



THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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Policy Brief

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The Role of Media in War and Peace in South Sudan¹

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Summary

Much of the commentary in the media and the news reporting in South Sudan tends to be partisan either supporting the government or the opposition. It also tends to take a regional or ethnic line. Consequently, such stances have negatively affected the objectivity of the reporting and weakened the media's role as a vital instrument for democracy, justice, and accountability.

Media coverage of the on-going violent conflict is, therefore, a double-edged sword, and its ability to incite more violence is indisputable.

The uses of the media as a vehicle for peace-building are currently limited to independent outlets such as the Catholic Radio Network, Eye radio, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan's Radio Miraya, and other private publications such as Gurtong's. Although these media establishments have a degree of independence and try hard to present all sides to the issues, it is often the case that those outlets are not necessarily seen as impartial. Both the government and opposition often accuse these outlets of serving as mouthpieces for the other, or for foreign powers, especially that they run on donor funding from outside. Other media outlets are affiliated with the warring sides and are only in the business of mobilization for conflict.

As of recent, the warring parties have attempted to restrict the media space, exercising censorship with an eye to controlling access to information, as well as showing opponents in a negative light. Observers suggest that the government's crackdown on the media has increased in the past few months, resulting in the closure of two English Language publications by the National Security. However, these strategies have

¹ The Sudd Institute gratefully acknowledges the UNDP's financial support through its South Sudan's Democracy and Participation Program.

² A good evidence for this posture is the way the opposition, the SPLM-IO, seemed to champion this cause at the beginning of the war as one major issue they would never compromise on, but then dropped the issue during the recently signed peace deal, relegating accountability to the bottom of their demand lists.

³ Some people suggest that the Juba incident exacerbated the conflict by turning a political

been unsuccessful, as sources of information have multiplied with the use of new technologies, the Internet and mobile phone services.

Most South Sudanese get their information about the war and peace efforts through word of mouth, phone calls, social media, and the radio. Much of this information is often second or third-hand, leaving room for exaggeration, omission, fabrication, and compromised news-reporting ethics. This has not helped in exciting peace, healing, and reconciliation.

I Introduction

Since the beginning of the ongoing conflict in South Sudan, the media in all its forms has been as much a serious factor in fueling the conflict as it is expected to be a vehicle for dissemination of the messages of peace. While the reporting of violence, the war-related humanitarian crises, the coverage of the peace processes, and the human rights issues has been done with an eye to keeping the people informed, there has been a growing concern about the role of the media in the incitement and promotion of violence, especially along sectarian lines. In the way the South Sudanese consume information, one person's reporting of news is likely another person's call to war. Thus, the media has also played both a positive and negative role, especially in highlighting the tragedy of gender-based violence and in promoting it. This was demonstrated, for example, by the use of radio by the armed opposition in Bentiu in April 2014, when it occupied the town and some of its elements started broadcasting calls for rape of non-Nuer women in the area. Likewise, accusations have abounded about how the government has used state-owned television and radio to defend its image and show up the opposition in a negative light. In both cases, the line separating the mere provision of information and a deliberate attempt to mislead has become ever more blurred.

The media within South Sudan has also been used as a platform for the management of the relationship between the country's leadership and the international community—at times exposing the misunderstanding and acrimony that exists in this relationship—all to the detriment of future cooperation on peace-related issues. A case in point is the role of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), which the government has viewed with suspicion since the start of the conflict, sometimes directly accusing the world body of meddling in the conflict in favor of the armed rebellion. In response, UNMISS raised serious concerns about the government's use of the national media to rally the people against the UN mission. This confrontation came to a head-on in early 2014 when the relationship soured over the accusations that UNMISS was caught in Lakes State delivering weapons to the armed rebellion in Bentiu. The government used the national television to air the frustration and anger of the Minister of Information, despite the assertion from the United Nations that this incident was no more than a simple case of misunderstanding: the weapons were accidentally mislabeled but were in fact destined to the new Ghanaian contingent of UNMISS, and that the objects the Minister claimed to be bombs were actually gas masks for the peacekeepers.

