Measuring the ‘democratic’ quality of radio news: experiences from Liberia

ABSTRACT
There is a general consensus that media are an essential element of democracy if they fulfil particular quality requirements in their reporting. Abundant literature deals with media quality from a theoretical perspective, but empirical knowledge on journalistic practice with regard to its role in democratization is rare, and this is even more so in the case of African countries. First, this article seeks to assess the quality of radio in Liberia, which is the country’s most popular medium. Second, the article tests a specific methodology in order to measure the contribution of radio to democracy. It argues that radio stations in Liberia strongly differ in their quality, each with specific shortcomings. These findings are confirmed by interviews with civil society representatives and by audience research.

Mass media constitute a public arena in which debates are held and decisions prepared (Rucht 2000: 53–4). These processes are seen as essential for the proper functioning of democratic systems. Media’s performance in enabling and shaping this public communication, media’s relations with other societal stakeholders and intermediaries, and its changing role in the process of globalization and economic restructuring have been intensively analysed, especially in Western countries (McQuail 2005; Jarren and Meier 2002: 133;
Less research has been conducted on this subject in the context of developing countries. Political scientists have studied in great depth the process of democratization in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Southern and Eastern Europe (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Merkel 1999). However, the main focus of these scholars was on changes in political institutions, and only a few studies have been conducted on the contribution of media to democratization (Gunther and Mughan 2000: 431–41; Hyden and Okigbo 2002; Voltmer and Schmitt-Beck 2006). These studies generally stress the positive role of media in the immediate transition of political systems, but highlight the endangered position of media after liberalization, mainly due to legal and structural hindrances to free media (Voltmer 2000: 143; Wanyande 1996; Kasoma 1995; Tettey 2001). These studies rely mainly on anecdotal evidence, and not on empirical research.

Thus, rather little is known about what kind of quality in reporting is essential to enable democratization, what level and kind of quality is practiced in journalism, and how different audience groups perceive, benefit and learn from the media for their political action. This article seeks to fill this gap, and provides sound empirical data to complement the little empirical knowledge on media quality and audience reception in African countries. Based on democracy theory, quality criteria for a content analysis of radio news were established. A sample of radio news from various Liberian broadcasters was then analysed. The criteria catalogue was adapted to the country context on the basis of interviews on media quality with journalists and representatives from civil society and political parties. The research then sought to measure the ‘democratic’ quality of newscasts, describing quantitatively the differences between broadcasters and additionally assessing its methodology of measuring quality. Subsequently, the results presented here were tested in group interviews with ordinary people of various backgrounds in Monrovia (Spurk and Lopata 2008).

The first section in this article summarizes the history of Liberia’s media landscape and the impact of the armed conflict on this history. The article then outlines how Dahl’s minimalist model of democracy theory can assist in formulating criteria to measure the quality of media. The last section discusses the democratic quality of the main news programmes of four different radio stations in Liberia, and highlights the main differences between broadcasters and the possible reasons for these differences.

LIBERIA’S MEDIA HISTORY AND THE ARMED CONFLICT

Although the historical situation of the media in Liberia is still under-explored, reports show that the first half of the twentieth century saw a relatively free press (Innes 2005). The process of systematically intervening and harassing journalists started only in the second half under William Tubman’s presidency between 1944 and 1971 (Rogers 1986: 277). Tubman’s executive government had its own newspapers that were ideologically in line with his viewpoints. It invented quasi-legal methods to hinder oppositional media and punish critical journalists. Freedom of expression was less and less perceived as a right, and was instead considered to be a privilege that the president provided (Innes 2005: 234). Despite these difficulties, a critical press was in existence. It helped that the Press Union of Liberia (PUL) was already founded in 1964, partially with the purpose of defending journalists’ rights. Thus, (print) journalism experienced at least some protection, mainly by the PUL and by civil society in later stages (Deddeh 2000: 165–6).
However, the situation of radio, the most popular medium, allowed for far less pluralism. During the 1970s and 1980s the government held almost a monopoly in radio broadcasting. The state-owned Liberian Broadcasting System (LBS) had been founded in 1949, with its radio branch operating under the name Liberian Broadcasting Cooperation (ELBC). Its only competitors were the protestant missionary broadcaster Eternal Love Winning Africa (ELWA, founded in 1954), Voice of America (founded in 1962) and ELCM community radio, founded in 1981 by the Catholic dioceses of Liberia (Biener 2007). The latter started as a religious broadcaster but gradually increased its coverage of social, political and human rights issues. Television was introduced by LBS but the station stopped broadcasting with the outbreak of war in 1990.

While Americo-Liberians had dominated political life in Liberia since 1847, a coup in April 1980 saw Samuel Doe as the first leader of indigenous origin. His coup can be interpreted as the result of ‘decades of exclusion suffered by the indigenous African population’ (Mehler and Smith-Höhn 2007: 51). After some initial hopes for genuine change, Doe’s regime continued with authoritarian rule by installing an exclusive patronage system as well. Doe recruited members of his own ethnic group, the Krahn, and of the close ethnic group of Mandingo to key posts in administration and military. Within this context, repression of media and journalists and restrictions on mass media increased. Although the government demanded ‘responsible journalism’, freedom of the press was ‘paid lip service’ (Innes 2005: 243). The government considered media outlets as auxiliaries to foster development and build national institutions. Dissent was nearly impossible in this atmosphere. The government gave security forces the power to ‘arrest and detain any person found spreading rumours, lies and misinformation against any government official […] by word of mouth, writing or by public broadcast’ (Innes 2002: 10).

