Research Proposal

Handed in March 2012 by Hansueli Homberger, Switzerland, info@h-connect.ch

Context: Project for a MAS-Thesis as part of the Studies in Peace and Conflict Transformation at the World Peace Academy (WPA), Basel. (As discussed during the Study-Module on the Contribution of Research to Social Change, 19.-21.3.2012)

Lecturer: PD Diane Ross, Otterbein University, Ohio/USA

1. What is the research question?

2008 I started systematic research on the question: *How to measure quality of media initiatives in conflict zones?*

Reflections during the WPA-course inspired me to think about reformulating the question for the next steps in this research. For example in a sense like: *How to add value to media initiatives in conflict zones by combining quality and performance assessment with the monitoring of social change?*

2. What are my assumptions?

History shows dramatic examples of conflicts and violence escalated by media. From a systemic point of view it must therefore be possible to run the mechanism the opposite way. But rather than investigating on this point, I'm up to look at the *conditions* required to make media work towards de-escalation.

Furthermore, I assume that quality of media initiatives in conflict zones is related to two main levels: *Social change* (in a broad sense) in a conflict zone, and *content* conveyed to recipients, which is the source of any media-outcome. The challenge therefore lies in being able to state on significant correlations between the two.

3. Why am I interested?

The idea of deescalating conflicts via media fascinates me since 1995, when I had the chance to get in touch with people from *Fondation Hirondelle* (based in Lausanne/Switzerland), who were then implementing a media-project in Bukavu (DR Congo), where hundreds of thousands of refugees gathered in camps after the genocide in neighbouring Rwanda.

As well founded the idea may be – it is manipulative! So, the most interesting and important thing actually is to get to know more about manipulation mechanisms: To avoid manipulation leading towards tensions and violence, the first step is obviously to *raise awareness on how manipulation works*.

4. How do I situate myself as a researcher?

I came to research trough many years of honorary NGO-work with local development initiatives in the DR Congo. This might be the reason that I want to orient my work towards solutions for practical challenges.

Seen from this background it also makes sense to me having an eye open on evaluation practice in other peace-promoting activities in conflict zones, specifically in the fields of development, humanitarian aid, etc.

And as my professional background is in the industry (electro-business), I'm always having another eye open for quality-management processes in this sector, where a lot of experience is available.

5. What do I already know?

2009 I have identified by theoretical approaches eleven questions that a sponsor should ask him- or herself before financing a media project in a conflict zone: A short conclusion of a longer study, looking at the topic with a conflict-eye and a media/communication-eye. (For details please refer to the interim study report, elaborated November 2010).

In that study, aspects like trust, transparency, knowledge of the local context and interdependencies, among others, appeared to be crucial. Newer reflections show, that I've probably not paid sufficient attention to the knowledge about *legal aspects* of the local context, and possibly other factors.

Since elaborating the interim study report in 2010, I read literature mainly on qualitative social research and qualitative evaluation research (and I am sometimes surprised how useful this knowledge is for my professional work in the industry, for auditing, instructing, developing safety concepts, etc.).

In addition, I went back to Bukavu from 16.12.2011 to 13.01.2012, where I realized a series of in-depth interviews (see the following chapter on methodology for details).

6. What do I need to read and learn more?

A missing link for me is the lecture of literature on *empirical* social research. In addition I'll look for reports on best practice. I already identified some books and articles that might be helpful to further ground my reflections. Others will follow.

- Atteslander, Peter, 2010 [1969]; Methoden der empirischen Sozialforschung
- Institut Panos, Paris / DFID, 2004; Situation des médias en République démocratique du Congo
- Gadhop, Butembo et. al., 2011; Diagnostic de l'écosystème de communication dans la province du Nord-Kivu, RD Congo
- Hupfer, Barbara, 2007 ; Wirkungsorientierte Programmevaluation
- Ayobami, Ojebode / Akin, Akingbulu, 2009, Community Radio Advocacy in Democratic Nigeria : Lessons for Theory and Practice

7. Where could this lead to?

At the moment I feel that it could make sense to develop a tool to self-evaluate media initiatives in conflict zones. Such a tool must be easy to handle and therefore reduce complexity in a reasonable degree. As stated in my assumptions (Point 2), I propose to focus on monitoring *social change* and *media-content*, and particularly on *correlations* between the two.

But this idea could still change or be modified.

8. To whom this study and its outcomes are addressed?

The focus is on local staff working for media organisations in conflict zones, who want to assure a certain quality level and to regularly monitor improvements. This activity should – must! – be affordable also for media organisations with small budgets.

I imagine that the method could also be applicable for external evaluations, thus it might be necessary to go more into details for that purpose. On the other hand it might also fit to evaluate purely local media initiatives that function without any external support or funding.

As the monitoring of social change is aimed to be part of the process, a desired side-effect could be, that media from outside the conflict zone get interested in referring to the databases as source for their publishing.

9. Methodology?

As I was reducing the topic to only a few pages of conclusions in 2009, I now first want to widen up the field again. I'm curious to find out as much as possible about realities and media effects in conflict zones and to be able to paint a realistic picture of media-situations in such zones. Being able to generalize some aspects would be welcomed, but I'll take care to not overload the project.

In this order, I had the chance to make a series of eight very interesting interviews during my last stay in the DR Congo. They are focussing on two simple questions: The *perception* of media and the question of what people *attend* from the media. To be able to contrast the picture, I'm having plans to some more interviews of that type.

To not get lost, I'm planning to focus my MAS-Thesis on data-collecting and data-processing and separate this clearly from estimations about quality.

I'm intentionally not focussing any further at this point. I like to allow unexpected things to happen – and other interested people to jump in the adventure.

10. What will I do to impact change?

First step must be the development of clever tools to practical challenges in the sense of the above mentioned, namely Pt. 7.

This should go along with networking, getting the proposition around, connecting people of similar interests, creating lobbies, integrating (critical) feedback and experiences of other researchers and professionals in the field.

I prefer *slow and careful steps* when it comes to impact change. Participatory approaches in close cooperation with stakeholders are a must in my eyes. And for media projects in conflict zones, the identifications of (all?) Stakeholders might be quite challenging.

On a more visionary level this project could be seen as an initiative to empower direct and indirect victims of violence to use (mass)-communication for an improvement of their situation.

11. Draft-Timeline (Updated in June 2013)

- Summer – Fall 2013: Finalizing transcription and analysis of the in-depth interviews and compiling the results to a draft version of the thesis.

- November 2013 – January 2014: Renewed testing of the model in the field.

- Spring 2014: Finishing the thesis, hopefully – and being read for new projects.

Zürich, 23.3.2012