Furthermore, the media itself has been the object of suspicion by all sides to the conflict. The opposition has used its online publications and social media as a conduit for messages of war, resource collection and recruitment, especially with regard to the opportunistic use of the December 2013 Juba incident that triggered the conflict. As a result, the supporters of the armed opposition have since focused the light on this incident, but mainly with a view to gaining political and military objectives on the back of that incident than a commitment to document the tragedy for purposes of future justice and accountability for the victims.² The armed opposition opportunistically used the incident to portray the government as a killer of its own citizens. For armed opposition, the incident became a tool for recruitment for the rebellion, and because of the heightening of the ethnic aspect of the incident, many of the disaffected Nuer youth flocked to the rebellion. The human rights abuses that followed the outbreak of war in Juba undoubtedly need to be properly investigated and widely reported in the media, and a lot of coverage has been done by both local and international news agencies. Still, it is suspected that the armed opposition has taken advantage of this incident to swell its military ranks, appealing to the feelings of Nuer people to avenge their loved ones who perished in Juba.

The coverage of this incident by opposition media, it is widely suggested, has not been for the purpose of documentation of this most painful human rights tragedy. Instead, or in addition, the incident—in which a number of Nuer people were killed in what appeared to be targeted killings on the basis of ethnicity and which sparked the conflict³—has been manipulated through the use of various media outlets to widen the rift along sectarian lines, drawing into the war a vast swath of people who had little or no shared political objectives with the leaders who resorted to armed struggle as a method of resistance against the government. For example, to capitalize on the anger of some Nuer youth about this incident, some of the armed opposition supporters started talking of a genocide, of numbers of the dead as high as 20,000, and of a government plot long in the making to exterminate the Nuer. There was very little evidence to support these claims, and yet these messages, disseminated by the media, caused the violence to spread so wide and so fast as to shock everyone. This continues, even after an international authority released a report that put death statistic in Juba at approximately 500. This tragic incident became the best recruitment tool for Riek Machar and his lieutenants. As one opposition supporter remarked, Machar “has been milking the suffering of Nuer people for his political goals ... although we know he will drop the issue of justice for them the minute he gains access to power.”

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³ Some people suggest that the Juba incident exacerbated the conflict by turning a political conflict, a struggle for power between the elite, into a war with an ethnic hue.

The government, on the other hand, has viewed the media coverage of “rebel” activity by national media outlets as an unlawful accommodation of the voices of the armed opposition and has used government-owned media outlets such as South Sudan TV, along with the recent national security legislation, to counter the opposition messaging, either by attempting to debunk the arguments of the armed opposition or by threatening the journalists with arrest or violence. It was particularly revealing of the government’s attitudes toward the media when the Minister of Information declared that interviewing rebel leaders by any South Sudanese national or for a national publication was in violation of national security regulations and tantamount to a criminal offense. To this effect, it was alleged that the government has closed down two English language publications and has supposedly issued death threats to journalists. There are, however, mixed reports about this story of the closing down of publications, especially the Citizen Newspaper. The journalists linked to the publications claim that they were ordered by National Security to shut down due to what the government saw as subversive reporting, but there are other insider views suggesting that the newspapers actually closed down due to their own financial struggles and lack of access to foreign currency, and were just making security threats a pretext. Whatever the truth may be, this has produced a toxic media environment, making the relationship between the media and the government very tense. In sum, the parties to the conflict, while sometimes upping the rhetoric of peace, are also engaged in war propaganda, especially pertaining to the recent violations of the ceasefire agreement that was reached as part of the compromise peace deal. The warring parties’ propaganda also reached new heights in June and July of this year when they engaged in the taking and retaking of towns that devastated Upper Nile State, and the areas around Malakal town, the state capital. This became as much a media war as it was a field battle, the aim of each side being to show the victories of one side and the humiliating defeat of the other.

Other entities, such as opposition political parties, ordinary citizens, independent publications, diplomatic missions, NGOs, and the UN have all used the media as the platform for the discussion of war-related issues and peace efforts. The relationship between the government and the international community has particularly been a very volatile and negative media spectacle over this past year and half, with the government pointing fingers at the international community over accusations of politicking and members of the world community accusing the government of shrinking the political space and of hijacking the civic rights in the country. The reported closing down of newspapers in recent weeks and the allegations of death threats against the journalists are thought to have vindicated these fears among the internationals.