After internationally questioned elections in 1985, which Doe won, an army commander, Thomas Quiwonkpa from the ethnic group of the Gio in Nimba County, tried to seize power, but Doe resisted. After this failed coup, mismanagement and gross abuse of power increased. Retaliation measures against the ethnic groups of the coup leader, mainly the Gio and Mano, promoted an ethnic dimension of rule that hardly existed before. With regard to the media, Doe ‘asserted his control of the means of broadcasting with a brutality that shattered domestic political opposition for the remainder of the decade’ (Innes 2002: 45). Radio broadcasting played a central role during the Doe era, as it was the only medium that reached a large number of Liberians, especially the illiterate and those living in rural areas. Doe even set up a rural radio network, the Liberian Rural Communication Network (LRCN), in order to promote development projects and foster national identity.

In 1989, Charles Taylor, former official of Doe’s government, started a military uprising. His National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) rapidly seized control of 90 per cent of the Liberian territory, but failed to conquer Monrovia, because a military intervention force of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), had entered in August 1990 in order to defend the government and restore order. Nevertheless, president Doe was captured, tortured and killed in September 1990 by the forces of Prince Johnson, a former ally of Taylor who had established his own military group. After Doe’s death, a peace agreement was signed and an interim government was established, but factually the state had ceased to exist (Innes 2003). An armed conflict, known as the Liberian civil war, followed with continuous fighting and a further proliferation and fragmentation
of military groups and changing coalitions, culminating in seven main factions by 1995. All of them reportedly committed severe human rights abuses and atrocities against civilians. Several peace deals failed during this period.

With the start of the armed conflict in 1990 media freedom shrank further. Journalists were under severe pressure to stick to one of the fighting factions. ‘Journalists joined the propaganda machineries of the warring factions […] became the conduits through which their verbal attacks were publicized and amplified’ (Deddeh 2000: 161–2). They became the mouthpieces of warring factions, i.e. ECOMOG, Johnson or Taylor (Momoh 1991). But the development of media in Liberia during the civil war stands for something even more salient: Taylor seems to have been the only warlord with a genuine idea of the power of radio in Liberia. At the time short-wave radio sets and hand-held radio receivers were quite popular, allowing residents to sidestep authoritarian control of the airwaves. Liberians used international broadcasters like the BBC and Voice of America in order to obtain additional information (Innes 2003: 7).

Taylor tried and managed to gain constant international media attention at the beginning of his invasion. Interviews by satellite phone with the BBC helped to shape his image and cause. Furthermore, he made attempts to gain a media monopoly and chose to either seize radio facilities for his own purpose or to destroy those he could not control in order to deprive his opponents of these means (Innes 2003: 2). Numerous examples show that Taylor pursued this strategy quite strictly. His NPFL troops first seized control of existing radio facilities in 1989 and 1990 as they moved from the north to Monrovia (Innes 2003: 8). The government station LBS in Monrovia suffered the shelling of its FM studio and a rocket attack on its main radio/TV building in 1990. The station changed hands several times between troops loyal to the late President Doe and Taylor’s troops. Finally, NPFL looted nearly all valuable equipment and set up a propaganda station, Kiss FM, at the headquarters of Taylor in Gbarnga (IMS 2004). Other stations were stripped of spare parts and/or destroyed, like the Voice of America studio in Careysburg, close to Monrovia. Taylor destroyed the missionary broadcaster ELWA as well, when he had to give up conquering Monrovia in 1990. All this left the NPFL almost with a radio monopoly. As ECOMOG perceived Taylor’s media power as a serious threat, Nigeria deployed a mobile radio station in October 1990 that began broadcasting in November under the name ELBC. Additionally, in July and August 1990 Taylor seized the LRCN with its network of stations and transmitters, originally set up by Doe. By 1992 all these stations were re-assembled in Taylor’s headquarters in Gbarnga, which enabled him to broadcast to the whole country (Innes 2003, 2005).

After military setbacks for Taylor and the establishment of ECOMOG, an agreement was reached (‘Abuja II’) in 1996, calling for ceasefire, disarmament and elections in 1997. Taylor won these elections with a landslide victory, although it is said that many voted for him due to fears he would continue the armed conflict if not elected. As president he installed a repressive regime that did not bring about any economic recovery, let alone stability. For the civilians, widespread suffering lasted. Hunger and malnutrition prevailed, medical assistance was lacking, and moreover, ethnicity-based persecution continued.

Taylor’s media monopoly was even more decisive in the run-up to the elections in 1997. Due to disagreements in the transitional government at the time, heavy fighting broke out in Monrovia in early 1996, during which almost all media houses except Taylor’s were heavily attacked. Of the six radio stations broadcasting prior to April 1996, only Taylor’s station was not looted. But his
troops had destroyed the site of Radio ELCM (later Radio Veritas) and seized the transmitter of DC101 FM. ELWA also went off air due to destruction. As a result, one year before elections Taylor’s media dominated the airwaves. Complementing his abundant radio equipment in Monrovia, he set up a network for the rural areas in July 1996, when Radio Liberia International, the new shortwave facility of Liberia Communications Network (LCN), went live.

