

MEDIATION



Biannual
publication
of Fondation
Hirondelle

UNDERSTANDING THROUGH INFORMATION AND DIALOGUE



Using information to reduce fear

Created in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, Fondation Hirondelle has chosen to work through journalism and supporting media in countries that have been scarred and weakened by conflict. By providing reliable, local information, we strive to reduce fear, rumours, and violent responses to crises. Our work is also about contributing to (re)creating the possibility of dialogue, a non-violent media space, built on the basis of shared facts and realities.

Twice, weapons have silenced our media: in Bukavu in 1996 when Laurent-Désiré Kabila's troops left for Kinshasa, and in Monrovia in 2000 on the orders of Charles Taylor's army. Unfortunately, violence remains the daily reality for millions of our listeners today in the DRC, the Sahel, the CAR, and Myanmar. Dealing with it is therefore at the heart of our work. This requires rigour and irreproachability in our newsrooms, but also courage on the part of all of us, in the face of risks. The quality of information produced, its local roots and representativeness, accompanied by training in journalism and security in crisis zones are essential, as well as transparency and dialogue to explain our work and make it accepted by all parties.

Caroline Vuillemin
General Director

VIOLENCE AND THE MEDIA

Since the beginning of the 2010s, violence, whether armed or not, has changed and been fuelled in diverse ways on social networks. Journalists need to be more careful and resourceful reporting on it without stirring it up.

In a world where the amount of information available increases exponentially each year, generating a fierce battle for public attention, it can be tempting for the media to give violence massive coverage, although it is not particularly on the rise. Armed violence is responsible for only 1% of deaths worldwide, and only a quarter of those are in conflict. Moreover, as the Canadian sociologist Steven Pinker⁽¹⁾ taught us ten years ago, armed violence is declining overall over the long term, although there has been a slight increase since the beginning of the 2010s. But conflict is one of the things that will always attract human attention, says sociologist Gérald Bronner in a fascinating essay on the economy of the Internet and social networks.⁽²⁾ Disseminating violent content, or content that stirs up violence, can thus capture the public's attention. Some media and social networks use this fact to generate audience, or "clicks".

But the role of journalists, and of the news media, is also to cover violence: conflicts,

Demonstration in Hong Kong, December 2019 © Anthony Wallace / AFP

wars, terrorism and extreme violence, violence against minorities. Violence has changed in recent years. Alongside the classic conflicts between States or politico-military groups (e.g. Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen), particularly deadly wars involving mafia groups (Latin America) or sporadic but repeated attacks against civilians over a vast territory (West Africa) are developing. In all these conflicts, information is a major issue. The parties to the conflict now use social networks both to spread their propaganda and to encourage the publication of false information designed to keep the population in a climate of uncertainty and fear. They tend to dismiss or even target journalists, especially local ones, some 60 of whom are killed each year in the course of their work.

In this insecure and shifting terrain, journalistic techniques and precautionary measures must be reinvented in order to report credibly on violence without contributing to its propagation. The use of new technologies, including open source intelligence (OSINT) from the Internet and social networks, can help. Other things that can help even more are an approach aimed at getting the victims' voices heard and explaining the complexity of the violence, its root causes and history – or even trying to bring stakeholders into dialogue, so that journalism covers violence and also contributes to reducing it. ■

(1) Steven Pinker, *The Better angels of our nature – Why violence has declined* (Viking Books, 2011).

(2) Gérald Bronner, *Apocalypse cognitive* (PUF, 2021).

Interview

REPORTING THE
COMPLEXITY OF
VIOLENCE

In the Syrian village of Marayan (Idlib province), after a bombing, October 2017 © Omar Haj Kadour / AFP



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As an investigative reporter, professor of international journalism and advisor to human rights and journalism protection organizations, Jean-Paul Marthoz has drawn on his experience to develop principles of conduct that enable journalists to report on the complexity of conflicts without fuelling violence.

What is your experience as a journalist in situations of extreme violence?

