



WHAT'S NEW?

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Debate organized by Fondation Hironnelle in DRC in 2016

© Catherine Trautes

Co-existing

Existing as an independent media serving the general interest under an autocratic or corrupt government is not easy. Relations between government and media in almost all countries today are delicate, tense or even conflictual, notably because of the multiple channels of communication. Whilst some people in France and the United States seem to be discovering this state of affairs for the first time, Fondation Hironnelle has been working for 20 years in countries where relations with the authorities are very complicated, requiring continuous dialogue and transparency.

Choosing to work legally rather than “off-shore” or as a “pirate media”, Fondation Hironnelle has experienced some difficult periods with authoritarian yet fragile governments such as in Liberia under Charles Taylor or the Central African Republic under François Bozizé. The role of the media that Fondation Hironnelle creates or supports is not to be an alternative power in confrontation with regimes or interest groups but to exist alongside them, providing factual, balanced information to the widest possible audience, empowering citizens to change the balance of power and act. That is why these media are respected and listened to, including by the political authorities of the countries in which we work. But this *modus vivendi* is fragile, and requires long-term support in order to develop.

Caroline Vuillemin,
CEO of Fondation Hironnelle



Broadcast media journalists stand ahead of Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump's election night event at the New York Hilton Midtown on November 8, 2016 in New York City © 2016 Getty Images

GOVERNMENTS AND THE MEDIA

The sometimes violent undermining of traditional media is no longer the domain exclusively of authoritarian governments. In democracies, it goes along with the use of social network to relegate them.

The first half of 2017 has seen unprecedented attacks and pressure on the media by governments in several countries with a democratic tradition: tweets and direct attacks by US President Donald Trump accusing respected media of “false news”; “tightening” of new French President Emmanuel Macron’s communication strategy and declarations from his entourage on the need to “lie” to the media; judicial complaints filed by governments for leaking information, after proposed laws were published in the media. Security is worsening for journalists in large countries still consolidating democracy like Turkey -- which has become since the failed coup of July 2016 the world’s biggest jailer of journalists -- or India, where the Hindu nationalist government systematically launches threat campaigns against critical journalists. And the situation for media is not improving in traditionally authoritarian countries like Russia and China, which are both

in the bottom quarter of the 2017 press freedom rankings published by French NGO Reporters without Borders.

Social media are an instrument of choice for authorities’ attempts to marginalize the media. When Donald Trump or Barack Obama can directly address tens of millions of voters via their accounts on social media platforms, why bother with the critical mediation of a journalist’s interview? Traditional media are not in a good position today in this competition to capture public attention. Opinion polls show that only 20% of people in the US trust the news and information they get. The “benchmark” media nevertheless have experience and ethical guidelines for gathering and covering news, on which they can build to demonstrate that their work is necessary and the facts they publish are not in the service of a particular person but for the benefit of all.

Fondation Hironnelle in Myanmar

Fondation Hironnelle started its activities in Myanmar in 2016, to support a professional media sector that gives voice to the population, in a delicate and historic context of democratic transition. A partnership with the Parliament of Myanmar (Hluttaw) makes it possible for the population to develop an understanding of the legislative process, thanks to better access to information, which contributes to a greater transparency of Myanmar's young democracy. Fondation Hironnelle also works with ethnic groups involved in the peace process to improve media coverage of this complex process.

In 2017, Fondation Hironnelle began a program with its partner Frontier Myanmar on human rights, funded by the Dutch Embassy. Frontier is an independent Myanmar news magazine with a website in English and the Burma language. This project aims to address important gaps in information on human rights and related issues through training with journalists and ethnic media and the production of a weekly audio podcast. This podcast, will begin broadcast in October 2017. It will bring unheard and moderate voices into the national dialogue, especially stories and perspectives from women and marginalized members of the community and should serve to counter negative stereotypes. Podcasts will be produced and broadcast in partnership with a network of ethnic media, starting in Magwe Region and Rakhine State. Rakhine State is especially important today given the current flare up of violence and human rights abuses impacting the Rohingya ethnic minority there.

More: frontiermyanmar.net



In the streets of Putao, North of Myanmar © Frontier Media / Ann Wang

ACCESS TO INFORMATION: A MAJOR CHALLENGE IN MYANMAR

Sonny Swe, CEO and Co-founder of **Frontier Myanmar**, a weekly magazine, talks about his independent newspaper's experience with state officials two years after the return to democracy in Myanmar.