Only Monrovia saw some media competition by December 1996, when six newspapers were published there and three radio stations were again broadcasting: ELBC as the transitional government radio, Taylor’s Kiss FM, and the commercial Radio Monrovia. But on Kiss-FM and Radio Liberia International, Taylor was the only candidate capable of running a national campaign for the elections. The potential media competitors came far too late, despite all efforts. Radio Veritas was only re-opened in June 1997, and the new Star Radio station – set up by the Swiss Fondation Hirondelle – only started broadcasting in July 1997, just days before the elections took place (Tanner 1998; Innes 2003: 14). After being elected as president in 1997, Taylor further strengthened this monopoly. He continued to fight Radio Veritas on several occasions, and closed Star in March 2000 for the rest of his rule (Biener 2007). Additionally, he systematically neglected LBS and solely strengthened his LCN.

Two years after the 1997 elections, renewed fighting erupted between Taylor’s government forces and a rebel group, ‘Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy’ (LURD), escalating in March 2003 when LURD advanced close to Monrovia and another opponent group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), attacked from the south. Peace talks between rebel groups and the government opened in June 2003, and simultaneously fights in and around Monrovia intensified. Facing mounting international pressure and being indicted for war crimes by the Special Court for Sierra Leone, Taylor agreed to go into exile in Nigeria in August 2003. The same month the government, LURD and MODEL signed a peace agreement, a transitional government was installed with all war factions present, and a multinational UN Peacekeeping force, the United Nations Mission in Liberia, was deployed with 15,000 staff. Up to Taylor’s departure into exile to Nigeria in August 2003, LBS employees had reportedly not been paid for 30 months (IMS 2004). However, there was a somewhat vibrant press, protected by the PUL, and preserving a stand for free opinion (Toure 2002). But it was limited to Monrovia, reached only the elite and thus had a limited effect at the national level.

In 2005 elections were held that led to the current presidency of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. The task of rebuilding the nation is huge, as fourteen years of armed conflict have almost completely destroyed the country, and thus all kinds of reforms such as security, disarmament, economic recovery, job creation, public services like education and health, and cultivation of a common national identity are perceived as urgently needing to succeed in a short period, otherwise violence might break out again (United Nations 2006). Since the end of the war and the inauguration of the new government in 2006, media freedom has considerably increased. Nevertheless, violations of journalists’ rights are still common, although major media law amendments have been launched and are currently discussed (Centre for Media Studies and Peacebuilding (CEMESP) 2008).

The situation of print media is economically difficult, and some argue that there are too many outlets but the range represents the breadth of political opinion (IMS 2004, 2007). Television has also grown, but is limited to commercial stations. The most remarkable fact after 2003 is the flourishing of the
radio landscape with many new radio stations. Diversity and plurality have increased considerably. At the time of research in 2007 there were at least eleven radio stations in Monrovia (ELBC, Star Radio, UNMIL (United Nations Mission in Liberia) Radio, DC 101, Radio Veritas, ELWA, Sky FM, City FM, Kings FM, Truth FM, Power FM), and in addition to these some estimated 35–45 community radio stations (IMS 2004, 2007). Thus, there is a considerable degree of pluralism in the radio and the print media landscapes, but economic conditions are generally harsh.

Summarizing the media situation from the perspective of the users, i.e. readers and listeners, there is some evidence from private notes that the Liberian populace has suffered from lack of impartial, truthful information and restrictions of freedom of expression. In his diary, a Liberian journalist questioned the veracity of government media reports in 1990 as follows:

The NPFL is now on the city’s doorstep. Reports say the fighting is only five miles from the heart of the city. Is this true? Rumours abound. Our only sources are the BBC, VOA, and ELWA. People learned long ago not to believe anything on ELBC and ELTV. Since the start of this conflict, the government has never admitted the loss or capture of any town or city, except by implication or reference. As each city or county has fallen to the NPFL, the government has denied the news and told us that everything was under control, that there was nothing to worry about, and that there was no need to panic.

(Andrews, quoted in Innes 2003: 7)

This statement might reflect the impressions of many people over the entire period of the armed conflict, an impression that was supported by the interviews held in Monrovia in January 2007 with representatives from civil society. Many Liberians are tired of being misled by biased or even forged information. During the war, misinformation occurred regarding not only political topics, but also practical, sometimes life-saving issues, e.g. on the whereabouts of armed groups that were approaching.

Interviewees from civil society organizations such as NGOs and churches, as well as political parties, identified the lack of good analytical reporting including background information and the negligence to pay attention to relevant issues as main shortcomings of media. This was mostly attributed to the fact that journalists expect the newsmakers to pay for coverage. Furthermore, the exclusion of ordinary people and their concerns and voices in the news was mentioned. In addition, the lack of enlightenment of the semi-literate poor populace was lamented. More balanced reporting was seen as essential, providing the citizens with a full and critical account of diverse viewpoints. An over-representation of information concerning Monrovia exclusively, neglecting the large hinterland of Liberia, was a further complaint. These quality requirements mentioned by civil society representatives were later strongly endorsed by focus group discussions with audience groups, but these are not reported here in detail (Spurk and Lopata 2008).

