



Community Radio in Ethiopia: A Discourse of Peace and Conflict Reporting

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Contents

Introduction	2
The Community Radio as Tool to Solve the Internal Conflicts	3
Ownership of the Media	4
Proximity and Immediacy	5
Languages and Values of the Community	6
Volunteerism and Nonprofit Making	8
Summary	9
References	9

Abstract

In the states, like Ethiopia, where internal conflicts, mainly ethnic conflicts, have currently been appearing in many parts, a medium that deals with those issues appropriately is vital. Among the three main media branches, such as public service, commercial, and community radio, the later can be described as an appropriate medium that can, perhaps, bring not only possible timely solutions to the cases but also some social changes in the society. This is because the nature of the community radio, which is close to the societies and covers the issues immediately, can serve the people well by raising directly relevant issues in relation to conflict and peace. By taking some cases from Ethiopia, it is the purpose of this chapter to show how community radio is a best platform in dealing with internal conflicts in particular and social issues in general in the marginalized societies that are vulnerable to various social and political problems.

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Introduction

In a broad classification of broadcasting, there are three groups of electronic media in Ethiopia. The first one is public broadcasting service, which is funded by the public. In the case of Ethiopia, these media are financed and controlled by the government. This can also be named government-run media. The second is commercials, which are privately owned, and their goals are profit making. The third is community radio, which is supported by the community and local and international NGOs. And, the main goal of the community radio is to serve and benefit the target groups in some areas. As it is defined by AMARC, community radio is a “nonprofit” station, currently broadcasting, which offers a service to the community in which it is located, or to which it broadcasts, while promoting the participation of this community in the radio (AMARC-Europe 1994 cited in Carpentier et al. 2003, p. 240). Among these three types of media in the country, it is the argument of this paper that the later one (community radio) can be one of the best means of communication for social changes in particular, dealing with internal conflicts in a given country. This will be explained throughout this chapter. But, first, it is fair to note briefly about the development of community radio and the extent of conflicts in the country.

Currently, there are a number community radio stations in Ethiopia. Most of them are well established and structured. Unlike the other media in the country, such as the national radio, television, and newspaper, the community radio can be described not only as a recent phenomenon but also as a fast-growing medium in the country (Tadesse 2006; Eshetu 2007). As of 2008, the government of Ethiopia, in its office, called Ethiopian Broadcasting Authority (EBA), has begun licensing the community radio in a formal way, but most of them have started properly functioning as of 2010 and 2011 (Infoasaid 2011). Presently, there are about 26 community radio stations, which are functioning well across the country; the other 30 got license, but have not started providing service to the community (EBA 2016). Since it is being recent and comparing it with other mainstream media, the community media can be described as a media in good progress in the country.

In advocacy communication, which is an important tool to foster public policies in the audiences by producing issues or program continuously in the media, in which they could bring solution, for instance, to the conflicts (Servaes and Malikhaio 2012), the community radio can be the best medium in taking such roles in the country. This can be discussed into two points in relation to internal conflicts. Firstly, there are several internal conflicts in the country. Ethiopia, one of the Horn of African countries, has been experiencing both inter- and intra-conflicts in its history due to political, socioeconomic, border, and administrative structure, ethnic and religious tensions, the geopolitics of the country, and other causes. Specifically, intra-conflicts have currently become so serious and vast in numbers. Various research and reporters indicated that there have been several internal conflicts, which have had serious consequences, which led to losing the lives of many people, destruction of properties, and other social problems in the country (Armed Conflict Location and Events Data Project-ACLED (2016). In fact, there were some regional states in the

country which were vastly experiencing ethnic conflicts. Oromia, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region (SNNPR), and Somalia regions were among the most vulnerable regions to ethnic conflicts (iDMC 2009). But recently, the conflicts have sporadically happened in the other regions due to the political tension, and many people lost their lives. In pastoralists' areas where grazing and farming land are so scarce and where the border structures are poorly demarcated, they have been accommodating many clashes and conflicts.

Secondly, the community radio stations in the country are mostly situated in marginalized areas, in which the people are vulnerable to various conflicts, specifically ethnic conflicts. These make the importance of community radio so magnificent in alleviating conflict and in bringing the solutions to the problems.