Jean-Paul Marthoz: I covered insurgencies, dictatorships and the drug war in Latin America in the 1980s for *Le Soir* in Brussels. I did assignments for journalistic organizations in Algeria, east and southern Africa in the 1990s, Lebanon in the 2000s, Russia, Tunisia and Turkey in the 2010s. Since then, I have been observing and documenting these situations, notably for human rights NGOs and international organizations. I have just started a course on

media and terrorism at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium.

In your research and writing⁽¹⁾, you have tried to synthesize some rules so that journalists faced with situations of extreme violence can report on them without fuelling them. What are these rules?

First, to be inspired by a strong doctrine of journalism, based on a sense of humanity and responsibility, while respecting the essential principle of the profession: the search for "truth". Who is responsible? Why does a society tip over into extreme violence? We need to open up the wide angle, not just cover the battlefield but try to understand the impact of extreme violence on the whole of society, on its most fragile members. We must investigate those who profit from this violence and chaos, but also talk about all those who fight to stop the violence and preserve a minimum of humanity and solidarity.

We also need to look for the roots of this violence in history, social relations, ideologies and international relations. This broad angle requires investigating the international actors who fuel the conflict or who do not do enough to stop it. We need to situate the violence both globally and locally, to establish the links between this violence, which is sometimes geographically very distant, and the reality of the large or small powers that intervene, and

the possible role of their governments and companies.

Finally, it is necessary to preserve one's independence in relation to all the participants, to exercise a critical eye with regard to all the testimonies. But we need to do this without moral ambiguity: neutrality between a genocidaire and his victim is not a journalistic virtue. The most eminent journalists (Joseph Kessel, George Orwell, Martha Gellhorn, Albert Camus, and more recently Anna Politkovskaya, Nicholas Kristof or Marcela Turati) have never been neutral or «impartial» when it came to defending human dignity. But this humanist approach must be maintained without compromising the search for truth.

We need to be inspired by a strong doctrine of journalism, based on humanity and responsibility

In situations of violence, journalists also need to protect their sources, not endanger people who provide information, who are often victims, witnesses or opposition activists. That is an absolute must.

Has the emergence of social networks and their widespread use transformed these rules?

Faced with social networks, the work of the media is difficult. On the one hand, the media have never had a monopoly on information

(1) Including *Les médias face au terrorisme* (Unesco, 2017) and *En première ligne : le journalisme au cœur des conflits* (Mardaga, 2018).

about armed conflicts: all actors (governments, armed groups, etc.) develop communication and censorship policies that can disturb or even dominate information. On the other hand, the Internet and even more so social networks have come to shake things up. A new universe of informers and disinformers, witnesses, commentators, agitators, specialists in influence strategies, has been added, disseminating masses of messages and opinions and complicating the work of selecting, verifying and interpreting the facts. These technologies and practices often play a role in accelerating violent discourse. Journalists, who have mostly learned to sort information on the ground, are now faced with a new battlefield online. And this is all the more true since the places where violence is happening are more and more often forbidden to them by the parties in conflict. They must learn to confront these different sources, to decode the veracity of messages posted on social networks, in order not to be influenced by the influence strategies of the different actors in the conflict. For journalists who are not specialists in the conflict zone, this is extremely difficult.

Faced with social networks, journalists are confronted with a new battlefield online

But as battlefields become less and less accessible to journalists, including local ones, these technologies are also exceptional tools to better cover conflicts and document extreme violence, notably through OSINT (Open Source Intelligence, including satellite images, citizen videos.). The work of Bellingcat, an independent international group of researchers, investigators and citizen journalists founded by the British journalist and blogger Eliot Higgins, seems to me characteristic of these new journalistic possibilities. He was interviewed by the team of international investigators in the trial on the crash of flight MH17 Malaysia Airlines, shot down in July 2017 in eastern Ukraine. By collecting thousands of elements (photos, videos, testimonies and so on) posted on social networks, and by processing this data, Bellingcat managed to identify the path of the missile from a military unit in Russia to a Ukrainian territory under the control of pro-Russian rebels, from which it was fired. In the same way, concerning the sarin gas bombings of Al Lataminah and Al Sheikhou near Hama in Syria in March-April 2017, Bellingcat managed to demonstrate the involvement of the Syrian regime, whereas it was supposed to have destroyed 100% of its chemical arsenal a year earlier.⁽²⁾ Obviously, the journalistic use of these

new technologies is only complementary to field investigations, when access remains possible.