DAHL’S MINIMALIST MODEL OF DEMOCRACY THEORY

Against this background of the impact of the armed conflict on Liberia’s media landscape and the perceived lack of good analytical reporting, this article seeks to assess the quality of journalistic reporting in Liberia. In order to achieve this,
a framework was needed that first defines the relations between journalistic reporting and democracy and second helps to identify criteria for good quality of reporting which can be observed in journalistic texts. In this endeavour the focus was on the normative political functions of mass media in democracies (Burkhart 1998: 368–400; McQuail 2005; Rucht 2000: 53–4). In this context, media are expected to create a public sphere; to control accountable decision-makers by making political decisions transparent, thereby enabling citizens to be informed; and to participate in political life. This is concordant with other strands of media theory that attribute to mass media the role of societal ‘self-observation’ (Arnold 2006, based on Luhmann).

The identification of specific quality criteria of media reporting is based on Voltmer (1998: 28–31), who used Dahl’s minimalist model of democracy theory (1998). The model sets very basic rules for democracy, applicable not only to various institutional settings of democracy, but also to different cultural backgrounds, the latter a basic requirement in order to adapt such a model to an African context. Dahl (1998: 37–40) identifies five basic standards for democratic decision making, three of which affect the role of media. Governing processes have to meet these in order to ensure that all members are equally entitled to participate in decision making. First, effective participation requires that all members have equal and effective opportunities to make their views known to other members of society. Second, enlightened understanding implies that each member needs an equal opportunity to learn about the relevant alternative policies and their consequences. Third, control of the agenda demands that members have the exclusive opportunity to decide what matters are to be placed in what form on the agenda.

As Voltmer (1998) has shown, Dahl’s criteria translate into specific requirements for mass media aimed at strengthening democracy. Effective participation requires media to contribute to political participation by providing a forum for debate, thereby enabling an exchange between groups beyond personal communication. The need for an enlightened understanding among citizens demands that media inform comprehensively, and that they provide the public with orientation on relevant issues and viewpoints of institutions and stakeholders. Media also need to inform government and other institutions about the viewpoints and concerns of the public. The requirement to control the agenda translates into expectations that the media will make decisions made by government transparent, investigate relevant information, and scrutinize salient issues and political actors’ interests. The media, therefore, are to play four main roles, i.e. information, orientation, forum and scrutiny. These roles are fulfilled when specific requirements in journalistic coverage are met (see Table 1). Following the discussion on quality criteria in media theory as described by Voltmer (1998: 33–57), specific criteria that are close to journalists’ daily work and that are in line with journalism practice literature (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001) were selected.

Regarding the information function, the leading criterion conducive for democracy is the comprehensiveness of information provided. Journalists and editors are expected to not only check the information they receive from whatever source, but also to actively research and investigate additional information. This ensures that a wide variety of topics, relevant to the audience, is covered. It requires the use of diverse sources so that a range of actors (political decision-makers, representatives of groups, the general public) are represented in news reports. Generally, it can be assumed that the more diverse the sources and the larger the range of topics, the better the information function
is fulfilled. One may also expect a higher level of accuracy and truthfulness when coverage is based on a larger number of different sources.

Journalists are expected to provide their readers not only with facts but with context as well. Hence, news stories should contain background information referring to the context, and information on causes of a reported fact as well as on its supposed consequences. Additionally, news should contain different viewpoints, usually opinions of different actors. The more viewpoints, the better the range of potential opinions on a specific subject is reflected, and thus the better the orientation function is fulfilled. The journalist’s opinion may add to this quality in case the opinion is strictly separated from reported facts and viewpoints (for example, as a commentary).

In accordance with the orientation function, journalists are required to collect different viewpoints and to present ensuing perspectives by using different sources and by actively searching different opinions. By offering a diversity of opinions, journalists demonstrate the fact that there is a range of viewpoints on a problem, and enable their audience to form their own opinion. Thus, the forum function is measured by the same criteria mentioned above.

Journalists are considered to operate as ‘watchdogs’. Respective criteria are whether journalists deal with a topic critically, e.g. keeping track of officials’ promises and reminding the public to check whether they have been fulfilled. In order to analyse to what extent a topic is covered critically, the researcher would have to focus on specific topics and identify the accordant range of arguments. However, this article examined entire news programmes and could therefore only deal marginally with the aspect of scrutiny. The research only analysed whether journalists conducted their own inquiries. This was done under the assumption that news sources do not tend to provide critical viewpoints themselves, and that journalists have to make their own efforts in order to find these. All these quality criteria are visible in media content and can be measured with content analysis.

MEASURING THE QUALITY OF RADIO NEWS IN LIBERIA

Drawing upon Dahl’s minimalist model of democracy theory, this section investigates (1) the current democratic quality of the main news programmes of different radio stations in Liberia; (2) the main differences between broadcasters concerning quality aspects; and (3) the possible reasons for these differences. A second goal was to find out how and to what extent the methodology of analysing quality by means of content analysis offers reliable results. And a third was to compare whether the quality of news as described by the methodology is in line with the assessments of civil society representatives. This third aspect was later complemented by audience research that was carried out in order to examine the assessments and expectations of the general public (see Spurk and Lopata 2008).

