

# **Evaluating the Quality and Impact of Media Initiatives in Conflict Zones**

A Set of Guidelines

Interim study report (summary), November 2010

Based on and subsequently developed from the degree dissertation:

"Medienprojekte und Medienwirkungen in Konfliktzonen -  
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# Evaluating the Quality and Impact of Media Initiatives in Conflict Zones

## Topic

A closer look at efforts in the fields of peace building, international cooperation, and humanitarian aid shows that initiatives in the media sector are frequently part of a larger projects or programs. This makes perfect sense, as it is widely accepted that a diversified and independent media landscape has the potential to stabilize societies and democracies. But what about the quality of these media initiatives?

As aid, cooperation and similar activities are financed mainly through public funding and donations, there is a strong public demand for information regarding their quality, efficiency, effectiveness and impact. Through my own personal experience in this area (I have been working together with NGOs and civil society activists in the east of the DR Congo since 1993) I became aware of the crucial role the media could play in deescalating conflicts. All these elements together provided the impetus to start research in 2008 on the question of how to measure the impact of media initiatives in conflict zones.

The first phase of this project involved reviewing the current state of research in the fields of media and conflict studies, combining and contrasting media-theoretical and conflict-orientated viewpoints, specifically focussing on media effects. As fitness for purpose was a fundamental criterion, I approached the conclusions of this theoretical research from the viewpoint of a fictive person responsible for deciding which media projects to finance in conflict zones. The result is a short catalogue of questions designed to help someone in this position make informed decisions on a solid, structured basis (see appendix 1). This can be regarded as providing a useful and workable set of guidelines; however, more work needs to be done to develop them into an adequate toolkit for a wider range of different situations (ongoing projects for example), and this is what I am currently working on.

## Key interim findings

The above-mentioned conclusions can be summarized under the three keywords: transparency, holistic approach and networks. The demand for transparency can be broken down into two main areas: transparency of goals and transparency of resources. Further details about this can be found in appendix 1.

The importance of a holistic approach, or a systemic view to use another term, is due to the diversity of roles the media occupy in society. Per definition media is "in the middle" and its primary function is to connect and link by transmitting information. Consequently, systemic boundaries need to be defined to enable structured analysis. Focussing on systems and their interaction is therefore an appropriate way to approach research in the media sector, and even more so when it comes to evaluating quality and impact in such highly complex contexts as conflict zones.

Adopting a systemic approach makes it possible - among other things - to observe the divide that exists between media professionals and activists working "inside" conflict zones and others working "outside", at a regional or international level. My initial research has already convinced me that the effectiveness of media interventions in conflict zones could be improved by bridging this gap through investing in connections and networking between the different levels.

Although specific decisions will always require specific information, the important thing is that overall objectives are clear from the very beginning. Therefore, the key reference points of any evaluation are firstly the analysis of the situation at the early stages of an initiative and secondly the goals as initially formulated. It has to be emphasised that any evaluation of media initiatives in conflict zones should take into account the entire cause-effect-chain, starting with the funding or sponsoring organisation and their specific roles, proceeding to consider the organisations implementing projects inside conflict zones and last, but not least, the intended recipients and possibly also other stakeholders.

## What next?

For the second part of this study my aim is to focus on testing theoretical findings in practical situations and combining them with established best practices. The next step, therefore, is to organise field research. For my part this can be done reasonably easily in the Great Lakes Region in Central Africa where I have a solid network. But as it would also be interesting to compare findings from different geographical regions (and different academic approaches, etc.), I am looking to collaborate with others engaged in similar research. Additional funding would greatly enhance the quality of the research.

At the methodological level I have in mind a comparison between the methods and criteria used to analyse quality and impact in the fields of international cooperation, humanitarian aid, peace building and - naturally - media initiatives. Given the shared goals and purposes in these areas, the presumption is that there is unutilized potential for synergies and knowledge transfer. To obtain the data for this comparative study, I initially started exploring evaluation reports for existing projects but had to interrupt this temporarily.

