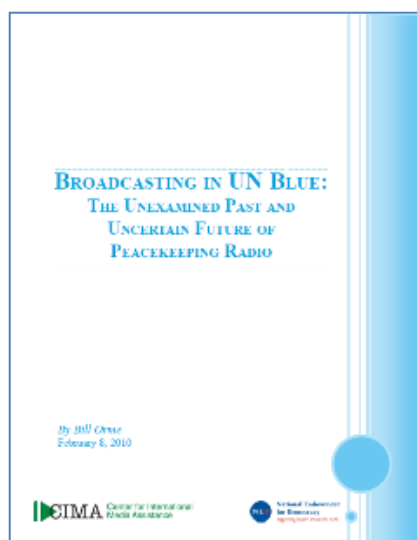


## Broadcasting in UN Blue: The Unexamined Past and Uncertain Future of Peacekeeping Radio



For almost two decades, United Nations peacekeeping missions have routinely set up local radio stations that almost immediately have become the dominant national broadcasters of those post-conflict countries.

From Cambodia to Liberia, these UN stations have helped end violent conflict and make political transition possible. They have provided citizens with trusted local news programs and nonpartisan discussion forums, often for the first time. The UN radio stations were also often the first to reach all corners of these war-ravaged countries. In national elections after peacekeeping interventions, the UN stations were the main if not the only source of nonpartisan voter information and campaign coverage, crucial for any functioning democracy.

And then, when the UN missions ended, the stations would abruptly close.

The management, impact, and ultimate fate of these UN stations—a dozen to date, five of which remain in operation in volatile African countries—has largely escaped the notice of policymakers, including within the UN itself. To this day, there is not even an official record of past and present UN mission radio services.

By almost any measure—political impact, infrastructural improvement, giving voice to dissent and minorities, raising local journalism standards—these peacekeeping radio stations contributed more to media development in certain post-conflict countries than any other concurrent media assistance programs, including the many journalism-targeted projects run through other UN bodies. But those achievements were disappointingly ephemeral, due to a lack of both long-term UN planning and a commitment to media development as an integral part of post-peacekeeping democratization.

The UN's radio exit strategy has often been just to pull the plug—literally—once the Security Council peacekeeping mandate expired, and put the broadcasting equipment back into containers for the next mission. In Cambodia the UN station closed weeks after the country's 1993 elections, leaving a media vacuum that has not been filled to this day. In East Timor in 2002, the UN station hardware was

handed over to the new government for a state broadcasting service under direct partisan control.

A repetition of either scenario in the remaining UN radio stations would undermine long-term nation-building efforts in Africa, where seven peacekeeping operations now account for more than two-thirds of all UN peacekeeping spending and personnel worldwide.

The UN radio services, though run quite professionally and effectively, were created with little strategic thinking about the local media landscape and without long-term planning for local alternatives upon their eventual disappearance. This is not a criticism of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, which was never asked nor equipped to be in the media development business. It is, however, a criticism of UN peacekeeping planning, beginning with the Security Council itself.

Peacekeepers on the ground have been acutely aware of the stations' importance to their long-term missions; surveys have confirmed their popularity and credibility with national audiences; and local journalists have lauded their contributions to media diversity and journalism standards. It would be not just shortsighted but reckless for the international

community to let this good work go to waste and deprive the citizens of post-conflict countries of the professional news and information services to which they have become accustomed and now rightfully expect.

There are a number of policy steps that would help UN radio services fulfill UN ideals and make lasting contributions to free media in the countries that peacekeepers are sent to stabilize. Among them:

- The Security Council should consistently require legal and technical facilities for UN-backed broadcasting and related digital communications as an integral component of peacekeeping missions—and it should back up those mandates with resources, clear policy guidance, and insistence on local compliance.
- The UN should draw a bright operational line between its public relations and information apparatus and its management of broadcasters providing news programs to local audiences.
- The UN should approach creation of a national broadcasting service as part of the UN's institution-building responsibilities in post-conflict countries, much as the UN does now with support for independent election authorities, human rights commissions, and other autonomous democratic bodies.
- All UN-backed local broadcasting should abide by the norms for independent media promulgated and championed by UNESCO and relevant regional institutions (the African Union, the Organization of American States, the European Commission, etc.).
- Before setting up its own radio stations, the UN should first consider partnerships with credible and capable local media outlets, such as nonpartisan public broadcasters or community radio networks, if such institutions exist.
- UN radio partnerships with nongovernmental media organizations should be pursued systematically and transparently, including through open bidding.
- The UN departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Public Information should develop and deploy an on-call roster of experienced media managers and trainers, including through collaboration with UNESCO (which has a mandate and expertise in media work but lacks field resources) and UNDP (which has large field operations and a complementary media development mandate).
- UN peacekeeping media strategies should be shaped through dialogue and data-sharing with local media groups and bilaterally and privately funded media projects in countries with or targeted for peacekeeping missions.
- Peacekeeping radio services currently operating should begin planning for their eventual closure and should help to build local broadcasters that could provide similarly professional and nonpartisan programming.
- Wherever possible, UN missions should support the development of local public service broadcasters with editorial autonomy and a commitment to professional newsgathering and nonpartisanship, as an integral part of the UN mandate to aid national transitions to representative and responsive democratic governance.

*Broadcasting in UN Blue: The Unexamined Past and Uncertain Future of Peacekeeping Radio* is a publication of the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA). The Center is an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy that works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development. CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

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