The research was limited to radio, which is the most popular media in Liberia, and to entire news programmes. Further research is expected to cover other radio formats, newspapers and selected topics as well. In order to adapt the applied criteria catalogue and codebook to the local context, desk research and a series of interviews with civil society representatives were carried out. To learn more about the expectations of opinion leaders in Liberia regarding media quality, interviews were conducted with representatives from political parties, NGOs and churches, as well as media personnel. Based on insights from the interviews, the radio stations for this research were selected and further questions added to the codebook, i.e. the geographical reference of
news, the existence of the perspective of ordinary people, and the balance of viewpoints as representing the full spectrum of opinions on a problem. Furthermore, the interviews were helpful in identifying relevant topics, as well as specific actors, sources and sound bites for the analysis.

For the content analysis, news broadcasts of four different radio stations were selected. These were mentioned by the interviewees as the ‘most important’ stations and represented different organizational set-ups. The stations included:

- Star Radio was founded in 1997, and is an internationally funded and well-equipped station with well-paid staff by Liberian standards. Star Radio was closed during Taylor’s presidency and resumed broadcasting in 2005.
- Truth FM, founded in 2005 and belonging to Renaissance Communications Incorporated, is a commercial broadcaster that is owned by a private business company. Interviewees mentioned that it is perceived as being close to President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, but there is no proof of any direct linkage.
- Radio Veritas was founded in the early 1980s as ELCM community radio by the Catholic church of Liberia. It was also closed several times during the war and Taylor’s presidency but managed to stay on air for most of Taylor’s presidency.
- ELBC, founded in 1954, is the radio branch of the state-owned LBS, and suffered from destruction and negligence during Taylor’s presidency.

A sample of news programmes from these four stations was drawn in February 2007. The main evening newscasts of the stations were recorded every second weekday between Monday and Friday and then transcribed. Due to technical difficulties, not all newscasts could be recorded, and in some cases the records were of such poor sound quality that they could not be transcribed. The final sample included only newscasts from days that were covered by all four broadcasters. This ensured that the actual events (the ‘reality’) reported were the same for all broadcasters. Differences in reporting could therefore not be attributed to different ‘realities’. The final sample comprised 246 news stories from five different days in February 2007.

A team of local staff from the CEMESP recorded and transcribed the newscasts and then coded the transcripts based on a jointly drawn up codebook. All coders participated in a four-day training course. Each news story was coded by two coders; this procedure allowed for comparisons of the coding data. Based on these comparisons, unreliable data were excluded. Liberian newscasts are generally divided into several segments. After a series of headlines, single stories are read in a ‘bulletin’ and a variety of topics is further outlined in the ‘actualities’ section by, for example, adding sound bites. In order to guarantee a comprehensive analysis, the different parts of the newscasts were first compiled into one single document and then coded. The compiled story was the unit of analysis. The data were then further analysed and statistically processed by the authors of this article. Before applying the general criteria catalogue (Table 1), the specific country context was investigated in order to adapt the framework to the local situation.

The analysis of the radio news revealed that there is a clear hierarchy in terms of quality, but even stations with higher quality levels have shortcomings in meeting ‘democratic’ quality requirements. Following the structure of quality criteria given in Table 1 and the amendments made by desk research and interviewees, the next paragraphs outline the results in detail.

3. The station of UNMIL, Radio UNMIL, was not included as it was described by the interviewees as only the voice of the organization. However, the populace names it as one of the most liked and most trusted stations enjoying a good reputation.
TOPICS

One of the main quality criteria is the diversity and relevance of topics. Therefore, the main topic of stories was identified according to a list of 37 different topics that were later re-grouped into topic groups. Remarkable differences in topic selection between the broadcasters can be measured. The topic group of ‘high politics’ comprising rather abstract issues (‘state and administration reform’, ‘day-to-day political processes in parliament’, ‘elections’, ‘foreign affairs’ plus ‘national security reform’) on average gained the highest attention (22.6 per cent), notably by the state broadcaster (35.0 per cent, see Table 2). The second most important category was ‘economics’, comprising news on ‘infrastructure’, ‘finances’, ‘development cooperation and foreign aid’ plus ‘agriculture’ (18.9 per cent), and again gaining the highest attention by the state broadcaster (27.5 per cent). This high share of news on economic issues might be explained by the fact that foreign aid and the reconstruction of infrastructure is a key issue in a war-torn country. The third most important topic category consisted of ‘conflicts’, comprising corruption as well as personal or political conflicts (13.4 per cent on average) with a larger share on Truth FM (18.9 per cent) and Star (14.5 per cent). Stories on crime, rape, accidents and disaster (called ‘events’) are also apparently newsworthy (10.6 per cent), with a higher share on Star (15.9 per cent).