You have written a manual entitled *Media and Terrorism for UNESCO*. How do you analyze the challenges of covering extreme violence in a region like the Sahel, which has been experiencing it for several years?

I think that, like Afghanistan in the 1990s, the Sahel is typically a region that has long remained off the radar of the mainstream media because it was considered to be of little strategic importance and because the violence that took place there was of low intensity. But today, as this violence increases, we see how little expertise

we have to understand it. Following this type of conflict over the long term is, however, crucial from a journalistic point of view: on the one hand, it responds to a "criterion of humanity"⁽³⁾ which seems to me to be central (distance does not justify our indifference), and on the other hand, it is a strategic necessity in order to better understand the economic, migratory and social phenomena which are affecting other societies, including those in the North, in a world that is becoming more and more interlinked. The crises in the Sahel also remind us that extreme violence is most often the result of a complex situation. The job of journalism is not to "simplify", but to make this complexity understandable. ■

Social networks, amplifiers of conflict

In a well-documented essay published in January 2021⁽¹⁾, sociologist Gérald Bronner draws up an inventory of the cognitive biases on which the algorithms of social networks and search engines rely to reinforce our addiction to these digital tools. Among these are the appetite for sexuality, the over-evaluation of risks through fear, the alertness to any kind of conflict, the satisfaction of being comforted in one's beliefs, the enhancement of the self. These are invariable traits of human behaviour, deriving from survival reflexes for the individual or for the species in the Paleolithic era, but which in this great deregulated world market of immediate publication contribute to the rapid propagation of lies, simplifying messages, instinctive reactions, and therefore, sometimes, of violence.

In 2018, for example, a study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology of 126,000 posts on Twitter showed that fake news is shared there more, and six times faster, than real news. This trend was further confirmed in the months leading up to the November 4, 2020 US presidential election, as documented in a study by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) that looked at the conspiracy group QAnon⁽²⁾. This was even more the case in the hours that followed the election: created on election night by Donald Trump supporters, the Facebook group "Stop the Steal" counted more than 320,000 members, registering up to 100 new members every ten seconds... before being closed by Facebook the next day. "The Capitol assault was the result of movements born on social networks, which drew their oxygen from the rhetoric of election fraud," says Renee DiResta, a researcher at the Internet Observatory at Stanford University (California). On January 6, this disastrous event for US democracy resulted in the death of four people.

(1) Gérald Bronner, *Apocalypse cognitive* (PUF, Paris 2021).
 (2) Ciaran O'Connor, Cooper Gatewood, Kendrick McDonald and Sarah Brandt, "The Boom Before the Ban: QAnon and Facebook", (ISD/NewsGuard, 2020).

Women, victims of online hate speech

Breakdown of hate messages on social networks in France*

Category targeted	Number of messages	Base 100
WOMEN	7,948 million	100
Arabs/North Africans	1,752 million	22,0
LGBTQ	1,695 million	21,3
Handicapped people	566 000	7,1
Roma/Travellers	299 000	3,8
Black-skinned/Africans	223 000	2,8
Muslims	168 000	2,1
Christians	156 000	2,0
White people	126 000	1,6
Jews	79 000	1,0
Asians	46 000	0,6

* Messages collected in a "basket" of social networks in France, including primarily (89%) messages on Twitter, between January 1 and May 31, 2019. Numbers rounded to the nearest thousand.
 Source: Institute for Strategic Dialogue



83%

Share of women journalists worldwide who experienced at least one instance of online insult, threat or harassment in 2017