The Community Radio as Tool to Solve the Internal Conflicts

There have been two different arguments on the importance of the media, in general, in relation to their interventions in conflicts. Some groups, for instance, Des-Forges (1999), Thompson (2007, 1999), by taking the cases of Rwanda and former Yugoslavia, argued that the media play a negative intervention in the conflict by presenting the cases in a more sensational ways that motivate the people to stand against the other perceived enemies. On the other hand, there are groups who are strongly arguing that the media are still one of the best means to approach conflict and bring sustainable solution to a given conflict (Wolfsfeld 2004; Spencer 2005; Lynch and McGoldrick 2005; Howard 2008). The best-case scenario of the positive intervention of the media in conflicts is the crisis between the Catholic and the Protestant groups in Ireland. The media in this country are appreciated in creating a conducive environment for the two-antagonist groups to settle their differences. To note here, both the negative and positive interventions have been observed in the mainstream media in the respective countries. It is the argument of this chapter that unlike the mainstream media, community radio differently serves the people in the discourse of peace and conflicts if it is properly established and managed and the volunteers' journalists are well trained. As Ethiopia is ethnically a divided country where its societies are grouped based on their ethnic lines which could help to mobilize themselves in their groups as well as to get some benefits because of their groupings (Abbink 2006; Østebø 2007; ICG 2009), a recent study on the mainstream media found that journalists in these media are always working in fear where their report may incite conflicts among the ethnic groups (Moges 2017). Due to the fear of inciting conflicts as well as fear of creating animosity among a perceived ethnic enemy, most of the mainstream media in the country do not dare to report internal conflicts, particularly ethnic conflicts (Moges 2017). The media prefer to silence the cases.

Taking this finding into account, it is the main argument of this chapter that the community radio can perform better than the mainstream media in relation to reporting conflicts and possibly bringing solutions in Ethiopia. This is because their nature, approaches, and autonomy could help them to deal with internal

conflicts in the society in a way to ameliorate cases. In support of this idea, Teriz and Vassiliadou (2008, p. 26) argued that the community radio has the power to reach the target audience and enable them to participate in the decision-making process both in the content selection and content production. Carpentier et al. (2003) also explained the importance of community radio into four multi-theoretical approaches. These are in terms of serving a community, the community media as an alternative to mainstream media, linking community media to the civil society, and community media as rhizome. These multi-theoretical approaches, except the latter, are very important to elaborate the cases of community radio in Ethiopia in the case of ensuring peace and resolving conflicts. In this chapter, the community radio are present in terms of their ownership, proximity and immediacy, language and values, and volunteerism and nonprofit-making interest.

Ownership of the Media

In the political economy of the media, ownership is one of the elements that influence the mainstream media content production and dissemination in the given society. However, it is possible to argue here that the influence of ownership in community radio becomes minimal. It is because the community owns the media and they can also select, propose, and even participate in the content production in the programs aired in the stations (Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada 2002). Unlike the mainstream media that are mostly working to meet either political or economic benefits of the owners by reporting some issues, such as conflicts, perhaps sensationally to get more sells (Allen and Seaton 1999), the community radio are, nevertheless, less likely rushing to report issues in a way to exaggerate the reports so as to maximize incomes. For instance, when there is conflict in a given society, the community radio stations are believed to report the cases in a very fair manner that benefits their target communities. It is because the community radio stations are always reporting cases in a way that helps that particular society. In support of this idea, Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada (2002) emphasize that the decision on all aspects of management is transparent and democratic which enable them to serve the community. This indicates that, for example, if there is a conflict in some areas, the journalists in the community radio are mainly concerned with how the cases could be reported in a way to bring the solutions to the problems. In other terms, their (the community media) main interest is to deal with the issues in line with the interests of the community, which are witnessing the conflict. A study on internal conflicts in Ethiopia found that owners (in terms of political and economic) are highly influencing the media in both the extent of and framing of those issues (Moges 2017). However, when it comes to the community radio, unlike the other mainstream media, the owners' influence in the community media is so little. Instead, since the communities are the owner of the radio station, they are highly privileged in participating in the content selection and production freely (Carpentier et al. 2003). They also underscored that in the community radio, the community are getting better access in participation in the content production and in the discussion

in the programs (Carpentier et al. 2003). Thus, the discourse of conflict and peace in the case of Ethiopia can be easily and fairly facilitated by the community radio stations, which are mostly owned by the communities.

Proximity and Immediacy

Proximity and immediacy are some of the most valuable elements in story selection in the media. When it comes to the conflict cases, these two elements become the most important criteria of story selection in the media (Gultung and Ruge 1965). More specifically, these two elements can be most valuable and well used in the community radio. This is because the radio stations can be the most close media to the society in providing information to them as soon as possible. This further benefits that particular society in four ways. Firstly, the target audiences can get the chance to know what is going on in their surroundings since journalists in the community radio relatively report the case as soon as it happens. Secondly, unlike the mainstream media at the national and international level, the community radio stations are situated close to the target community, in which their journalists can easily identify the possible violence, perhaps, before the outbreak of the conflicts, as well as suggest possible solutions to them. As it has been argued by Lynch and McGoldrick (2005), reporting conflicts proactively can contribute to containing the outbreak of serious violence and their consequences in the community. This is because when the report identifies some problems ahead and suggests the way out, the concerned bodies can also come up with the solutions. It is also easy to get the solution to the problem from the community themselves. This can happen in the community radio, which is situated in the community. In support of this idea, Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada (2002, p. 71) state:

The collective perception can only be achieved through internal discussions to analyse specific problems, identify possible solutions, and mobilize the appropriate people or groups for action. Community radio provides the perfect platform for this internal discussion.