At the end of half a century of military dictatorship and two years after the return to democracy in Myanmar, to what extent the press can be considered free?

Sonny Swe: The press has a significant degree of freedom. Five years ago, the Thein Sein government lifted pre-publication censorship and since then we have been able to make our own editorial decisions. Media like Frontier who want to undertake independent, unbiased reporting on important issues now have the opportunity to do so.

That said, there are still a number of threats to media freedom. Many old laws - and even some new ones - still pose major challenges for journalists. The biggest threat is the 2013 Telecommunications Law, which can result in a three-year prison sentence for anyone found guilty of defamation. More broadly, there is less freedom in the broadcast media sector than print and online. The government still closely controls licenses and many broadcasters are reluctant to tackle topics that are perceived as sensitive.

In your investigative work, do you encounter resistance from the government or other powers?

One major challenge in Myanmar is access to information. Many members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) government - including Aung San Suu Kyi - rarely, if ever, speak to the media. The NLD also restricts access to parliament and in many cases does not allow its MPs to speak to the media. And civil servants are still reluctant to provide information and interviews to journalists. This creates difficult decisions for our editorial team - for example, whether to hold a piece in the hope of getting clarification from the government, or proceeding without official comment. In the meantime of course, the state media is still printing propaganda for the government.

What can an independent media like Frontier contribute to the democratic transition in Myanmar?

Because the NLD controls both the government and parliament, there is a lack of scrutiny on its activities. The media and civil society are really the only check on both of these institutions. The NLD is also unwilling to do anything that might harm its relations with the military, so civil society and the media are also important for watching the activities of this powerful institution.

“The truth, no matter how bad, is never as dangerous as a lie in the long run.”

BEN BRADLEE



The wall of Pulitzer Prizes in the Washington Post's new building March 3, 2016 in Washington, DC © AFP or licensors

THE MAIN MISSION OF THE MEDIA IS TO HOLD POWER ACCOUNTABLE

Philip Bennett, professor of journalism and public policy at Duke University and former managing editor of The Washington Post (2005-2009), analyzes the latest evolutions in the relationship between media and power.

Today, many governments show public mistrust towards traditional media. How do you situate this moment in the history of the relationship between media and power?

Philip Bennett: When the Internet arose as a mass media in the 2000s, there was a great hope of increasing freedom of information and knowledge: anyone could have access to information, discover new facts and find the truth. But in the 2010s, the Internet also appeared as a tool to spread false information and to control opinion. In the US, former President Barack Obama had a very efficient use of the direct communication that social networks allow to the public. In a very different style, Donald Trump has the habit of tweeting to attack enemies, challenge facts and announce new policies in 140 characters – a powerful way to prevent any public debate on his decisions.

Political leaders have always tried to use new technologies to shape reality and deliver unfiltered messages to the public: think of the use of radio in the 1930s and 40s by Hitler, Churchill or Franklin Roosevelt. What is new today is that social media allows targeting messages to specific audiences, and for those audiences to communicate with each other. There is also an increasing trend in some democratic countries for governments to interfere in media's work, and to implement strategies to erode public trust in traditional media. Trump's near constant attacks on the media are an

obvious example. And, in more subtle ways, the Obama administration applied pressure on the news media through aggressive leak investigations.

Can traditional media resist this attack by governments?

At least they should try. This is one of the defining contests in democracy today: do we have a public check of political power through media or are we losing that vital tool? We're witnessing a global information war between various competitors – governments, corporations, NGOs... The traditional media is part of this contest, but no longer dominates the field. Their best weapons in this war are an array of principles designed to make sure that they serve the public interest: maintaining transparency, preventing conflicts of interest, and keeping separate facts and opinions.

This is the sense of The Washington Post Standards and Ethics (see right), for instance, created at the end of the 20th century to make the journalists investigate as widely as possible without fear or favoritism. Indeed, the main mission of the media is still to hold power accountable. The best way to do so is not to become an opposition media, but to remain a disinterested media trying to publish true stories that the government wants to keep secret and the public needs to know.