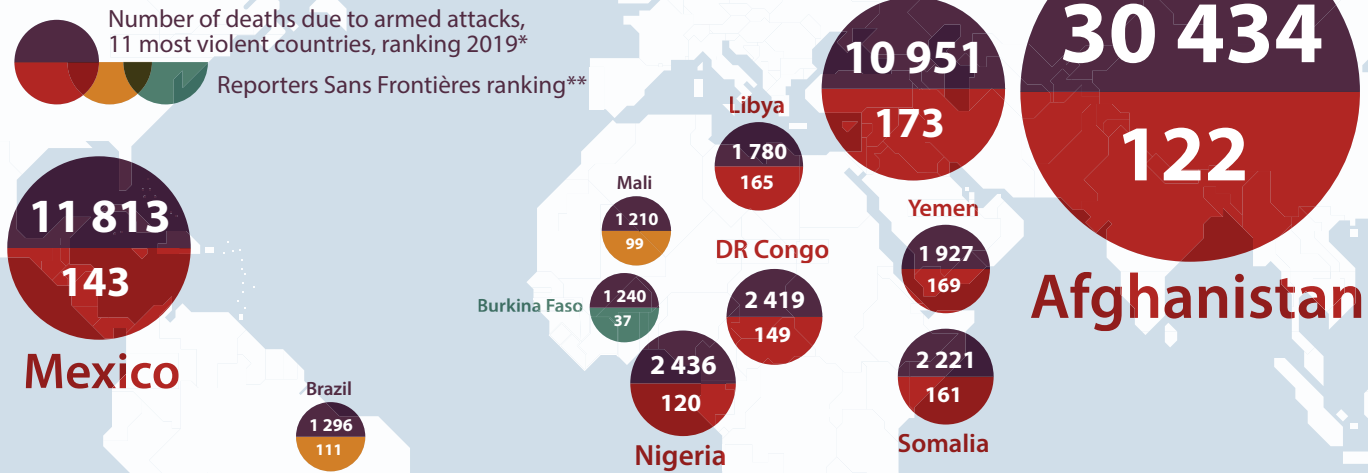
Source: International Women's Media Foundation

(2) According a communiqué from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, January 2016.

(3) cf. Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Pain of Others" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

Big Data

Armed violence and the state of press freedom



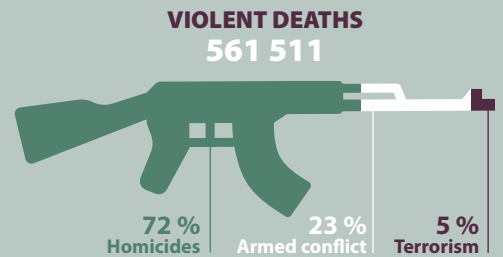
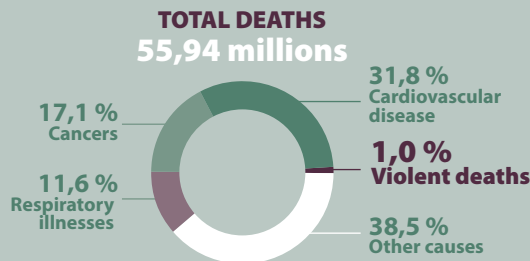
** Countries recorded with at least 1,000 deaths due to armed attacks in 2019 (statistics on deliberate attacks causing at least 25 deaths)
** Rank in Reporters Sans Frontières press freedom index 2021, covering 180 countries

Sources: Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), Reporters Sans Frontières.

ARMED VIOLENCE IN THE WORLD

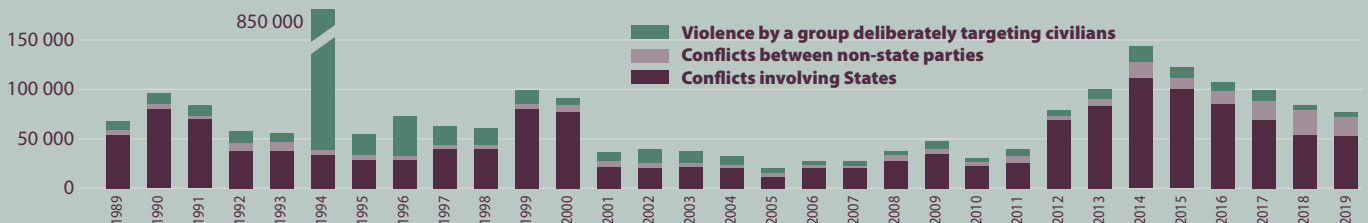
Armed violence, a lesser cause of death

Cause of deaths in the world in 2017



Source: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), 2018.

