Media and conflict in Sierra Leone: national and international perspectives of the civil war

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Introduction

The end of the twentieth century saw an adverse escalation in armed conflict. A characteristic of this was that whilst the majority of wars that took place before the 1990s were fought between states, conflicts post 1990 progressively began to take place within countries. The doctrines of major world powers no longer seemed to determine the ideologies and objectives of warring groups and, almost as a new war strategy, combatants started to target civilians rather than fighting sections in order to achieve their objectives. Atrocities began to be the statements that publicised political positions. In countries that were rich in natural resources, such as diamonds, the political goals of wars were often linked to the complex logics of resource appropriation (Bangura, 2004).

Rather than providing an account of the events that shaped the unfolding of the civil war in Sierra Leone, this paper focuses on the analysis of the role that the media played in elaborating the perception of those events, both at a national and international level. A theoretical examination of the impact of the conflict's media coverage - which has been explored and reviewed by authors such as Khan (1998) and Shaw (2006) - is conducted and its effect of the war explained.

The growth of the Sierra Leonean press is discussed and its limitations reviewed, examining both the financial and legislative constraints that characterised it, some of which derive from the colonial period. The role of the media is then evaluated in relation to the internal influence that "biased" journalism had on the shaping of the war, and how it impacted on the fighting. Finally, an example of the Western media coverage of the conflict is also reviewed within the context of theories that illustrate the way the African region is often regarded as an uncivilised and hopeless continent, where little can be done by the developed world to put an end to violence.

The rise of the media in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone was created out of the small costal settlement that developed around Freetown, which the "abolitionists" set up in the late 1700s as a new residence for Africans that had been freed from slavery. Here, protest against colonial abuses and participation in the colony's administration provided the basis for the rise of the independent press (Gordon, 2004).

As Gordon (2004) makes clear, by the late 1940s the press presented two main characteristics: the first was the relatively small - often personally owned - and under-financed nature of its operations; the second was the constant attempt made by the state to license, regulate or otherwise control the content of newspapers.

At the beginning of the 1990s, radio broadcasts were the most popular and widely-consulted news medium. In addition to the national broadcasters, there were several privately owned FM radio stations. Besides local radio, international media such as the BBC, Radio France International and the Voice of America also competed for audiences. The printed press landscape was characterised by over 15 national newspapers, representing both the government controlled and independent press. Television broadcasting was limited to Freetown, Western Area and several areas in the Provinces, with a much smaller audience in comparison to radio and newspapers (Khan, 1998).

Throughout the post-independence period the media struggled for survival facing a scenario of civilian and military dictatorships based on corruption and repression. Within the reality of Sierra Leone, freedom of expression for the press involved the possibility to expose and denounce those who controlled the capitalist system that gave rise to the colonial and neo-colonial system (Gordon, 2004).

Since the state could not deny the existence of corruption, the only weapon left in the hands of officials was to muzzle the press in order to avoid possible withdrawal of foreign investors' involvement in the country's economic activities. Thus, in order to end negative press coverage, and thereby ironically walking the same path as its predecessors, the neo-colonial state created a series of repressive laws designed to limit the independent press reporting on the accountability and transparency of state officials. In 1980 the Newspaper (Amendment) Act was passed by the All People's Congress (APC) one-party dictatorship. The act gave ministers full authority to issue newspaper licenses as well as to suspend, cancel and refuse to grant them (Gordon, 2004).

The media and the civil conflict
In response to the authoritarian political environment, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel faction launched a war to remove the repressive APC from power. Their aim was also that of revamping the economy by taking over the national mineral wealth industry from foreigners. In the face of the government's inability to bring the war to a swift end, the press responded with unfavourable publicity (Khan, 1998).

In *Journalism and Armed Conflict in Africa*, Khan (1998:590) explains that a "biased" journalism took place during the conflict in Sierra Leone. This is believed to have affected the development of the war and its outcome. According to the author's investigation into the impact of the media, 'top military commanders claimed that the "derogatory" reportage against the military had a demoralising effect on their troops in the battle fronts'. For instance, they argued that the weak reporting of the military's successes in contrast to the exaggerated presentation of defeats inflicted by rebels spread discouragement among their troops. This view was endorsed by the soldiers themselves who stated they were ordered not to listen to radio broadcasts to avoid the impact of this phenomenon (Khan, 1998).