Regarding the main differences between stations, Star – and to a lesser extent Veritas – are reporting less on the usual formal political processes (‘high politics’). It can be said that Star, Veritas and, occasionally, Truth are closer to people’s concerns than to elite issues. This is reinforced by the fact

<table>
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<th>Mass media functions</th>
<th>Quality criteria</th>
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| **Information**      | • Comprehensiveness of information  
                      | • Diversity of topics  
                      | • Relevance of topics  
                      | • Diversity of actors in stories  
                      | • Diversity of sources |
| **Orientation**      | • Presence of background information  
                      | • Presence of reasons, causes beyond factual information  
                      | • Diversity of viewpoints  
                      | • Clear separation of fact and opinion (transparency) |
| **Forum**            | • Diversity of viewpoints  
                      | • Diversity of sources  
                      | • Balance of opinion |
| **Scrutiny**         | • Presence and balance of critical viewpoints  
                      | • Own journalistic inquiry |

Table 1: ‘Democratic’ quality criteria for mass media.
that the topic of ‘social development’, which comprises issues close to ordinary people’s needs and concerns such as ‘education’, ‘health and nutrition’, ‘environment’, ‘water and sanitation’ and ‘poverty’, was only considered as a serious news topic by Star (11.6 per cent) and Veritas (10.9 per cent) and was hardly mentioned by ELBC (5.0 per cent) or Truth FM (1.9 per cent). In contrast, Star and Truth FM have higher shares in conflictive issues and typical news events such as accidents and crime than Veritas and ELBC. Beyond this, it is remarkable as well that ‘civil war and reconciliation’ were hardly an explicit subject during the recording period. In a country dealing with civil war this topic was expected to play a more important role, but only Radio Veritas touched it.

**GEOGRAPHICAL REFERENCE**

Inspired by the accounts of the interviewees, it was analysed to what region in Liberia the news story was referring to, distinguishing between the capital Monrovia, the country as a whole, and specific regions or counties. With regard to this aspect, Star Radio has a higher share of news from counties (36.0 per cent, see Table 3) which seems to be clearly attributable to the fact that Star Radio, unlike the others, has regional correspondents. The opposite is true for Radio ELBC: a mere 10.2 per cent of analysed content dealt with specific news from the regions. It is assumed that in Liberia, where many people had to leave their homes and became internally displaced during the years of war, news ‘from home’ is highly appreciated and hard to obtain, as transportation to the hinterland is a major problem.
ACTORS

For each news story the three most important actors were identified. This indicated whether the radio stations prefer specific actors or actor groups. The present analysis shows that the institutions of the executive government (comprising the president, the cabinet, the ministries, other central authorities and the local administration) take the leading position among actor groups on all four stations, most notably on Radio Truth FM (37.1 per cent) and Radio ELBC (37.0 per cent). Political parties play a minor role, a little more on Truth FM (11.4 per cent) as compared to Star (3.6 per cent) and Veritas (4.8 per cent). The parliament is equally represented on Truth FM (13.6 per cent), Veritas (12.1 per cent) and ELBC (14.0 per cent). Star is behind the others in this aspect (7.9 per cent). Civil society actors are only mentioned in 5 per cent of all cases on average, more often by Star and Veritas (around 6–7 per cent) than by Truth FM (1.5 per cent). Surprisingly, economic actors (1.7 per cent) are hardly represented in the news, although economic issues were a key topic of the news. This reflects the fact that it is not the local Liberian economy but rather international actors such as aid organizations, NGOs and intergovernmental bodies that decide on economic development in the country (11.3 per cent of all actors).

The general public constituted a quite important actor in radio news (15.7 per cent on average), with Star Radio leading (19.4 per cent), closely followed by Radio Veritas (18.5 per cent). ELBC lags behind (9.0 per cent) in this regard. Star Radio, Radio Veritas and Radio ELBC (all around 4 per cent) pay more attention to the typical target groups of development cooperation (e.g. refugees, migrants, ex-combatants, youth, disabled, women, people with HIV) than Radio Truth FM (1.5 per cent). Most of these differences in actor preferences can be explained by the differences in topic selection. Deliberate choices of journalists seem to play a lesser role.

DIVERSITY OF SOURCES

Sources and their diversity are much more contingent upon choices of journalists than actors. Therefore, the quantitative and qualitative diversity of sources was assessed by stating the number of sources and identifying to which group...
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the source belongs. Veritas has the highest average of source numbers (1.51 sources per news story) and Truth FM the lowest (1.21). Star (1.35) and ELBC (1.38) are in between.

Analysing the number of sources per news story, it can be stated that only 5.6 per cent of all news stories had no explicit source at all (Table 4). This means that generally at least one source was mentioned.

On the other hand, it has to be stated that rather frequently only one source was explicitly mentioned (62.6 per cent). This does not meet high qualitative standards, but might be explained by very restricted time and financial resources for journalists. Nevertheless, the differences between stations show that improvement is possible. Radio Veritas has the largest share of two or more sources (37.2 per cent = the sum of the percentages for 2, 3 and 4 and more sources), followed by ELBC (35.1 per cent) and Star (32.2 per cent). Truth FM is the last in this regard (22.9 per cent). This might be explained by the fact that Truth FM is a purely commercial radio station and works on the tightest budget of the four stations. For comparison, a similar study from Zambia shows that on average slightly more radio news stories (38.8 per cent) had two or more sources (Spurk et al. 2007: 23–4).