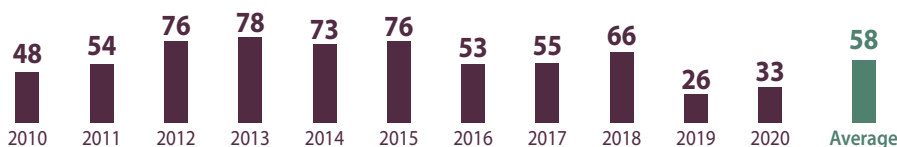
But number of deaths from armed conflict on the rise since 2010



Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). Figures relate to deliberate attacks that caused at least 25 deaths.

Armed violence, a risk for journalists

Number of journalists and media professionals killed in the course of their work



Source: Committee to Protect Journalists

Social networks, new fields of violence

+ de 600



Number of paramilitary groups removed by Facebook in the United States between 4 November 2020 and 6 January 2021

Source: Facebook

Our experience

ADDRESSING THE CORE ISSUES

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Interview of a policeman by a journalist of Fondation Hironnelle, Kasai Province, DR Congo © Gwenn Dubourthoumieu / Fondation Hironnelle



Sacha Meuter, legal advisor and research coordinator at Fondation Hironnelle, explains how the Fondation, together with researchers and partners, is reflecting on how its media covers extreme violence, an issue at the heart of its mission.

Fondation Hironnelle was created by journalists to respond to an event of extreme violence, the genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda, and then confronted it again by creating and supporting media in the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sahel and Myanmar. What modus operandi has it developed during its long experience in this field?

Sacha Meuter: To simplify things a bit, we can say that in this type of situation, there are three possible responses: to try to silence hateful comments; to disseminate counter-propaganda; or to try to (re)create a media space that is as impartial and inclusive as possible to

promote dialogue. Fondation Hironnelle has always been dedicated to the third option, and while the fundamentals of our journalistic approach have not changed much, it is the means of dissemination that have evolved. We are increasingly using local radio and TV networks as partners, which include our programmes in their broadcast schedule.

This development brings challenges, such as how to respond to the many information needs of different audience groups in different languages, all with much less broadcast time available. But it also presents opportunities: we are training correspondents within these partner radio stations who feed our programmes. This development can strengthen our approach based on listening and inclusive dialogue around the root causes of tensions.

As for posting content online, while we can control the content we post on social networks, we do not control the algorithms of these platforms that give more or less visibility to our content. However, it is increasingly clear that these platforms tend to boost fragmentation of the public space by creating closed communities and further polarizing societies. This reinforces the challenge of rebuilding impartial and inclusive media spaces to recreate the capacity for dialogue between communities with different opinions.

Strengthening a culture of dialogue as a tool of conflict resolution

Faced with extreme violence, how can we measure the impact of possible media responses?

In general, it is very difficult to measure the effect of media, especially in conflict zones. However, one verified effect of our approach is that of strengthening a culture of dialogue as a tool for conflict resolution.⁽¹⁾ Studies also show the failures of “counter-propaganda” in the face of extreme violence, insofar as this counter-propaganda does not address the underlying problems that create a fertile ground for radicalization.

