal *hawala* system.<sup>42</sup> In the area of health communication, it has been suggested that the Internet has the potential to significantly improve health services because it pro-

vides better opportunities for active participation by health workers in the discussion of new treatments.<sup>43</sup> The sometimes exuberant enthusiasm for new technology could use some critical reflection, however. The growth of new information technology has led to great optimism in certain development circles, but in reality it is often only a very small segment of the population that profits from the technology (the “haves”), and it has proven demanding to make the technology available to the majority of the population.<sup>44</sup>

Despite some uncertainties related to media user patterns in mainland Somalia, it is clear that the diaspora in Europe, North America, and Australia is very active in the media arena, particularly when it comes to the Internet. There are several hundred websites that focus on Somali current affairs. In addition, there are a wealth of blogs and discussion forums in English, Somali, and other languages. The next section will discuss what potential role these media channels play in the process for stability in Somalia.

#### **V. Diaspora Media: Mediator and Provoker**

In relation to its population, Somalia has one of the largest refugee contingents in the world. Between one and two million Somalis reside abroad, compared to a population of approximately nine million in homeland Somalia.<sup>45</sup> The Somali diaspora is still new; most left Somalia in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, many have a closeness to their country of origin, which could explain why they engage in political and social affairs in the homeland.

The activities of the diaspora regarding the homeland is well known by other countries marked by strife and have received much attention from the research community. Some emphasize the potential of the diaspora to contribute to peace and development in their country of origin. The Irish diaspora in North America, for example, purportedly played an active role in the peace negotiations in Northern Ireland.<sup>47</sup> African diaspora communities in Europe and North America may acquire a similar role in relation to conflicts in Africa, argues the African Diaspora Policy Centre in Amsterdam.<sup>48</sup> International organizations like the United Nations increasingly focus on the diaspora as a potential partner in economic development and the promotion of good governance.<sup>49</sup> Others, however, claim that the diaspora only serves to extend and reinforce conflicts in the homeland. In this regard, Eric Louw and Zala Volcic demonstrate how the South African and Serbian

diasporas present themselves as victims of unjust politics in the country of origin.<sup>50</sup> Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler maintain that diaspora groups score poorly in terms of conflict prevention because they are among the most important supporters of insurgent groups.<sup>51</sup> Militant groups in Somalia, for example al-Shabaab, have thus received significant support from Somali groups in Scandinavia and elsewhere in the Western world.<sup>52</sup>

One of the most effective means of communication in the diaspora is the Internet. However, the role of the diaspora in this area is disputed. On the one hand, there is enthusiasm because digital media are in essence democratic; they are citizen-driven, inexpensive, and easily available—even in Africa. To the diaspora, the Internet is both a communication channel *vis-à-vis* the homeland and an instrument for positioning itself in the international community, as illustrated by many of the websites edited in English. There are therefore both principled and pragmatic arguments for the new media being a potent instrument in the path toward peace and development.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, new media channels are just as easily available to groups having aspirations other than peace and collaboration. Al-Qaeda, for example, has utilized the Internet to reach sympathizers across national boundaries. Through the wire agency al-Fajr, the terrorist network has spread *jihadi* propaganda from Somalia, among other places.<sup>54</sup> In the view of Abdisalam Issa-Salwe, the civil war in Somalia has been replaced by another war: a “media war.”<sup>55</sup> The media landscape is nevertheless multifaceted, and even more so with the presence of the new media. Many of the most popular Somali websites concentrate on social networking and pure news exchange, and do not appear to have war and conflict high on their agenda. A popular website until recently is Somalinet.com, which has been the subject of several studies.

Somalinet.com was launched in 1998 and welcomed about 10,000 unique visitors a day until it closed for refurbishing.<sup>56</sup> The site is a typical hybrid website combining news, discussion, and user-generated content including video sharing. The users are largely confined to Europe and North America, but most are of Somali origin. Discussion topics are mainly related to Somalia. Some of the frequently debated topics are the status of Somaliland and the role of the different kin groups in the Somali conflict. The website can thus be seen as an arena in which Somali identity is confirmed and “negotiated.” In an in-depth study, Jennifer Brinkerhoff discusses what role Somalinet.com plays in conflict prevention for Somalis. She finds that the members of the dis-

cussion forum rebuke violent means and diminish rather than heighten tensions. Most of the participants seem to support a common Somali identity. On the basis of these findings, the researcher concludes that there is a positive peace-building potential of Somalinet.com and similar websites. They “promote liberal values, channel frustration into verbal debates thus diffusing tension, and create communities that counter the marginalisation conducive to violence.”<sup>57</sup> Carol Auld proffers a similar argument after studying Somali websites in Canada. The websites serve as a corrective for depictions of Somalia in the Western media, she notes. “They don’t know what is going on in these communities,” says a refugee from Somalia about the BBC coverage of Somalia, “their news is not an accurate representation of the facts.”<sup>58</sup>