To complete the study, I am also planning to interview recipients, journalists, project implementers and sponsors of media initiatives in conflict zones.

## Some background information

This summary is based on research I did during a postgraduate course on Conflict Research and Conflict Resolution at the Basel University, Switzerland (2008-2009, Advanced Study Centre, documented in a degree dissertation in German). Whilst I am looking to translate at least parts of this 70 page paper, my focus at present is the further development of the study. This is the reason why currently only the essentials of my previous work are available in English. Together with this summary and the conclusions already mentioned (appendix 1), there is also a table of contents of the original dissertation (appendix 2).

Interested readers should not hesitate to ask for details and - especially appreciated – provide any feedback or possible contacts. Readers interested in the original German text are kindly asked to send me their e-mail address.

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Appendix 1:

## Conclusions from the first phase of the study

These are formulated in the form of a catalogue of questions that can be used as a guideline by organisations funding media initiatives in conflict zones.

		Link to chapter (see appendix 2)
1.	Do relationships of trust exist with media professionals and activists in the conflict zone in which an intervention is intended?	4.1.4
2.	Is the funding organisation in a position to influence the conditions (legal, security, etc.) applicable for media work in conflict zones and, in particular, those governing the work of media professionals and activists? Can the funding organisation take appropriate action to deal with attempts at censorship and manipulation as well as reprisals? (Possibly a question of the project size, among other factors).	4.1.4 (3.1)
3.	Does a reliable overview of the existing media landscape in the conflict zone exist and are measures taken to ensure that planned media initiatives do not stifle promising media activities that already exist at a local level? (Diversity of opinion)	2.1 4.1.1 4.2.2.4
4.	Does a reliable and credible analysis of the situation in the conflict zone exist? Does this analysis provide clear and transparent reasoning for the media intervention, the project goals and the intended project impact? Are there resources available to update the analysis at adequate intervals? (Transparency of goals, Sustainability)	2.3 3.4 4.1.1 4.1.3 4.2.1.3 4.2.1.4 4.2.2.3
5.	Is it absolutely clear what role the media intervention is to take: is it pure information brokering (passive, catalytic role) or is the intention to effect some form of behavioural change (active, manipulative role)? If other content such as educational material is to be disseminated alongside the core business of conveying information, then do sufficiently clear definitions and regulations for these tasks exist? Is the world-view, the ontological basis	2.1 4.1.2.2 4.2.1.2

	behind this additional activity clear and apparent? Does the dissemination of factual information have priority over fictional material? Do the project goals include developing the media competence of recipients?	
6.	Have all the requirements for a long-term involvement of the funding organisation been met? Does the creation / implementation of a media organisation which is able to survive independently - after a phase of external funding - remain the clearly declared overall project goal?"	4.1.4
7.	Is the project sufficiently embedded in its local environment and does it have adequate networks to provide access to credible sources whilst also ensuring that the information and content generated are accessible to a wide-ranging public? Do these networks also include media professionals working at a regional or international level and specialists in the field of conflict analysis and related areas? Is there an interest or an intention to create or promote these types of networks?	2.3 4.1.1 4.2.1.3c 4.2.1.4 4.2.2.1 4.2.2.2
8.	Do regulations and tools exist to ensure transparency, for example in regard to financing, conflicts of interest, cooperation agreements etc.? (Transparency on resources)	2.3 also 4.1.3 4.2.1.3b
9.	Do regulations exist for particular situations, for example the handling of dissident or extremist opinions, attempts at instrumentalisation, the handling of confidential data, etc.?	4.2.1.3.b 4.2.1.3c
10.	Are the facilities, mechanisms and know-how available to archive published material, and possibly also provide statistical analysis?	4.2.1.3c
11.	Which structures and processes are planned or have been implemented to ensure contact with the public?	

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**Annex 2: Bibliography**