Thirdly, since the journalists and the owners (the community) are part of the same society, the former can bring issues of conflict to the audiences so as to discuss the case in the way they want to be. The journalists know the social and cultural values of that particular community (will be discussed next), and they can present the cases that the audiences can understand by using its language and culture. In light of that, reflecting and promoting local identity, values, and culture of the community are some of the main functions of the community radio (Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada 2002). The society is also considering the community media as a safeguard for their culture (da Costa 2012). This can be further discussed in the next subtopic.

Lastly, the community can get the chance to easily participate in the program, which also helps them to promote the rights of the societies (Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada 2002, p. 71).

(The community radio help) to promote good governance and civil society by playing a community watchdog role that makes local authorities and politicians more conscious of their public responsibilities. The marginalized and the oppressed normally have no way to complain when authorities take advantage of them, but community radio gives them a voice to air their grievances and obtain their due rights.

In a similar vein, Carpentier et al. (2003) noted that the community media has the power to provide access to the community, particularly the marginalized, in participating (getting the chance to have their voice heard) and facilitating communication in the given society. The Kore community radio in Ethiopia can be a case in point for such role. Historically, the Kore community is likely isolated both politically and geographically from the central government. The area, which is located in SNNP region, is not easily accessible for transportations. Like many other ethnic groups, this community also has a distinct language, which is not catered by the national media. Of course, as the Ethiopian populations are large in number and there are many ethnic groups with their own language, it has become difficult to provide coverage for all groups in their languages at the national level in the mainstream media. As a result, the community radio, Kore Community radio, has become the best platform to the community to use the media in expressing whatever they want. Kembata community radio has also shared similar roles. Generally, the issues of proximity and immediacy make the community media more preferable stations in the discourse of peace and conflicts. There is a strong need for the proximity of radio stations to the rural audiences and localization of program materials (Diedong 2014). This ultimately helps the community to raise more issues, and then, they can get the chance to be heard by the concerned people. In addition, as it is noted in the multi-theoretical approach of Carpentier et al. (2003), topics of the discussion in the programs in the community radio are considered for selection if and only if they are found relevant to that particular community. This has also another advantage in the community. Issues, which need immediate action by the decision-makers, could get answer shortly.

Languages and Values of the Community

As noted above, briefly, the other most important elements in the discourse of peace and conflicts in the community radio in Ethiopia are the use of local language and social values of the community in the program production. It is clear that language is one of the means that reflect values and cultures. The community radio is also using this advantage by producing and disseminating information to the audiences that they can clearly understand the cases. In addition to language, the communities have different identities, cultures, or perceptions that may bring some forms of different understanding. This can be described as the main challenges to the mainstream media at national, foreign, or international level in reporting cases in line with the cultural context of the cases. As it is argued by Terizis and Vassiliadou (2008), the international and foreign media can be highly challenged in understanding and

translating words and concepts of the local community. The low level of understanding and translating the local language by these mainstream media may lead to prejudice and biases toward the cases, the context, and the society they are reporting to (Terizis and Vassiliadou 2008, p. 386). In other terms, Servaes and Malikhao (2012) argued that media, which aspire to bring social changes, particularly build peace, and bring resolution to the conflicts, shall frame the message based on the culture context of the target community. “The information should be trailered to the audiences and be in line with the understanding and expectation of the people or stakeholder” (Servaes and Malikhao 2012, p. 237). In his handbook, *Conflict-Sensitive Reporting*, Howard (2008) also noted that journalists should describe conflicts accurately, which needs understanding to the background of the case, the context, and other: “. . .the spelling of names, the facts as they happened, and the real meaning of what was said” (Howard 2008, p. 21). All the above authors suggested that considering the language and values of the given community where the media are working in is vital. In the case of community radio, the journalists do understand well not only the language and the values of the community but also the interest of the target audiences. This can help the community to get more chances to speak out their problems freely. And they can also suggest possible solutions freely that can work in line with their cultural values.