When it comes to journalistic quality, diaspora channels are habitually subject to criticism. For instance, the diaspora media are accused of being more preoccupied with political agitation than investigative journalism. Many of the channels appear to be well entrenched in the Somali community, but the news is marked by favoritism. This is so because the diaspora is as fragmented as the people in Somalia, claims Mohamed Amiin Adow, editor of the Mogadishu-based website Shabelle.net.<sup>59</sup> The editor accuses websites outside of Somalia of playing a destructive role while being mouthpieces of specific kin groups. Several of them have even named their site after a particular kin group. Omar Faruk Osman, general secretary of the National Union of Somali Journalists, is of the same opinion. He claims the Somali media arena has become less professional with the coming of the new media channels. The diaspora and kin groups live in a symbiotic relationship in which they support each other economically and ideologically, according to Osman.<sup>60</sup> What may on the surface appear as journalism is thus motivated by factors other than news distribution and critical analysis.

Moreover, it seems that the initial enthusiasm about the “digital diaspora” has become more nuanced lately. The websites reinforce the Somali identity, but also inflict fragmentation and political contestation in the Somali community.<sup>61</sup> The online diaspora may contribute to development by being a link between Somalia and international donors, but simultaneously may prolong homeland conflicts.<sup>62</sup>

It is difficult to be conclusive about whether diaspora media are constructive or damaging to the search for peace in Somalia. As information channels for Somalis in the diaspora and the international community, they play a key role because the international news agencies have modest access to first-hand information about Somalia. The

country is quite inaccessible to foreign journalists and is, after all, regarded by some as having very limited relevance outside of the Horn of Africa. All the more important are the diaspora websites as sources of information from Somalia. But the diaspora media channels operate somewhere along the continuum between professional journalism and activism.<sup>63</sup> Foreigners do not often have the knowledge to distinguish accurate from misleading information. Thus, the segment of the diaspora that adopts Western jargon and communication may get more access to international forums for the purpose of political lobbying in the same way that, for example, the Ethiopian diaspora has gained sympathy in the international community.<sup>64</sup>

Judged by common journalistic criteria, the Somali websites—like other amateur content on the Internet—have a number of weaknesses. Despite closeness to local Somali sources, the news reports often appear to be biased and sometimes directly misinforming. The writers often use pen names (pseudonyms) and do not take proper responsibility for the posted allegations. Despite genuine intentions, the diaspora media, which almost always operate on a volunteer basis, lack the resources to provide a solid journalistic contribution.<sup>65</sup>

Importantly, however, diaspora media should not be judged by professional journalistic criteria alone. Many of the websites are primarily arenas for discussion and promote grassroots engagement. The potential for backing peace processes exists. As Mandy Turner argues, it is too simple to conclude that the diaspora either aggravates or reduces conflicts. It does both.<sup>66</sup> Likewise, the media channels are not inherently conflict-provokers or peace-makers, but are used constructively and destructively in different settings.

## **VI. HornAfrik: A Somali Peace Media Initiative**

The peace-building potential of the media on the ground in Somalia is of a quite different nature than that of the diaspora media. The target group for the local media is residents of Somalia, not actors in the international and transnational community. To this end, the Somali media have a better opportunity to keep in touch with the local situation and can take part in daily exchanges. What is the likelihood that these media can have an impact on the processes toward stability and democratic development in Somalia? It is difficult to conclude whether the media have a direct impact on such processes, but on the basis of experiences elsewhere and case studies in Somalia, one can make some

qualified suggestions. We will refer particularly to HornAfrik, a private media initiative in Mogadishu, which has been called peace radio in a Somali context.<sup>67</sup>

HornAfrik was started in 1999 by Somalis who returned from Canada. The enterprise began as a radio station, but today also includes a television station and a website ([hornafrik.com](http://hornafrik.com)). The radio is still the main medium. The program content consists of a combination of news, education, and entertainment. HornAfrik has engaged in experimentation with active audience formats, for example call-in programs in which listeners discuss the behavior of warlords and other local leaders. The call-in programs show great popularity. HornAfrik has become an alternative to kin-based radio stations and apparently has led to the closing of some propagandistic radio stations.<sup>68</sup> The radio station has always collaborated with NGOs in the production of material, for example in the area of health information. NGOs have to some extent had free access to air time. HornAfrik is presumably the media organization in Somalia with the widest international contact network. These linkages have brought support for journalist training, for instance. BBC World Services uses HornAfrik in the retransmission of Somali programs on local FM stations.