A look beyond the sheer number of sources is needed in order to better evaluate journalistic quality, since in cases with a larger number of sources several sources might come from the same institution. Thus, it was further determined who the sources are and to what institutions they belong. Up to three different sources per story were examined for their origin and transparency (see Tables 5 and 6).

There is a remarkable bias in the selection of sources on Truth FM. The station relies in 56.7 per cent of the examined cases – and thus to a much higher extent than the other stations – on sources belonging to the executive government. The state-run broadcaster ELBC has the smallest number of sources attributed to the executive government. However, it needs to be taken into consideration that ELBC has the highest share of non-transparent sources, and therefore it may have more government sources than it explicitly mentions (Table 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source number</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Ø</th>
<th>Total N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Truth FM</td>
<td>Star</td>
<td>Veritas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 (per cent)</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (per cent)</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>60.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (per cent)</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (per cent)</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 and more (per cent)</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage of different number of sources; base of N = all news, excluding purely international news and sport.

Table 4: Quantitative diversity of sources.
Another significant difference between stations concerns the use of the general public as a source. Ordinary people are strongly represented as sources, with 16.9 per cent each on Star and Veritas. Both stations not only include representatives of the general public as actors in the news, but also emphasize their role by including them as sources. Thus, they allow a stronger presence of the general public than Truth FM (5.0 per cent) and ELBC (5.9 per cent).

Table 5: Representation of different groups as sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source groups</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Ø</th>
<th>Total N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Truth FM</td>
<td>Star</td>
<td>Veritas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive government (per cent)</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>29.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties (per cent)</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative government (per cent)</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent institutions (per cent)</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil society (national) (per cent)</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International groups (per cent)</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy (per cent)</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals (per cent)</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General public (per cent)</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media (per cent)</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (per cent)</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target groups development cooperation (per cent)</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage of news with a source from the source groups; three most important sources in all news identified. Base of N = all news, purely international news and sport excluded, in total 271 different sources.

Table 6: Transparency of sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source transparency</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Ø</th>
<th>Total N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Truth FM</td>
<td>Star</td>
<td>Veritas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source identified (per cent)</td>
<td>91.7</td>
<td>88.1</td>
<td>84.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source not identified (per cent)</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base of N = all news, purely international news excluded.

Table 6: Transparency of sources.
Further differences are that only ELBC (19.6 per cent) considers members of parliament as important news sources. The political parties (6.6 per cent on average) play a minor role, despite ‘high politics’ being identified as the most important topic group. This might point to the weak position of political parties and less to any weakness of radio stations in approaching them. Civil society has on average a similar importance as political parties, but is much more frequently considered as a source on Radio Veritas (7.8 per cent) and Star Radio (7.2 per cent), whereas it is almost neglected by Truth FM.

Almost non-existent is the use of professionals (1.5 per cent) and of economic actors (0.7 per cent) as sources. The former might be a consequence of the brain drain resulting from the civil war. There are hardly any experts (medical, legal etc.) in the country whom journalists could rely on. Nevertheless, there is a local economy with which journalists could build a relationship.

This pattern of source selection is even more pronounced when looking at the use of live sound bites and who is providing them. Truth FM relies heavily (53.1 per cent) on the executive government as sound bite provider, ELBC (30 per cent) on parliamentarians, and Star and Veritas give an opportunity to civil society (9.1 and 7.7 per cent, respectively) and highlight the voice of ordinary people (24.2 and 23.1 per cent, respectively).

TRANSPARENCY OF SOURCES
It is important for the listener to be able to identify the source. Identifiable usually means that a name and a function of the source are provided, so that the listener can estimate the source’s position, credibility or importance, or would even be able to contact it. Truth FM (91.7 per cent), Star Radio (88.1 per cent) and Radio Veritas (84.7 per cent) declare the origin of their sources to a quite similar and fair extent. Only ELBC stands out for low transparency regarding the background of its sources; their origin is indicated in only 64.2 per cent of the station’s cases.

Considering the results of the stations in the indicators related to sources, it can be stated that Star and Veritas are performing considerably better than Truth – and to some extent ELBC – for the following reasons:

- They consider sources from a wider range of social groups
- They are not biased towards the executive government, as is Truth (ELBC is at least not obviously biased towards the government)
- They consider the general public largely as a source and thus give a voice to ordinary people; and
- Their quantitative diversity in sources is higher, but only in comparison to Truth (ELBC is performing well concerning the number of sources).

REPORTING STYLE
As interviewees required a more enlightened understanding and more analytical background reporting (orientation), the completeness of news stories was examined. For this purpose a model was developed, according to which news can potentially cover four different levels of depth: (1) the simple description of the event or problem (what happened?); (2) the immediate reason or trigger for the event (why?); (3) the background (reasons, causes or history of that event or problem); and (4) the potential consequences. It is assumed that the more levels are covered, the more comprehensive the news, which adds to its quality.
The present analysis shows that all news stories contain a description of the event or problem (first level) and that usually the immediate reason (second level) is given (average of 84.3 per cent), though less frequently on Radio ELBC (78.4 per cent). It is remarkable that background information (average of 20.2 per cent) is rather neglected. Star Radio (30.6 per cent) notably outperforms the other stations (Table 7). Reporting on the consequences of news (average of 30.3 per cent) was provided to a larger extent than reporting on the background. Again, Star Radio (40.3 per cent) considerably outperforms the other stations.

