
Mali's Voice of Reason

Broadcasting from this war-torn country's capital, a remarkable radio station is bringing implacable enemies together for dialogue.

BY JACK WATLING, PAUL RAYMOND

OCTOBER 8, 2015 - 2:36 PM

BAMAKO, MALI — This June, as Mali's three-year civil war sputtered to an end, representatives of the government, loyalist militias, and the rebels gathered here in the capital to discuss their country's future. Just days earlier they had signed a provisional [peace agreement](#). Now, they came together for a public discussion of the deal: not in a grand hall, government palace, or hotel conference center, but in the shoebox-sized sound booth of a private radio studio.

It could only have happened at [Studio Tamani](#), named after a kind of drum traditionally used in West Africa for passing messages from village to village. Founded at the height of the civil war to produce high-quality news and debate programs, Studio Tamani has transformed Mali's media landscape in just two years. In a country where internet access is sparse and just a third of adults are literate, everybody listens to at least one of the country's plethora of radio stations. But this one stands out. It has hosted the country's political top brass, broken major stories, aired unprecedented debates on controversial topics like female genital mutilation, and become one of the most widely listened-to and respected radio stations. Moreover, it is that rare example of a foreign aid project that has worked unequivocally — in terms of bang per buck, it's been a foreign donor's dream. (The studio was founded by [Fondation Hirondelle](#), a Swiss NGO.) And at the heart of it all is Famoussa Sidibé, a young Malian journalist who unexpectedly found himself hosting the studio's flagship debate program.

Before joining Studio Tamani, Sidibé spent six years as an unpaid intern working for **ORTM**, a state broadcaster. “[There] we would never give the rebel groups the chance to speak; even if the situation demanded it,” Sidibé recalled. “We wouldn’t organize two-sided debates, to let everyone express themselves.” Moreover, given the lack of wages, it was common for companies and political parties to pay journalists to attend their press conferences. “You can’t be independent and at the same time take money from people who organize events,” said Sidibé, shaking his head. “The first goal of Studio Tamani was to campaign against that practice.”

This lack of independence is a frustration shared by many Malian journalists. “If I write a story critical of the telecom companies or the banks, the editor will scrap it. They own us,” said Lanfia Sinaba, a senior reporter at one of the country’s leading newspapers. “Studio Tamani is like another world,” Sidibé said with relief. “Here, we don’t deprive anyone of the right to speak.” The station pays its staff, bans them from taking bribes, and produces verified, factual reporting. With a network of 19 reporters on the ground from the southern town of Kayes to the northern outpost of Kidal, Tamani delivers ten-minute news bulletins in each of five local languages and French. It also airs an hour-long debate program that has become Sidibé’s pet project.

Mali was ruled by military regimes and one-party governments from its independence from France until 1991, when President Moussa Traoré was overthrown by the military. Free and open elections soon followed, and the right of free speech enshrined in the country’s 1992 constitution. That freedom took a hit when a group of officers, angry with the state’s failure to manage a Touareg rebellion in 2012, overthrew President Amadou Toumani Touré and suspended the constitution.

A coalition of Touareg and jihadist militias took advantage of the diversion to invade much of the north of the country, prompting a French-led intervention in early 2013. But after the coup leaders stepped down, the constitution was restored and journalists — at least those sympathetic to the state — were able to get back to work.

But the independence of many outlets is still compromised by the need to placate wealthy backers. Studio Tamani's independence is ensured because its funding comes from Fondation Hironnelle, the Swiss NGO that founded it. But the station is now preparing to find its own sources of income with the aim of becoming entirely self-financing by 2018. The Swiss organization has experience setting up radio stations and training programs across Africa. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, some 14 million listeners tune in every day to **Radio Okapi**, an outlet Hironnelle set up in partnership with the UN. The model involves hiring a team of promising young journalists from across the country and training them in radio production and journalistic ethics.

When Tamani started recruiting in Mali, Sidibé wasn't sure that he wanted to join. Despite ORTM's failings, he felt that it produced better journalism than its private competitors. His colleagues warned him that the new radio project "wouldn't last." There were already hundreds of radio stations in Mali, and in a country where two-thirds of adults are illiterate, they had large and loyal audiences. But Hironnelle worked closely with ORTM's management, which encouraged its voluntary contributors to apply for the chance to get training and paid work. Sidibé was among those selected.

Two years later, Studio Tamani syndicates to 23 radio stations, and is negotiating to provide content for 37 more. Over half of adults in the remote desert town of Timbuktu say they listen to Tamani. In Bamako, some 80,000 people tune in every day. The basis for the station's monumental rise has been its reliable, factual reporting. When ebola broke out in Mali, Studio Tamani was the first news organization on the scene, and rapidly got the victim's family, doctors and representatives from the Ministry of Health on the air. It also broadcast public service announcements about the disease to counter widespread fear-mongering.

