

Media that Matters: Translating Rights into Reality

BY JUSTINE ABIGAIL YU

“Awareness is the first and most necessary step in ending human rights abuses.”

Those words are splashed on the website and promotional materials of the non-governmental organization, Journalists for Human Rights. And it’s a statement I have found myself saying over and over again both to myself and to others when talking about human rights violations around the world and the media’s role in reporting these issues. After all, if people aren’t aware of the rights and freedoms they are entitled to, how can one possibly, in the words of the ever-wise Bob Marley, “get up, stand up—stand up for your rights”?

Yes, awareness is the answer. It’s so intuitive, so common sense, so simple.

But alas, common sense does not necessarily reflect reality and simple does not mean easy. Regrettably, around the

world, including in some of the most developed and prosperous countries, there is an outrageous and glaring lack of awareness of our most basic and fundamental human rights.

The media have a huge role to play in solving this problem by highlighting the gap between every individual’s guaranteed human rights and what they experience in reality. With their ability to reach millions of people, whether through print, radio, television, or now in our increasingly digital world, the Internet, the media are essential to a vibrant democracy that does not tolerate arbitrary abuse.

Let me demonstrate. A single radio station in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the most important medium for information in the country, reaches thousands of Congolese people. Now multiply that by the approximately 360 local community radio stations that exist in the DRC and imagine the number of people who can be informed of their rights. In fact, a study in Ghana on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child found that the media was the

largest source of information about the treaty. The media thus has the power to expose human rights abuses when they happen, to hold relevant actors accountable for their actions, and to empower marginalized and vulnerable communities to speak out and protect themselves.

But herein lies the rub: We live in a world where press freedom has been on the decline, where only 35% of all the countries in the world enjoy a free press, and where the infrastructure for a strong and independent media is, in many countries, virtually nonexistent.

In such a situation, it is no wonder that investment in local media is largely missing from the wider discussion of international development. Indeed, media development makes up a meager 0.5% of all international development efforts.

Despite this seemingly insignificant number, some organizations are working tirelessly to strengthen the journalism sector in some of the harshest conditions in the world—and are even achieving tangible success. One such organization is the aforementioned Journalists for Human Rights (JHR), Canada’s largest media development organization and one that I’ve been working with for the past two years. Working in post-conflict African countries where human rights are most at risk, JHR works in partnership with local journalists, NGOs, editors, and media owners to build the professional capacity of journalists, especially developing their human rights reporting skills.

CAPACITY BUILDING

JHR serves countries that have been ravaged by civil war—countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where years of conflict have eroded the educational system. Schools were directly attacked and closed down, students and teachers became targets of violence and abuse, and families and even entire communities were displaced. In these areas, journalists and those aspir-



A JHR trainer working alongside local journalists in Ghana.

ing to be journalists often lack the educational and professional background needed to succeed, as well as the resources necessary to conduct independent reporting.

In the grander post-conflict reconstruction puzzle, JHR provides educational training to journalists and journalism students alike in an attempt to bridge the gap that strife has left behind. JHR's veteran journalists from around the world work alongside local journalists and sharing insights on reporting, techniques on interviewing, and advice on layout design or programming.

Beyond the inadequacies of the educational system, these countries often lack good governance and a sound economic base. Many journalists live in a climate of fear and where corruption is endemic. In the DRC, for example, an average of one journalist is killed or disappears on the job in a single year. Sierra Leone, meanwhile, was ranked number two on the Committee to Protect Journalists' (CPJ) impunity index in 2009—which means that murders of journalists go largely uninvestigated. As such, many stories, particularly those that touch on human rights violations, are left unwritten or unpublished in fear of reprisal from government officials and other relevant authorities. Instead, “cheque-book journalism” prevails. The combination of death threats, libel charges, and insufficient salaries make the practice of accepting “brown envelopes” of cash for favorable coverage an appealing option for many journalists who struggle to feed themselves and their families. The practice has become so common in Africa that many countries have developed their own term for it: *coupagne* in the DRC, *solli* in Ghana, *gatu* in Liberia, and *buhe* in Ethiopia.

As a response to these problems, JHR often hosts workshops and forums. In March 2011, for instance, the organization, along with the Canadian High Commission to Ghana, held a symposium to discuss the practice and impact of *solli* in Ghana's journalism sector. The

event brought together a number of local journalists from various media houses not only to debate, but also to propose potential solutions. Of course, this is not to say that the symposium put a definitive end to *solli*, but it did

open up a discussion—a necessary first step to remedy a problem that goes largely unchallenged.

As for the climate of fear in which these journalists must often operate, JHR organizes workshops that focus on strategies to avoid reprisals from authorities. There is obviously no easy answer, but in the summer of 2010, JHR and *Toronto Star* Editor-in-Chief Michael Cooke reached approximately 350 journalists, students, editors, and broadcasters in Kinshasa to address this very concern and train them on the basics of investigative journalism.

In each of the countries where JHR works, these journalists undeniably hunger to learn more about their industry and to improve their skills. They show a resilience to overcome even the most daunting odds, and a deep-seated hope for a thriving democracy and a vibrant press.

A FOCUS ON HUMAN RIGHTS

JHR's programming focuses on strengthening the general professional ability of journalists and aspiring journalists, and also pays attention to increasing the number and quality of human rights stories that are published and broadcasted. The only media-related NGO dedicated exclusively to human rights reporting, JHR insists that “without a thriving local journalism sector, there can be no effective means of communication between citizens and their governments. Good governance and respect for human rights depends on effective media that has the ability to create and inspire real change.”



As such, JHR has pioneered the growth of “Rights Media”—“the process of writing, collecting, editing, producing, and distributing media that creates societal dialogue on human rights issues.” Based largely on the empowering of rights holders by building their capacity to solve problems, JHR's Rights Media framework encourages locally trained journalists to approach all human rights stories with the following elements: participation, accountability, non-discrimination, and a linkage to specific human rights treaties.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

Working with JHR for the past two years now, I have seen success after success, where journalists, properly trained and equipped, give a voice to those who are voiceless, telling their stories and holding duty bearers accountable for their actions or, in some cases, negligence. By writing stories that raise awareness of human rights, journalists and the media are translating rights into reality. The path may not always be linear, but once we take that first step of spreading and raising awareness, a ripple effect of change is inevitable.

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” proclaimed Martin Luther King Jr. And despite the obstacles, media development organizations like JHR and vigilant human rights reporters and media houses will bring us closer to that end. □

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