HornAfrik (together with Radio Shabelle) has received increased attention from international press freedom organizations as an icon for free and independent journalism in Somalia. The radio station particularly arrived on the agenda when one of the founding members and two other journalists were killed in 2007 and 2009. The station has faced pressure of different kinds both from the Transitional Federal Government and militia groups. This condition provokes a key question for media in conflict situations: To what extent is it possible for the media outlet to maintain the roles of peace mediation and critical journalism simultaneously? A medium that exercises critical journalism may easily be perceived as biased. HornAfrik was the first medium to investigate and report on human rights transgressions in Somalia. The critical journalistic approach was viewed negatively by the parties involved. On the other hand, the radio station has also facilitated dialogue between the various parties. As part of this strategy, the radio station has deliberately chosen not to deliver information about certain violent actions. Such an approach is controversial in the journalism community worldwide. Should it be the task of the media to censor news because it may fuel violence? In the peace movement, it is common to justify such a strategy on the premise that journalists

filter information anyway.<sup>69</sup> Larry Beyna and colleagues support the strategy of HornAfrik and maintain that, "if carefully done, conscious censoring of volatile news in situations of high tensions and conflict may be able to stop escalation because this step denies further fuel for the violence."<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, they add that such censoring must be executed carefully as there is a risk that the reputation of the station may be damaged over time with continuing lack of transparency.

These contributions notwithstanding, it is striking that evaluations of peace media initiatives habitually come out in defense of classic journalistic values. Along these lines, a comparative study of HornAfrik and a similar peace radio station in Burundi concludes that the stations should be as independent as possible and must resist political influence.<sup>71</sup> This advice may be read as disapproval of the policy of various African governments, which maintain that state-owned media are the best assurance of balanced and interest-free journalism. Furthermore, the study emphasizes that the media should work for ethnic and kin-based diversity in the program production and warns against dependence on external donors and foreign journalists.

Regarding program formats, the researchers emphasize "soft" genres, such as soap operas, sit-coms, and talk shows that invite audience participation. These are well-established methods within the area of media and development. Within this approach, there is generally great confidence in communication methods that promote active audiences and highlight popular topics instead of elite commentaries and hard news. However, the effects of such programmes on actual conflict resolution remain largely indeterminate. As Chris Greene points out in relation to a Somaliland study, it is presumptuous to claim that the decline in female genital mutilation among women in Hargeisa is a direct result of a local radio drama, but it is still feasible that the program may have reinforced a change of attitude that had already been started.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, the above-mentioned study of HornAfrik concludes that radio is not an effective instrument to initiate change on its own. More successful than peace radio is local peace mediation, which involves leaders and other persons in face-to-face dialogue.<sup>73</sup>

## **VII. Summary and Conclusion**

To most of the population in Somalia, radio is the most important mass medium. In addition to local radio stations, people listen to foreign shortwave broadcasts in Somali. Many of the local stations are asso-



ciated with particular clans, however, and thereby reinforce internal conflicts.<sup>74</sup> The media diversity in Somalia may be said to reflect unsolicited fragmentation rather than beneficial pluralism. In the extended Somali media atmosphere, the diaspora is remarkably active through producing content for blogs and websites as well as participating in discussion forums. However, the media activities of the digital diaspora are marked by clan-based divisions as well.

Peace researchers generally see a great potential for improvement in the area of mass media as an instrument for change and reconciliation. Media analysts are often more skeptical. It is difficult to decide what role the Somali media actually play in the process of conflict resolution. In practice, when the peace journalism philosophy is transferred to actual media work, small media and active audience formats are deemed most useful. When traditional news media channels are requested to engage in peace journalism, the recommendations tend to reinforce traditional journalistic standards: independence, objectivity, fairness, and the importance of fact checking.<sup>75</sup> These standards correspond entirely with the values called for by journalist organizations in Somalia. In this area, the contribution of peace journalism does not stand out as something new. When it comes to the need for explaining the complexity of the Somali conflict and creating understanding between the various parties, there is undoubtedly room for improvement both in the Somali and international media. A bulletin-style news language would not suffice. One needs wider program formats and participation from diverse interests, including average citizens. The language of the media must also be the subject of persistent critical analysis. Some of the important issues are how reporters frame a conflict and who they include and exclude in the presentation. To scrutinize the media processes, one could very well be inspired by Johan Galtung and other peace researchers who are critical of the logics of the mainstream media. However, traditional journalism actually does not appear to be hostile to improvements in these areas. To the contrary, it is part and parcel of the journalistic craft to be cognizant of the effects of word choice and media framing. Like the Somali proverb reads, "*Haddii aan afku xumaan, gacantu ma xumaato*" (No foul mouth, no violent hand). That is where the journalist and the peace activist meet. To journalists covering Somali issues, however, the appropriate approach appears to be the exercise of professional journalism rather than entering a peace mediation role.