Despite Mali's relatively free press, certain social issues remain off-limits for most journalists. This is why it's important that Studio Tamani has been pushing the boundaries of what can be openly discussed.

In his dimly lit office on the ground floor of a former newspaper office near the city's dilapidated railway station, the station's executive editor, Bernard Conchon, recalls the public reaction to station's programming on female genital mutilation. "We had a genuine debate and managed to get an imam on the program. We got a lot of testimonies from women afterwards saying it was the first time they had heard the issue discussed publicly, despite 90 percent of women having it done to them." Far from inviting criticism, Tamani's readiness to tackle controversial issues has won it widespread admiration. "We have had an impact on the way other media organizations report," Conchon explained. "The national television has been ordered to mirror our live debates."

Even government officials praise the station's work. "It's a very good radio station," said said Thierno Diallo, Minister for Religious Affairs. "In Mali there are hundreds of stations, but they have dull content; no substance. With Tamani there's a good crew, the journalists are on point."

It is for this reason that government ministers regularly join the station's debates. Although they expect to face genuine criticism, the station's reputation ensures that what they say will be taken seriously — so the station ends up hosting monumental announcements. It was during an appearance on one of Sidibé's debates in May last year that then prime minister, Moussa Mara, announced he would visit the northern town of Kidal, a rebel stronghold. The provocative visit sparked a gunfight between rebels and the army, threatening to derail the fragile peace process. Soumaila Cisse, the leader of the opposition, then came on Sidibé's show to call for Mara's resignation. This episode seriously weakened Mara's position, and he eventually departed office in January this year.

Sidibé described feeling "nothing but satisfaction" in his role at the center of Mali's politics. "We have managed to create in Mali a platform that, in the most difficult, tense periods, allowed us to have all of the stakeholders in the war in the same studio," he says. "That's unique to Studio Tamani. It's only here that that happens."

And it has paid dividends. When Kidal first fell to the rebels in 2012, they threatened to outlaw the secular curriculum and replace it with Koranic schools. Studio Tamani organized a debate on the topic, inviting both rebel leaders and representatives from public schools to challenge their views. After the debate, the rebels conceded that some secular schools could stay open. Today, 60 percent of students in the north study in secular schools, in no small part because dialogue moderated the rebels' position. "That's the main thing that I'm proud of," said Sidibé. "To make it so that despite the emotions, despite the tensions, we can have dialogue. That's what I'm proud of, that I was able to do that for my country."

Mali is still **a long way** from stability. Although the Tuareg separatists have refrained from launching further offensives, bandits prowl the vast northern desert, looting towns and convoys. Al Qaeda militants frequently carry out drive-by shootings on army checkpoints and assassinate local officials. In Bamako, the government has a weak hold on the levers of power and struggles to tackle rampant corruption. Many of the details of the fragile peace deal have yet to be worked out. But Studio Tamani remains a shining example of how small aid projects with focused objectives can have a disproportionate impact, and demonstrates that a professional media is essential to paving Mali's road to peace.

This reporting was supported by funding from the [International Reporting Project](#).

The photo shows the Radio Tamani studio. Famoussa Sidibé is on the left.

Photo credit: Paul Raymond

Corrections, October 12, 2015: The original version of this story misstated the dates of Prime Minister Moussa Mara's appearance on Radio Tamani and his subsequent resignation. He appeared on the show in May of 2014, not 2015; and he resigned in January 2015; not in the days following his appearance on the debate show.

YOU MAY LIKE

SPONSORED LINKS BY **TABOOLA**

CET ARTICLE TRAITE DE 3 SECRETS QUE SEULS LES GENS RICHES CONNAISSENT
IFOREX.FR OPTIONS TRADING

SPARTA : THE STRATEGY GAME PHENOMENON OF 2015
SPARTA ONLINE GAME

THE ONLY 2 SITES YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT WHEN BUILDING A WEBSITE
TOP 10 BEST WEBSITE BUILDERS

THE MOST EXCITING MMORPG YOU'VE EVER PLAYED! DON'T MISS THIS!
STORMFALL - ONLINE GAME

MORE FROM FOREIGN POLICY

BY **TABoola**

THIS MAP SHOWS CHINA'S HILARIOUS STEREOTYPES OF EUROPE

THE REAL SHAME IN PAKISTAN

ONE REASON YOU SHOULDN'T GO TO AFGHANISTAN WITH A BEARD

CHINESE STATE TV ANCHOR LEARNS THE DANGER OF WEARING AN APPLE WATCH

5 THINGS THE PENTAGON ISN'T TELLING US ABOUT THE CHINESE MILITARY

THE STARTLING PLIGHT OF CHINA'S LEFTOVER LADIES