Both the government and the army claimed that the critical reporting of their conduct in the war, such as the brutal treatment of suspected civilian RUF allies, was largely responsible for isolating them from the citizens' consensus. This also cultivated the view that the media had been another player in escalating the conflict and undermining the peaceful resolution of the crisis, which was being cautiously negotiated by mediators (Khan, 1998).

Through its dissemination, withholding and manipulation, information represents a powerful weapon during a conflict. The arrival of the mass media has multiplied this effect by making possible vast propaganda and indoctrination operations. As Frère (2007:1) states, 'it is undeniable that the media have the capacity to both increase and decrease tensions within countries in a crisis.'

Khan (1998) continues by explaining that significant impact on the media reporting of the conflict in Sierra Leone was also given by their reliance on eyewitness accounts after the event, which has been a prominent feature of media practice in Africa. This is due mainly to the impoverished nature of their economies and infrastructure, which discourages most if not all local news media from live coverage of conflicts. No Sierra Leonean media outlet invested in insurance against loss of life or expensive equipment, and war correspondents were reluctant to put their safety in danger by embarking on first-hand reporting. Thus the only alternative that could be seen as professionally reputable was to search for news among displaced people fleeing an area of attack (Khan, 1998).

Unfortunately, even though in most cases the fact that a news item was based on eyewitness accounts was duly acknowledged by the reporter, the public failed to recognise this. In relation to the level of authenticity, most people could not differentiate between first-hand reporting and second-hand information deriving from eyewitnesses. For a population that was 75 percent illiterate, any information that came from the media was regarded as authoritative (Khan, 1998).

The evolution of the conflict
In April 1992, a *coup* launched by a group of young military officers overthrew the APC and established the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) as the ruling authority in Sierra Leone. The NPRC promised to engage in a "war against corruption" and set up public investigation led by senior judges, to bring to the surface the corrupt practices of the APC. However, when stories of the past abuses progressively fell off the agenda and the press took in hand the corruption occurring within existing NPRC circles, the new regime reverted to old APC methods. In January 1993, the new restrictive licensing regulations that were brought in excluded over 24 of Freetown's 33 independent newspapers (Gordon, 2004).

With another *coup d'état* on May 25, 1997, an alliance made of dissident subalterns in the army and rebels of the RUF, calling itself the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), deposed Sierra Leone's first democratically elected government in nearly 30 years. This initiated a nine-month regime of looting, murder and mutilation. Between May 1997 and February 1998 most sections of the independent press in Sierra Leone found themselves in a difficult confrontation with the AFRC - known by most Sierra Leoneans as the "junta" – which acted as one of the most ferocious African military commands (Gordon, 2004).

The AFRC era intensified the repression that the Sierra Leone's press had been subjected to since independence. Gordon (2004) explains how the struggle of the independent press against the junta was a reflection of the struggle of civil society against the state. In spite of the restrictive measures, the press served in fact as a platform to present the strong opposition that the junta was facing both internally and externally. It gave space to press releases of various civil groups and carried out interviews with leaders of organisations like the Labour Congress; Labour leaders used the newspapers as a medium to strengthen the workers' solidarity in the anti-junta struggle, while simultaneously repressing the news items designed to paint the military in a more favourable light. Moreover, the press was not just a mere reflection of what was happening on the surface: it also helped shape and strengthen civil society's democratic commitment by highlighting particular news items as well as actively working with more organised and stronger social forces that were challenging the AFRC (Gordon, 2004).

The coalition of interests opposed to the regime included students, teachers, labour leaders, ordinary workers, market women, university lecturers and even sectors of the state's establishment like judges and the police. Only the press was in a position to articulate those interests in a consistent and daily basis. Despite their brutal methods, the junta simply could not eliminate all those who had opposite views (Gordon, 2004).

The Western media perspective of a "barbaric" Africa

According to the accounts of the majority of journalists, aid staff and even some academics, wars seem to be confusing and pointless events in history. A common framework of analysis represents war as 'a contest between two or more sides where the roots of the dispute are not always illuminated' (Keen, 1999:81).