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**Notes**

1. Galtung and Ruge 1965; MacBride 1980.
2. Gadi Wolfsfeld 2004.
3. Wolfsfeld 2004; cf. Bratic and Schirch 2007.
4. Galtung 1969.
5. Galtung 2000, p. 162.
6. Bell 1998.
7. Bell 1997, p. 8.
8. Lynch and McGoldrick 2005a.
9. Lynch 1998.
10. McGoldrick 2006.
11. Lynch and McGoldrick 2005a, p. 209.
12. Lynch 2007.
13. Lynch and McGoldrick 2005b, p. 14.
14. Hanitzsch 2007, p. 5.
15. cf. Schudson 2003.
16. Hanitzsch 2004.
17. Loyn 2007, p. 1.
18. Nohrstedt 2010.
19. Nohrstedt and Ottosen 2008, p. 14; cf. Verhoeven 2009.
20. Banda 2008, p. 50.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Zint 2009, p. 14.
24. Goretti 2007.
25. *Ibid.*
26. According to Reporters Without Borders ([rsf.org](http://rsf.org)), the Committee to Protect Journalists ([cpj.org](http://cpj.org)), and Freedom House ([freedomhouse.org](http://freedomhouse.org)).
27. Institute for Economics and Peace 2010.
28. There is speculation that Kenya may be the first nation to recognize the independence of Somaliland; *Jimma Times* (22 May 2011), online at [jimmatimes.com/printFriendly.cfm?articleID=33949](http://jimmatimes.com/printFriendly.cfm?articleID=33949).
29. Shimelis 2002.
30. Nielsen 2009.
31. Harro-Loit 2005.
32. Ismail 2006.
33. Ducaale 2005; Höhne 2008; and Johnson 2010.
34. Ducaale 2005; Ismail 2006.
35. Ismail 2006.
36. Stanhope 2004.

37. Albadri 2010.
38. Estimates vary a lot. In a study of 600 pastoralists in three regions in Somalia, 86% of the respondents said they had access to short-wave radio (Ismail 2006), while another study from Somaliland suggests that most people in the countryside lack radio receivers (Ducaale 2005).
39. Logan 2007.
40. "Disguising Defamation and Support for Violent Fanatics as Press Freedom," commentary, *Garowe Online* (8 September 2010), online at [garoweonline.com/artman2/publish/Editorial\\_29/Somalia\\_Disguising\\_Defamation\\_and\\_Support\\_for\\_Violent\\_Fanatics\\_as\\_Press\\_Freedom\\_Editorial.shtml](http://garoweonline.com/artman2/publish/Editorial_29/Somalia_Disguising_Defamation_and_Support_for_Violent_Fanatics_as_Press_Freedom_Editorial.shtml).
41. Estimates of how much of the population in Somalia use the Internet vary a lot, from less than 1% to more than 70%. At any rate, it is unreasonable to suggest that 70% uses the Internet (e.g., Auld 2007) when an estimated 75–80% of the population is illiterate ([undp.org](http://undp.org); [who.org](http://who.org); and [internetworldstats.com](http://internetworldstats.com)).
42. Auld 2007; Turner 2008.
43. Marriott 2008.
44. Sonaïke 2004; Evusa 2005; and Obijiofor 2008.
45. Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, United Nations (2009).
46. Assal 2006.
47. Cochrane 2007.
48. Mohamoud and Osman 2008.
49. Brinkerhoff 2008, 2011; Kleist 2008b; and Lindley 2011.
50. Louw and Volcic 2010.
51. Collier and Hoeffler 2006.
52. Horst and Gaas 2008; Shinn 2010.
53. Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010; Kadende-Kaiser 2003; Kvasny and Hales 2010.
54. Rogan 2007.
55. Issa-Salwe 2006.
56. According to [alexa.com](http://alexa.com), data from 2010.
57. Brinkerhoff 2006, p. 25.
58. Auld 2007, p. 196.
59. Fallis 2009.
60. Ibid.
61. Issa-Salwe 2006.
62. Kleist 2008a, 2009; Horst and Gaas 2009.
63. cf. Skjerdal 2011.
64. Skjerdal 2009, 2010.
65. Fallis 2009; Issa-Salwe 2006; Issa-Salwe and Olden 2008; cf. Redie 2007.
66. Turner 2009.
67. Two additional stations that have been regarded as peace radio in Somalia are Radio Galkayo (Puntland) and Radio Voice of Peace (Mogadishu). See [radiopeaceafrica.org](http://radiopeaceafrica.org).

Also worthy of mention is the Northern Kenya Peace Network, a journalist group formed in 2010, which produces awareness-building community radio broadcasts in the Somali language (Khalif 2011).

68. Beyna et al. 2001; Ismail 2006.

69. cf. Lynch and McGoldrick 2005a.

70. Beyna et al. 2001, p. 46.

71. Beyna et al. 2001.

72. Greene 2008.

73. Beyna et al. 2001.

74. Farah 2010.

75. Beyna et al. 2001; Goretti 2007.

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