Not all the international criticism of the media climate in South Sudan is free of value judgment or unbiased, however. More recently on August 16, 2015, when President Salva Kiir was traveling to Addis Ababa to attend the IGAD-Plus mediated peace process, he reminded all local journalists that in their reporting on the peace process, they should be mindful of what it has cost the people of South Sudan in terms of human

lives to liberate this country and that they should not work against a country that was wrested from the hands of a very formidable opponent, the government of Sudan. This did not go down well with Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), a US-based organization, which misinterpreted the remark to suggest that the President had threatened to kill journalists. It would have been important for CPJ to be mindful of the context in which the president's remarks were made, which is that the president was urging the citizens of South Sudan to be loyal to their country and not report anything that may jeopardize the country's national security.⁴

The result is the mutual suspicion between the warring parties and the world community, including South Sudan's citizenry and between the warring parties themselves. The South Sudanese have been caught in a situation where they have to decide which of the warring sides is telling the truth about the war, and to do so based on the political or sectarian leanings of the news outlet. The victim in this spectacle is firstly the possibility of acquiring accurate information and, secondly, the ability of the South Sudanese to trust each other and build a sense of collective citizenship based on belonging to the political entity that we call South Sudan and not on sectarian loyalties. Additionally, that the media outlets compete for consumers in an attempt to influence their political stance exacerbates divisiveness and the potential for further conflict, instead of enhancing the possibility for peaceful coexistence.

This paper examines the role of media in the promotion of peace, the fanning of conflict, the management of relationships between South Sudan and the global community, the government and opposition briefings and press releases about the peace processes and about the humanitarian situation in the country. The paper explores both the possibility that the media could be a force for positive change toward peace and a potential for further fueling of conflict; and how it has arguably become a platform for diplomacy instead of face-to-face meetings between government and opposition, between South Sudan and the rest of the world and between citizens and their political affiliations. The paper reviews numerous sources of information, such as print, television, and internet-based social media platforms, in order to show that while the media is a vehicle for the promotion of peace, it also has a capacity for negative use.

II The State of Media Profession in South Sudan

It is important to think about the role of media not just as the source of information but also by examining the specific sources where the South Sudanese get their news. The

⁴ Unluckily for President Salva Kiir, a journalist was killed in Juba on August 19, a mere five days since the president made his remark, proving in the minds of many journalists and citizens that the death of Peter Julius Moi was a consequence of the president's unweighed remarks. His having refused to sign the compromise peace agreement for over a week became the focus of condemnation through the media, even without the correct understanding as to why he chose that position.

most common formal medium for news is the radio, especially the FM stations scattered throughout the country; this medium is perhaps followed by newspapers and by South Sudan Television, especially for news related to government activities and messages. These outlets are obviously confined to the urban population and the few literate persons living in rural areas and small towns who can access these services in foreign languages such as English and Arabic. Some of the FM stations broadcast in the local languages that are predominant in the area where a given radio station is located. But these are few to cover the entire nation. The most widely used medium, by far, is word of mouth at gatherings such as funerals, weddings, social clubs, and church services. This is followed by phone calls and then the internet, made possible by 3 G-enabled mobile phone technology, some of which come with access to Facebook, Twitter, Yahoo, and Google. With the mobile telecommunication networks spreading ever more in the country, access to the news, ability to publish blogs, and to communicate generally have been greatly increased as compared to just a few years ago. In this regard, the four mobile phone networks operating in the country—Zain, Vivacell, MTN and Gemtel—are all competing for consumers' attention, each one trying to out-perform the other by providing the strongest signal and the best internet-enabled network. However, with the exception of voice calls, this medium also demands literacy competence, making its reach essentially limited for most of the people of South Sudan, though it is possible to communicate such information further to the non-literate population by word of mouth.