**PERSPECTIVES**

Both earlier research and interviewees from Liberia suggest that radio provides the full picture of attitudes to a problem and of the political discourse on it. It was thus decided to assess whether and to what extent news stories were framed at least in considerable part with different perspectives. The presence or absence of political discourse (in contrast to just describing what the government said, omitting other voices and opinions) was measured by indicating whether at least one third of a single news story was dedicated to reflect the public discourse, i.e. referring to different positions. Additionally, it was assessed whether news stories dedicated at least parts of the story (again one third) to the concerns of ordinary people and presented the story from their viewpoint.

Star Radio (22.6 per cent, see Table 8) is leading in presenting public discourse. Radio ELBC scores far lower (5.4 per cent) and Truth (6.3 per cent) scores low too. Apparently, the state-run broadcaster and the commercial radio station hardly promote public discourse, at least not in their news programmes. This is reflected in the fact that they both use a high

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspectives</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Ø</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public discourse (per cent)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Truth FM</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Star</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Veritas</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ELBC</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerns of Ordinary people (per cent)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Truth FM</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Star</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Veritas</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ELBC</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage of news covering different pre-defined perspectives; base of N = all news, excluding purely international news and sports.

*Table 8: Perspectives in radio news.*
share of government and legislative sources. Star Radio is further remarkable with its large share of news that reflects ordinary people’s perspective (53.2 per cent). ELBC also shows a large share in this regard (40.5 per cent), whereas Veritas scores comparatively low (27.5 per cent). This result needs to be interpreted with caution, as it contradicts Veritas’ large share of ordinary people as sources and sound bites. This is a hint at a methodological weakness that needs to be worked on. Coders were not sufficiently trained in how to code this category. The same was seen in another category (diversity of viewpoints), where the coding results were again not trustworthy enough to be further used.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study shows particular shortcomings in broadcasting quality for four selected Liberian radio stations. Quality was defined by the contribution that media content can potentially make to democracy. Those shortcomings were identified to a different extent in each station.

Regarding the information function, Star Radio and Radio Veritas perform better with respect to most quality indicators: Star’s and Veritas’ topic diversity and their qualitative sources diversity (representation of various groups as sources) are higher. Additionally, they provide the general public and civil society with the opportunity to speak out. Truth FM and Radio ELBC show a certain bias towards official sources and the executive government, and ELBC has a huge lack of transparency in sources.

With regard to the orientation function, all four stations provide a low level of background reporting, but Star and Veritas offer comparably more complete news with a little more background reporting. In relation to the forum function, Star offers more public discourse and more often represents the perspective of ordinary people. The performance in diversity of viewpoints could not be precisely examined in this research due to some methodological problems.

For the stations themselves, the results confirm that all radio stations in Liberia need to improve their reporting in many quality aspects, some more than others. This can be exemplified most clearly by the lack of background information in news. As most of the populace relies on radio to gain understanding, orientation and meaning, an average of 20.2 per cent of news, including background information, is far too low. Star Radio and Radio Veritas demonstrate that improvement – also under the current conditions – is possible.

Methodologically, the content analysis demonstrated that large parts of media quality are quantitatively measurable by easily applicable indicators. The analysis is in line with most of the media quality assessments made by civil society representatives. The results were later confirmed by audience research (Spurk and Lopata 2008). The insight into ordinary people’s perspectives gained by means of audience research reflected the fact that Liberians strive for better media quality. This may be seen in the context of the long history of biased information, which leads to a pronounced need for sound information. There is a remarkable accordance between the findings of the content analysis and the audience research. Those broadcasters fulfilling the examined quality indicators to a higher level were among the audience’s favourite and most trusted. This is an encouraging result, as it demonstrates a positive correlation between media quality and appreciation by the audience. Media that fulfils higher quality standards attract the attention of larger audiences and are rewarded for this.
Nevertheless, the analysis showed that there is a need to improve the measurement of some of the indicators (viewpoints, balance of viewpoints, perspectives), which was strongly emphasized by civil society representatives and by focus groups. In this regard, the methodology needs improvement, as only qualitative source diversity could cover this section but coding of different viewpoints encountered practical difficulties and needs further refinement. The indicator selected to measure the function of scrutiny could not be applied as planned. The reason for this is that by assessing the journalists’ own inquiry it is not clear whether this is due to different editorial routines in explicitly stating their own investigative effort, or rather due to different practices of reporting. Furthermore, it is obvious that some indicators can only be assessed in news on specific topics. Only through such a limitation of topics is it possible to assess critical viewpoints. Such a limitation of topics is the subject of an ongoing further content analysis focusing on conflict-related issues in Liberia.

For policy-makers this research and its method reveal a potential to improve media support based on systematically gained data. The method and the insights gained from it can be used in training of editorial staff and journalists. It is recommended for international donors to use this methodology in order to assess programmes and progress in journalism.

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**SUGGESTED CITATION**


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