Keen (1999) explains that this depiction of war can be a debilitating factor that gives rise to a culture of disempowerment. This largely occurs in wealthy countries that are confronted with conflicts elsewhere, producing in them a combination of outrage, indifference and inaction. In so far as the causes of civil wars remain poorly understood, it may be in fact less problematic for some analysts to argue that the appropriate response to distant conflicts is that of isolationism.

The theories of the "new barbarism" suggest that parts of the world are populated by irrationally violent and uncivilised peoples (Keen, 1999). The danger of superficiality of media coverage and its focus on "new barbarism" imagery lies in the perpetuation of racist myths about Africa and in the concealment of international roles in sustaining conflicts occurring there (Atkinson, 1999). There appears to be a temptation to consider Africa as a continent that has no impact on the rest of the world and that only elicits horror through the atrocities that are committed, and compassion when one looks at its poverty (Marthoz, 2007). As Atkinson emphasises (1999), African civil wars have been continuously used by media analysts as examples to support theories of the disintegration of the state in Africa, the re-emergence of primitive tribalism and the shared perception of Africans' inability to live together peacefully.

The images presented of African conflicts as primitive and senseless reinforce existing prejudices and prevent an accurate assessment of their causes and impact. On the basis of this flawed analysis, conclusions are drawn that an intervention from the West cannot save

Africans from their local and historical conflicts. Disengagement becomes therefore the only sensible strategy (Atkinson, 1999), a theory reiterated by Keen; 'It has become common place to hear that "we in the West" should simply withdraw from faraway countries of which we little and understand less." (1999: 82).

As Franklin & Lovel (1998:546) assert, 'it is the prior dispensation through colonial discourse and its subsequent manifestations with neo-colonial dependency mechanisms that make so much of contemporary media content from the West appear uncritically acceptable to audiences elsewhere around the globe.' This is to explain how the cultural legacy of colonialism is carried not only within the discourse of the news suppliers, but also within the set of values that the recipients use to "decode" the message. Such values originate from a shared past (ibid.).

A final crucial aspect of these considerations lies in the fact that – particularly in countries with insufficient media resources - Africans frequently learn about themselves via the international press. This occurs both because of the financial constraints that African journalists face to undertake their own reporting, and because of government repression of the media - predominantly on radio and television. The international media perspective also affects the image that African people have of themselves (Marthoz, 2007).

Western media coverage of the civil war in Sierra Leone: the British example
Shaw (2006) makes clear that the main war reporting styles used by Western media journalists can be classified in two different approaches: evocative and diagnostic reporting. These two basic professional techniques, which are ordinarily applied to facilitate the production and reception of news, can play an important role when reporting crisis situations. Evocative reporting is the style that focuses either on spinning the national and geopolitical interests of the home countries of the Western media, or the humanitarian angle of the news, with the primary aim of sensitising public opinion. In contrast to that - while still covering the national, geopolitical and humanitarian angles of news - diagnostic reporting pays more attention to analysing its political context; that is putting emphasis on explaining the causes that led to the crisis instead of providing a mere description of it. This approach introduces the political context of the war, which is crucial to understand why it started, how it can be resolved and what the possible ways are to avoid it in the future.

Regular analysis of the development of the war is crucial so that policy-makers are properly informed of the realities of the conflict and can base their decisions on facts rather than assumptions. Clean narratives however are becoming increasingly rare in the media, and powerful images seem to have turned into the most effective way to gain the attention of readers and viewers (Atkinson, 1999).

As Shaw (2006) determines, thanks to a series of interviews held with different Western journalists, the diagnostic approach was rarely observed in the coverage of the Sierra Leonean war. One of the consequences of the "new barbarism" paradigm is to obfuscate the role of those countries involved in the modern war economies of West Africa and to hide their responsibility for the ensuing social damage (Atkinson, 1999).