The ease of access to information made possible by the Internet has, however, presents both challenges and opportunities for the profession of news reporting and for journalism as a whole. It means that information in foreign publications, including major newspapers like the *New York Times* or the *Guardian*, and major TV stations like BBC and Al-Jazeera (the links for which can at times be found on Facebook or Twitter) can be viewed or read on mobile phones. So all it takes for a piece of information to be disseminated is its production. The minute it is produced and published, it can reach all the corners of the country almost instantaneously. Clearly, this is an advantage, both for news producers and the consumers. However, these formal, trusted, and well-established outlets are facing steep competition from the informal, private blogs, social media platforms, and other online publications, all of which seem to have the capacity to turn any citizen into a news reporter overnight. But that also means this has become a dangerous technology because of its potential to be utilized for violence.

With the effortlessness of production and distribution of news described earlier come the questions about quality, the ethics of reporting, and the balance and objectivity of analysis. It has made it quite easy to fabricate news and has facilitated subjective reporting, dangerously dividing the South Sudanese along sectarian lines. For example, articles written in opposition-related online publications over the past year and half, such as in *Nyamilepedia*, *Upper Nile Times* or *South Sudan TV in Opposition*, have all churned news reports, most of which have turned out to be unverifiable or entirely false. Their reports are often about the movement of opposition troops, attacks on government-controlled towns, the capturing of towns, the number of military equipment destroyed

or “captured in good condition,” or the personnel killed. They also have a regular language that seems to borrow from the north-south liberation war reporting in the old Sudan. For example, a common feature is something called “tactical withdrawal” from a town, which actually means that the force was defeated, with opposition forces not admitting their defeat lest the resolve and confidence of their support base is shaken. For the government, the phrase is often “we are fighting the rebels on the outskirts of town,” also allegory to a defeat. In other words, almost all these publications are not really in the business of accurate news reporting but simply exist as propaganda mouthpieces of the warring parties.

Quite rapidly, such publications have become the subject of heated discussions on social media and have been quickly discredited by people who read them for the purpose of informing themselves about the war. But they remain important platforms for people who want to believe anything that either discredits or praises the parties. They are the main driver of rifts between online communities, as supporters of the opposition themselves clash between those who want to establish or maintain the credibility of the opposition by sticking to accurate reporting and those simply desiring to keep up the morale of their fighting forces by portraying them as invincible fighters. In the early days of the war, for example, it was very common to read about how the “Nuer are great fighters,” that the Dinka of Kiir Mayardit can never defeat them, or how they will teach the cowards of Bahr el Ghazal a bitter lesson.

The same type of slanted reporting of the war to suit one’s objectives is also exercised by the government. One only needs to watch Maalak Ayuen Ajok present the army program on SSTV to realize that the current conflict is being fought both in the battlefields and in the minds of the people. The vilification of the supposed “enemy” and the attempts to boost the morale of the fighting forces and their support base among the public seem to be the main objectives of those in charge of war-related information management. This has produced two very worrying outcomes.

The first is that the media has been used to report the military confrontations along the increasingly hardened ethnic divide and to manage the war through sectarian relations, often speculating about which sections are behind each side of the war. The second outcome is that this condemnatory attitude, some of which spills over as generalizations about and vilification of entire “tribes,” is self-perpetuating, producing a vicious cycle of hatred that becomes extremely difficult to massage away in the future. This has added to the already strained relations, so that the media, while it could be a strong vehicle for peace making, has actually contributed to widening the wedge between ethnic communities already badly affected by the war.

III Media and the History of Conflict in South Sudan

During the long journey of liberation, which began with the commencement of the first civil war in the 1950s, accurate war reportage was a challenge and almost as hard and dangerous as the war itself. For all practical purposes, Southern Sudan had a near news blackout, except for the dedication of a small number of southern print journalists who committed themselves in the 1960s to bringing the news of the suffering in the region to the attention of the rest of the world. These included reporters for *The Vigilant* and *The Grass Curtain*. Both publications had dedicated themselves to documenting the atrocities taking place at the hands of Sudan Armed Forces stationed in southern garrison towns of Juba, Bor, Malakal, Wau, Aweil, among other areas. Stories of chiefs massacred in Bor, families attacked at a wedding in Wau, attempts to exterminate all the educated southern Sudanese in Juba, and mass burials of victims in wells or drowning in rivers all across southern Sudan, were just but a few examples of what these publications documented.