This can be described in terms of presentations of the issues in the community media. Some communities have the culture that can colorfully express certain issues. This can help the community radio to use such values of the society in presenting issues of reconciliation and arbitration of the conflict artistically, which ultimately make the discussion very soft and smooth. As one of the roles of the journalists who are aspiring to bring conflict cases and present them in a non-violent way, Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) suggest that the presentation shall be more creative and be in line with the social values of the community. The authors also advise that the story shall include the voice of the people in general and influential cultural and other social groups, in particular, who can influence the public opinion easily. Unlike other mainstream media, the community radio is a best platform to bring those values from the societies, and they can present those in the form of music, dialogue, art, poem, and others (Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada 2002). In its nature, the community radio is producing programs in the local language about local issues, music, cultures, and news based on the interests of the target listeners (Milius and Oever NY.). This makes the community radio the right medium in solving the problem and bringing peace to the community. To note here, all the community radio stations in Ethiopia are using the local languages of the people who are getting the service from the aired programs. In other terms, most of the community radio in Ethiopia is serving small ethnic groups, which have a strong sense of local identity (Infoasaid 2011, p. 18). This can be further explained that some community radio stations are serving some marginalized communities, which are somewhat isolated in the socioeconomic benefits of the country. At the same time, these marginalized societies are most vulnerable to minor conflicts. This is one of the advantages of community radio, specifically in Ethiopia, which are producing contents and disseminate them to the societies in different languages of the communities.

Languages and values can also be discussed in relation to having clear understanding to the cases. Facts are the most important elements in the objective reporting in the media; it thus becomes so serious in writing accurate stories within the context of a given society. It is the job of the journalists to work hard to figure out facts from the trashes. There are times that journalists who are not close to the issues or particular communities are challenged in identifying “which is which.” However, these problems may not be a big deal with the journalists who are working in the community radio. It is because they either can know the facts well or can easily cross-check them from various sources. Moreover, they can know the context of the conflicts, the background of the conflict, and the values that should be dealt with while reporting the cases. They can also easily anticipate the intended consequences of their reports in the political, social, and cultural matters in the target community. Hence, the presentation about a certain conflict that aims at bringing reconciliation in the community or arbitrating the groups by taking their values in the program needs to have clear knowledge about the case, which is not a challenge to the journalists who are working in the community radio.

Volunteerism and Nonprofit Making

The last point that this chapter wants to mention to strengthen the discussion in relation to the importance of the community radio in the intervention of peace and conflict reporting in Ethiopia is volunteering and nonprofit-making interest of both the journalists and the stations. Journalists who are working in the community radio are volunteers who have ardent interests to serve the society for free. Of course, they shall have some skills to write and report issues. They work in the community radio parallel with their jobs. The radio station may not pay them. As their aim is only to serve the target community, they do not have extra interest in working in the media. This is to mean that journalists in the mainstream media are highly interested in reporting conflicts mostly in a sensational manner. This can be an advantage to promote them and become famous in the media by dealing with sensitive issues. However, when it comes to the community radio, its journalists do not have an extra interest in rushing to report some issues in a sensationalized manner for monetary gain or personal promotion. In fact, this has been argued in a different way.

The flow of information is another advantage of the community radio. Unlike other mainstream media, the community radio does not highly promote the top-down flow of information. In fact, there are times that the community radio stations set some agendas from the NGOs or other funding organization. For instance, there were some local NGOs that have been financing Kembata community radio to deal with women and children issues with the aim of minimizing women-children mortality rate. This is also common in Africa in general. NGOs and development agencies consider the community radio as conduits for message that aimed at educating the community, fostering behavioral changes, and empowering them (da Costa 2012, p. 135). This indicates that the community radio not only develops

volunteerism but also promotes social changes at the grassroots level in its community. This ultimately has an impact in dealing with issues of conflicts.

Summary

Generally, community radio in Ethiopia can be considered as one of the tools that can be used to intervene positively in the discourse of peace and conflicts and bring solutions. Since community radio stations are owned by the community and run by the volunteers, and they are close to the society, they become so vital not only becoming a platform for discussion on conflicts and peace as well as other sociopolitical issues but also deepening the participation of the community in many aspects which ultimately bring social changes. It also maximizes the two factors of development, such as communication and people's participation. Taking all these points into account, community radio in Ethiopia is one of the catalysts for social changes and solves ethnic conflicts mostly happening in the remote parts of the country. According to Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada (2002, p. 69), "the community radio station is a platform for identifying and analyzing problems and their solutions, thereby determining development inputs that truly meet local needs." Hence, those who want to use and advocate certain issues, including peace building, in Ethiopia, shall approach the community radio to meet their interests. This is because the community radio is the best medium that can bring social issue up front to the public discussion.

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