The Washington Post Standards and Ethics

Last published in 1999, The Washington Post Standards and Ethics states:

“The Washington Post is pledged to an aggressive, responsible and fair pursuit of the truth without fear of any special interest, and with favor to none. (...) We accept no gifts from news sources. (...) All reporters and editors are required to disclose to their department head any financial interests that might be in conflict in their reporting or editing duties. (...) The Washington Post is pledged to disclose the source of all information when at all possible. (...) We avoid active involvement in any partisan causes – politics, community affairs, social action, demonstrations – that could compromise our ability to report and edit fairly. (...) On this newspaper, the separation of news columns from the editorial and opposite-editorial pages is solemn and complete. (...) The Washington Post is vitally concerned with the national interest and with the community interest. We believe these interests are best served by the widest possible dissemination of information. (...) The newspaper shall not be the ally of any special interest, but shall be fair and free and wholesome in its outlook on public affairs and public men”.

These principles have been completed in 2011 by Digital Publishing Guidelines to “maintain credibility” of The Post's journalists on social networks.



Editorial meeting at Radio Ndeke Luka, Bangui, February 2017 © Marc Ellison

RADIO NDEKE LUKA STAYS ON TOP IN CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

A new national survey in June 2017 provides valuable information about Radio Ndeke Luka's importance in the Central African Republic, and on the habits, needs and expectations of Central African listeners with regard to information.

May and June 2017 saw five focus groups organized by Radio Ndeke Luka (RNL) in Bangui, Boda, Bouar and Bozoum, and an independent survey carried out by the IMMAR company in Bangui, Bambari, Bouar and Mbaïk. The main aim was to know more about the habits of listeners and the information needs of Central Africans. According to the results, RNL remains the country's leading media, with 60% of adults over 15 listening to it daily in the zone polled by IMMAR. RNL is also the top radio station in Bangui (59%), well ahead of the other international and national media available in this city.

A majority of listeners say RNL helps them to better understand their country and how it functions; to access objective, neutral information; and to be interested in all the regions and peoples of the Central African Republic. This audience survey is an extraordinary tool for Radio Ndeke Luka's journalists and staff to engage with the population, to consolidate the project and to make it sustainable. Following this survey, there will be a number of changes to move RNL forward, including a new programme schedule in autumn 2017, the launch of a new website and regular meetings with the population as of 2018.

OUR COVERAGE OF THE PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY OF "LA FRANCOPHONIE"

Fondation Hironnelle covered the 43rd Parliamentary Assembly of "la Francophonie", which was held in Luxembourg in July.

From July 6 to 12, Fondation Hironnelle sent a media team to the 43rd Parliamentary Assembly of "la Francophonie" (APF), which was celebrating its 50th anniversary around the theme of linguistic and cultural diversity. A team of four African journalists from our media or partner media covered the APF's work, supervised by an editor-in-chief. Their reports were broadcast by our media Studio Tamani in Mali and Studio Kallangou in Niger, by our network of 120 media partners in the DR Congo, and by the public broadcaster of Burkina Faso.

Our editorial team also followed young Africans participating in the 8th edition of the youth parliament that was held alongside the APF. In the debates and workshops, these young people were able to learn more with regard, for example, to education, gender equality and digital entrepreneurship. In partnership with Vivendi and Canal +, our editorial team made daily videos on these young people, their perceptions and their hopes. These videos were broadcast on the Culture(s) With Vivendi's website and on Dailymotion.

New website

Fondation Hironnelle's new website has been online since June 29. Our mission and activities are presented in a different way so as to better demonstrate the impact of our action. We have presented what we do according to different fields of action and themes, highlighting the role of journalism, access to information in several areas key to development aid and humanitarian action. The content has been completely rewritten and enriched, to present our projects, our approach, our expertise and our priorities. Key figures, testimonies and videos illustrate the vital utility of information and dialogue for men and women facing major crises across the world. The graphics have been updated, with new logos for the Fondation and its media. The new presentation, modern and colourful, gives a big place to photos from our media and the places where we work. The launch of this new website is the fruit of an overhaul of Fondation Hironnelle's communication carried out in the first half of 2017.

<http://hironnelle.org>

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. Since its creation in 1995, Fondation Hironnelle, which is based in Lausanne, has been active in 18 countries on 3 continents.

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