These modest publications with restricted distribution were still able to demonstrate utmost professionalism in recording the incidents of civilian killings, abuse, and humiliation at such a high standard as to rival any modern news organization in South Sudan today. These publications, at least what has been preserved of them, today remain a very valuable historical record of what happened during this period. Other records by foreign visitors, Christian missionaries, and aid workers were also made and currently provide a glimpse of what life was like in Southern Sudan during the first civil war, a life of displacement, disease and malnutrition almost unprecedented at the time but which has been surpassed during the second round of civil war (1983-2005).

Examples of such documentation include a film recording made in Equatoria and Bahr el Ghazal by Allan Reed, an American working for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), in 1971. This makes clear the brutality with which Khartoum had conducted its counter-insurgency, the level of suffering inflicted on the civilians, and the resourcefulness of the southern separatist fighters of that time. The latter's ability to use their meager and rudimentary military supplies to score victories against the well-equipped armed Sudan government forces stood as testament to the level of objective determination to achieve set political goals. This was done without any form of mass media, but through village-to-village mobilization for the war, for the civilians to commit to shouldering the cost of the war and for the political objectives to remain clear. Much less violence was meted out against the civilians in support of war than the SPLA would do many decades later. The lesson in this history is that documentation of war crimes is a very difficult endeavor, but one that needs to be done such that future generations can use these stories to build a positive future. They show that sort of research is possible to do and can be useful for peace-building, if it is done carefully and accurately. It is such careful research that survives the intense scrutiny of the warring parties, no matter how hostile the media climate may be.

During that war, despite the unity of purpose among Southern Sudanese of the time, there were always local rivalries and jockeying for control within the ranks of the fighting forces and among the political leaders. But despite these disagreements, unlike the situation in subsequent conflicts, there was very little capacity to compete for popular support, as the ability to rally the masses was hindered by communication challenges across large areas of the region. A group or an individual was then forced to choose between seeking reconciliation with their contenders or to reach for the ethnic or regional card to gain some support. The disagreements were often confined to the fighting forces in the event that a military confrontation ensued. In the end, despite the fact that political differences remained, especially within Sudan African National Union (SANU), the majority of fighters came to rally behind a single commander, Joseph Lagu, a man from one of the smallest ethnic groups in the country, the Madi, and someone who would not have mustered any leadership position had the politics of power contest been as mired in the ethnic politics as we have now come to know in South Sudan. Both the limited access to mass media and a stronger sense of commitment to the unity of purpose kept Southern Sudan in a relatively cohesive state during the first war, at least politically. In hindsight, it might be possible to suggest that lack of easy access to media was a blessing in disguise, because it prevented the political differences from being inflamed by ambitious individuals to the levels we have now come to witness in post-independence South Sudan.

The near media blackout of the war's past was to change only very slightly in the second civil war (1983-2005). The first thing that the SPLA/M did soon after it was established was to set up its own radio station (*Radio SPLA*) to air from Ethiopia into Sudan in Arabic, English, and some South Sudanese indigenous languages. The usual reliance on foreign media to spread the message of the revolution was no more. Yes, the BBC, the VoA, and the CNN of this world would all become important in the course of the liberation effort, but only in terms of making the SPLA's case in foreign capitals, not for the purpose of creating the popular support that the SPLA came to enjoy for nearly eight years, before it was disrupted by the 1991 split within its senior ranks, when Riek Machar and Lam Akol broke away to create SPLA-Nassir.

For the current conflict, however, the situation is significantly different from both the previous liberation wars, not just because of the nature of the war itself—the fact that it is within South Sudanese family—but also due to the massive changes in technology and access to information. In this war, media has become a double-edged sword. Use it to put down the opponent, vilify them and show them in worst light possible and you will have created animosities that will last for a generation (the 1991 split and the propaganda that followed is testament to such a scenario). Or practice professionalism in the presentation of the war experience and one might have just saved this country from a perpetual cycle of violence and from total ruin. Only independent media outlets have the capacity to counter the warring parties' divisive positions and use their platforms to sow the seeds of future reconciliation between the warring parties, the

political leadership, and among the competing communities, is the only way to hope for success.