Even on the rare occasions where an attempt was made to give the political context of the conflict, journalists tended to spin more of the internal rather than the external factors that

caused the war. Such representation was influenced mainly by their cultural biases rather than professional considerations. The accounts advanced by journalists to explain the war focused on internal factors such as corruption, state collapse, tribalism, poverty and underdevelopment. Little attention was paid to external elements like the exploitation of the natural resources by Western multinationals, unfair trade and harsh regulations set up by Western financial institutions (Shaw, 2006).

Through an analysis of the Western news media discourse during the conflict, the study conducted by Shaw (2006) reveals a dominance of events and issues of national and geopolitical interest for the home government countries. As an example, British journalists focused particularly on two items:

- The liberation of foreign troops kidnapped by rebels, with the British government attempting to launch raids with the aim of liberating their officials and troupes (Shaw, 2006): as emphasised by Kargbo (2006:132), 'coverage of the Sierra Leone war in Britain was very patchy until the coup in May 1997, when dramatic pictures of British nationals being rescued from Freetown were displayed on the front pages of leading broadsheets as well as on news broadcasts such as BBC and Channel Four.' The *Sandline* affair and the implication of the international community: most of the British media questioned the morality of the British authorities in assisting the British mercenary company *Sandline* to violate the arms embargo imposed by the United Nations on Sierra Leone, by supplying the weapons that were used by pro-government troops - including mercenaries - to remove the AFRC junta and restore the elected government (Shaw, 2006).

This demonstrates how the facts presented by the British *media* in the relation to the civil war in Sierra Leone bore a strong relevance specifically for a UK audience.

The role of NGOs in news reporting
A final consideration that can be made *on the* reporting of the civil conflict in Sierra Leone involves the role played by NGOS.

A large part of the information on Africa is produced by NGOs that specialise in the study and analysis of conflict, and who act as "news wholesalers" in a similar way to international news agencies. Confronted with the reluctance and refusal of their editors in chief towards an in-depth reporting of the crisis, which was due to both costs and a lack of interest in what was happening in Sierra Leone, a number of journalists became increasingly dependent on invitations from humanitarian organisations for their travels to Africa. Rather than from the journalists, the coverage of the war therefore started to be determined by NGOs. Through the provision of financial and technical support, NGOs gained considerable power over the news frame and they were thus able, in most cases, to increase the production of "westernised" images of Africa. This prevailed over the compensation for the imbalances in the media coverage (Marthoz, 2007).

Between 1991 and 1999, both the RUF and the Civil Defence Forces used children who were 15 years and younger in combat and support roles for their war effort. Abdullah & Rashid. (2004) estimate that between 1992 and 1996, more than 4,500 children were drawn into the war, bearing arms and taking part in all aspects of the various military campaigns and their atrocities. In a discussion on transnational advocacy network, Carpenter (2007) explains how

child soldiering has progressively become one of the top issues among NGOs and other children's rights organisations. Thus if the media agenda was being driven by NGOs, it is no surprise that the main tendency in the international news reporting on the Sierra Leonean conflict was that of telling the sad and distressing stories of children who had been forced to become soldiers.

Conclusion

By discussing the rise of the press since the colonial time and its evolution during the various regimes, this essay analyses how the media in Sierra Leone are believed to have influenced the unfolding of the war through a 'biased' journalism, which affected the disposition of the government army and indirectly supported the rebel factions. This discussion highlights the critical role that the media can play in conflict situations and the attempts that those who are in power always make to silence unfavourable press reporting in the time of a crisis.

The way Western media covered the Sierra Leonean war is also analysed through the theories of the "new barbarism", according to which Africa is often depicted as a continent with no hope. This perspective, conveyed by means of an "evocative" style of journalism, can be regarded as suitable for Western powers to justify their deliberate choice of non-intervention (or in certain cases only limited) in conflicts such as that of Sierra Leone. Throughout the crisis, the international press appears to have only concentrated on suggestive images of civilians' massacres and stories of child soldiers – also deriving from the strong influence of NGOs – and on facts that carried a geopolitical interest - as illustrated by the British example.

This leaves us with the question of whether or not a different portrayal of Africa, offered through the lens of a more "diagnostic" approach that effectively engages with the tragic events occurring in the continent, would encourage both governments and civil society in the developed world to play a stronger part in ending violence and corruption.

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