At Fondation Hironnelle, we try to address these underlying issues. Research conducted in eastern DR Congo⁽²⁾ has shown that listeners to our debate programmes have a better understanding of the structural causes of the conflict, a greater sense of responsibility, and a sense that they should be part of the peace process. Similarly, we know that gender issues are at the heart of many radicalization processes, with stereotypes of masculinity being exploited to recruit marginalized young men. Therefore, the question of our media’s impact on the promotion of women’s rights and a more peaceful and inclusive relationship to gender is at the heart of a research project we are conducting in three Sahel countries (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso) under the direction of Dr Emma Heywood.⁽³⁾ This project will publish its results in 2022. ■

(1) Cf. our interview with researcher Christoph Spurk (<https://www.hironnelle.org/en/blog/343-the-impact-of-information-depends-on-its-quality>) and his survey on Studio Tamani and the peace process in Mali (<https://www.hironnelle.org/pdfviewer/?lang=de&id=215>).
 (2) Jacob Udo-Udo Jacob, “Convincing Rebel Fighters to Disarm” (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2017).
 (3) <https://www.femempowermentafrique.com>

Eyewitness

CREDIBLE REPORTING HELPS REDUCE HATE SPEECH

Lina Chawaf, a Syrian journalist in exile since 2011, is CEO of Radio Rozana, an independent Syrian media based in Paris. She explains the work of Syrian reporters faced with daily violence.

Why did you leave Syria in 2011?

Lina Chawaf: I was then working at Arabesque, the first private and most popular FM radio station in Syria, which I had founded five years earlier. Soon after the beginning of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, the regime asked me to broadcast their propaganda. I refused, because it was all lies and hate speech. After four months, I was repeatedly threatened with arrest, killing, killing of my children, and I was told to leave the country. I was scared every day, so I escaped.

In 2012, I was contacted by other Syrian journalists who had also been forced to flee the country. In July 2013, with the help of foreign cooperation including the Danish NGO International Media Support and the French agency CFI, we launched Radio Rozana. It's an independent media based in Paris, broadcast on the Web, providing news to Syrian people. Our values are credibility, human rights, women's rights, acceptance of differences, with the aim of changing Syrian society and bringing democracy to the country. Today our team is composed of five people in Paris, 13 people in the Turkish city of Gaziantep close to the north-west Syrian border, around 20 correspondents inside Syria and other places where Syrian people live such as Lebanon, Jordan, Istanbul and Berlin.

For the journalists who remained in Syria, what are their possibilities to work?

It is nearly impossible for any Syrian or foreign journalist to work openly and freely in Syria today. It is too dangerous. Censorship by armed groups and other political actors is everywhere. It varies according to regions, but the greatest risk is working in regime-held areas. At Radio Rozana we all know journalists and friends, including some of our correspondents, who have been kidnapped and killed by Al Nosra, ISIS or the Syrian regime since 2011.

For that reason, we didn't choose professional journalists as our correspondents but rather activists who



Lina Chawaf © DR

publish information on social networks. They work for us in a clandestine way. For three years we were able to provide them with professional journalistic training in Gazantep, until the Turks closed their border in 2015.

In such a dangerous context, how to produce reliable and accurate information?

Frankly, this is very difficult. It's difficult to ask our correspondents, who are Syrian, to remain neutral in this conflict. Some of them have lost members of their families in terrible conditions. They have seen so much injustice over the last ten years. For instance, when the chemical attack occurred in August 2013 in the south-eastern suburb of Damascus, we were not able to report for 24 hours. Our correspondents were shocked. Some of them saw dozens of people dying in minutes: 1,600 people died that night, most of them in horrible suffering. It was so hard. In this case and many others, witnesses wanted to exaggerate the number of casualties, so that people could be rescued sooner. They were looking for international help and were disappointed. We could start reporting only after 24 hours. We had to count corpses, to speak with more sources than ever, to cross-check more information than ever, inside Syria and outside. These were the necessary requirements for credible reporting.

It's difficult, but we keep on working because credible reporting helps reduce hate speech in Syria. And this is very necessary today because the social networks are full of propaganda and hatred. They were important channels for the peaceful spread of the Syrian uprising in 2011. But after ten years of destruction, they have become the only platform where Syrian people can shout their anger and their despair. ■

Witnesses wanted to exaggerate the number of casualties, so that people could be rescued sooner

Fondation Hironnelle is a Swiss non-profit organization which provides information to populations faced with crisis, empowering them in their daily lives and as citizens. Through our work, millions of people in war-affected countries, post-conflict areas, humanitarian crisis and societies in democratic transition have access to media that speak to them and give them a voice.

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