If one reads *Gurtong*, there is reason for hope. This online resource and its printed magazine cover news, but more importantly, it focuses on culture, the history of coexistence, and on reporting the positive things that are happening now, even in the midst of violent confrontations. Take, for instance, the question of whether South Sudan has fallen into the abyss of ethnic annihilation since the current war began. To truthfully answer this question, with an eye to finding pockets of civility between these ethnic groups to build on for future reconciliation, it might be more honest to ask the question of why in the midst of this war there are still communities of Dinka and Nuer in Jonglei or why the Dinka of Warrap and Nuer of Unity still interact peacefully and take refuge in each other's homelands. Covering and probing these situations, as *Gurtong* does, might be the kind of media coverage that sows seeds of future coexistence. Anything short of this spells tragedy ahead. It would indeed be tragic if today's communication technology becomes a curse, instead of improving lives.

IV Freedom of Expression as a Responsibility

Since the war began, media restrictions by the government have undoubtedly grown. But South Sudan's government remains comparatively more open and respectful of civic rights than some governments in the region. Nevertheless, journalists or associations representing them have been outraged about harassment, arrests, banning, exclusion from covering events, and about the death of several of their colleagues. But it is important to state that the exercise of liberty comes with responsibilities. It seems that the South Sudanese need to remind themselves of this truism from time to time. If the South Sudanese demand that the government respects their constitutional rights and civil liberties, it would only be natural that the government also demands from the citizens that they respect the law and exercise these rights with the understanding that there can be a slippery slope between freedom of expression, freedom of association, and all other constitutionally protected rights on the one hand, and breach of duties and obligations, on the other. This is particularly more so now due to the fact that the country is at war and journalists should distinguish between simple reporting of news and jeopardizing the security of people. The problem is that often such a law delineating responsibilities and obligations does not exist, or is unclear or ignored where it does.

But this is the dialectic relationship that has bedeviled the governments of Western countries and their war on terror, and preservation of civil liberties versus enforcement of national security objectives. Where do freedom of expression and a citizen's right to information end and where does the obligation of the state to enforce law begin? We think the South Sudanese might be able to learn a thing or two from Western experience. It is not just the existence of liberty itself but also how it is exercised that actually determines whether we will always be able to enjoy this liberty. One cannot kill

or publish a call to the killing of someone or wrongfully accuse someone of theft just because we live in a free society.

Take, for example, the media versus the government. The relationship between these two entities is marked by shared responsibilities and mutual benefits, but also by serious liabilities. Use it responsibly and the citizen could gain a moral high ground from which to challenge the state. Conversely, if the state clamps down on these liberties unconstitutionally, it risks forcing the citizens to seek unconstitutional means to send their message. It is our observation that in South Sudan both sides often misunderstand this complex relationship. On the part of public media, it almost goes without saying that it has the responsibility to try as much as possible to inform the public and to do so with as much accuracy and verification as possible, regardless of who or what is the subject of that information. The media also has its own ethics of conduct to follow in pursuit of its goals. Veering away from these responsibilities, deliberately or inadvertently, could land a journalist, or anyone who uses media outlets to pass information, in very hot water. But even when there are disputes about coverage, they could still be resolved using the existing laws of the land. Individuals and public institutions that feel wronged by a media outlet, for instance, could sue that outlet in a court of law seeking an apology or a retraction of information, as well as press for libel.

For the government, the responsibility in this sort of situation is to allow, prioritize, and facilitate the legal process to take its course, not for any branch of government to take actions on its own. The first thing the government does, if it feels wrongly accused of any kind of wrong doing, is to demand proof of what is being said or published, and to do so through legal channels, not by breaching the civil liberties of a citizen in the course of seeking redress. It would just be as unconstitutional for any government agency to arrest and detain a journalist without due course of the law as it is unconstitutional for a media entity to publish hearsay, libelous information, and unconfirmed news that could spark violence or destruction.

This complex relationship is at the heart of liberty, at the heart of whether this country will continue to grapple with violence or will begin to build peace and stability. The two entities described here need each other. The media needs government protection through established rules and the government needs the media to keep the public informed and to dialogue with that public. The government requires access to the media in order to be proactive in its pursuits and to present its side of any story, lest the wrong story goes out and it would take time to undo any damage caused by lack of proactive use of the media. Imagine a scenario, for example, when a radio station or news publication calls a government official and asks for a comment on a topic they are investigating and no comment is made, or if a journalist is kicked out of a meeting at a public institution and then reports her ejection. This arouses suspicions from the public about the government is concealing something, possibly resulting in a public relations war the government could easily lose.

Freeing up the space for the citizens to air their frustrations and disappointments is good for the government because it grants it a moral high ground for prioritizing dialogue above suppression of voices. The words of John F. Kennedy are instructive indeed, especially in our fragile political climate: “Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.” It costs the government and the state far less to allow open speech than to deal with the consequences of outbursts from oppressed citizens. Likewise, the media would spare itself a lot of aggravation from state institutions by sticking to the rules. The problem in South Sudan, of course, is that the two are not seen as equals and the relationship has been turned into one of mutual suspicion. The result is that the two seem to work for each other’s demise instead of focusing on the mutual benefits and the benefits that accrue to the state and the citizens from a positive government-media working relationship.

V Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no question that the way the media has covered the war in South Sudan for the past year and a half has presented the question of whether or not the media contributes more to war or to peace. The way the warring parties have attacked each other using both official and informal media outlets has only created a climate of mistrust that goes beyond the war between the armed men and has attracted other fighters to it, even those with little understanding of the war. This paper has reviewed some of the media outlets that are active in South Sudan and has attempted to summarize the role of media in the current political situation. The paper concludes that the professional ethics of the media in South Sudan make it as much a deadly weapon as it is a potential conduit for peace and reconciliation. There is no question that the whole country’s media profession needs greater professionalism, while the government and the opposition need to make it possible for the media to function in its duty of informing the public and in correcting the misinformation that fuels the conflict.

We recommend to those seeking to use the media for conflict mitigation, conflict resolution, peace-building, and reconciliation in South Sudan to look to independent media outlets such as those owned and run by faith-based groups. This is largely because high journalistic standards are compromised by both the divisive politics of conflict and by the ease of access to information through informal outlets such as the social media and the Internet.

While we do not have full understanding of how big is the role of social media in stoking the fires of violence, we judge that any efforts to use the media to build bridges between hostile communities must find ways to counter the negative impact of second-hand information that comes through social media or mobile phone calls. This can be done by recruitment of volunteers to monitor social media activity, summarize the negative messages being peddled, and try to craft counter messages that can be aired through the radio stations that focus on peace.

There are two additional problems facing the media in general but specifically the messages of peace that the media should carry. The first one is the capacity of the media houses: how can these media houses be assisted to upgrade their capacity in investigative journalism, diligence in information gathering and perhaps a special way to promote a language of peace? The country needs objectivity in reporting and dedication to investigative research into human rights violations by all sides to the conflict. This should be an area of real conversation among the donors who are already supporting the country in this field, the UN, and the government to ensure that media is strengthened as a major component of democracy and governance. The second issue is the role of the international media in the prevailing situation in South Sudan. It would be important for local and international journalists to find ways to work together so as to transfer skills to the local journalists while foreign journalists benefit from the perspective of local journalists as people who know their country best.

About Sudd Institute

The Sudd Institute is an independent research organization that conducts and facilitates policy relevant research and training to inform public policy and practice, to create opportunities for discussion and debate, and to improve analytical capacity in South Sudan. The Sudd Institute's intention is to significantly improve the quality, impact, and accountability of local, national, and international policy- and decision-making in South Sudan in order to promote a more peaceful, just and prosperous society.

About the Author

Jok Madut Jok is a co-founder of the Sudd Institute. He is the author of three books and numerous articles covering gender, sexuality and reproductive health, humanitarian aid, ethnography of political violence, gender-based violence, war and slavery, and the politics of identity in Sudan.