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Diaspora Journalism and the Somali Conflict

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Abstract

Since its invention, journalism has been required to do at least three things at the same time as outlined by McNair (2005). These are the provision of information required for people to monitor their social environments, a resource for the participation in public life and political debate (what Habermas has called the 'public sphere') and a medium of education, enlightenment and entertainment. In conflict societies, however, these principles have been internalised and interpreted through a conflict lens creating a very complex web of media operations that produce contested representations. This article focuses on one such conflict that exemplifies this complexity; the Somali conflict. It concentrates on the Somali media produced by diaspora journalists and showcases the pressures that drive their selection processes and editing methods, processes and methods that transnationalise and re-create the conflict amongst Somali communities (Osman 2017). The findings analysed in this article are derived from interviews that have been conducted with diaspora-based Somali journalists and producers. The article illuminates the driving forces behind the darker roles that diasporic media can play in the continuation of an ongoing conflict.

Keywords: Journalism, Somali diaspora, conflict,

Introduction

Diasporas have existed in one form or another since ancient times but there are reasons to believe that the political weight of diaspora communities has increased importantly throughout the late twentieth century (Demmers 2002). They play a crucial role in contemporary conflicts due to 'the rise of a new pattern of conflict, the rapid rise of war refugees, the increased speed of communication and mobility and the increased production of cultural and political boundaries' (Demmers 2002: 86).

In the context of conflicts of the 21st century, which are no longer fought or confined within the territorial borders they escalated from, conflicts are becoming dispersed and delocalised (Demmers 2002:85). Examples of the Tamil Tigers in London helping their counterparts in Sri Lanka, American Jewish groups supporting right-wing extremists in Israel, and German Croats supporting the collapse of Yugoslavia are representative of such conflicts and communication technologies have played a role in all these instances (Demmers 2002). The influence of these diaspora communities is often manifold and can take different political forms.

The Somali diaspora maintain links with family members back home primarily through economic support, but they are also active in the general reconstruction of the country. They make a major contribution to the Somali economy, sustaining livelihoods through remittances, humanitarian assistance and participation in recovery and reconstruction efforts (Menkhaus 2009). It is commonly acknowledged that the most successful migrant businesses arise in the crevices created by transnationalism - for example, shipping and cargo companies, import and export firms and labour contractors (Glick, Schiller et al. 1995. The Somali diaspora has utilised the improvements in

communication technology as the Internet in particular 'presented an opportunity for them to communicate, regroup, share views, help their groups at home and organise activities' (Issa-Salwe 2011: 54). But whilst these products of transnational media dissolve distance and suspend time, they create new and unpredictable forms of connection, identification and cultural affinity. The internet is also an opportunity to promote political identity and particular points of view through a new medium. The Somali websites that have sprung up in various parts of the world depict a deeply divided society, one that is at the same time both integrated and fragmented (Issa-Salwe 2011). As Lyons (2004) points out, conflict-generated diaspora groups are social networks that link past conflict, the contemporary challenges of living in a host state and an aspiration of return to a particular piece of territory that is the symbolically important homeland. He relates the advantages that cheap Internet communication and inexpensive telephone calls have for diaspora members.

Consequently, we witnessed a proliferation of Somali diasporic media (*hiiraan.com* in US, *somalitalk.com* in the US, *universalsomalitv.com* in UK and *oodweynenews.com* in Norway are some of the popular ones) particularly in the last decade, to meet the need of the Somali diaspora to obtain news from their homeland. Accompanying this phenomenon was a growth in the number of Somali journalists based in the diaspora, especially concentrated in the US, UK and Northern Europe. These journalists maintain close personal and professional relationships with Somalia and by extension with the Somali conflict, which is often of complex and multi-dimensional nature. This article is based on interviews conducted, as part of the author's PhD thesis which examined diasporic media involvement in the Somali conflict, between 2013-2014 with the journalists and producers to unpack and understand something of this complexity. The narratives of these interviews have

also been published as part of a book based on the author's PhD thesis titled 'Media, Diaspora and the Somali Conflict', published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2017.

There is a need for broader studies that examine the structures of operation, technological and ideological factors and a deeper look into the transnational milieu within which these journalists and producers work. What this article hopes to achieve, by identifying some of the issues concerning the role(s) diaspora-based Somali journalists play in the Somali conflict, is to spark interest and offset studies that can delve deeper into this under-researched yet topical subject.

Conflict and the mediated operations that re-create it

Diasporic media is often defined as the media produced by and for those of migrant backgrounds that live outside the borders of their homelands (Ogunyemi 2015). Their content focuses on matters that are of specific interest to diaspora communities. Current academic discourse regarding diasporic media often centres around its capabilities to help immigrants preserve their identities and maintain ties with their homeland. It is considered to be responding to the specific needs and conditions of immigrant communities as well as allowing a transnational bond to be created with countries of origin and therefore sustain ethnic, national and religious identities and cultures (Aksoy and Robins 2003: 93). While these notions hold much truth, diasporic media is doing more than that. They enact and perform conflict dynamics, actively shaping the constitutive nature of the conflict. It is these areas that require more academic attention to advance our understanding of the multifaceted role(s) diasporic media can play.

In the Somali case, this usually means news stories that deal with the on-going Somali conflict and the rebuilding of a collapsed nation. The Somali diaspora has established diasporic media to remain connected to their homeland as they still have meaningful ties there. They are particularly well positioned to engage with homeland activities. Since fleeing from civil war in the late 1980s and later on, the Somali diaspora has integrated into the West, used the opportunities of better infrastructure and technologies presented by the new environments and thereby attained resources vital to remaining connected to their homeland. In this, they have become part of what Appadurai refers to as the 'emerging new global cultural ecumene' (Appadurai 1990: 5). Somali diasporic media is often used and remediated by the domestic media in Somalia. This means that domestic Somali media can act as an echo chamber for views that originate from outside the country. It also warrants diasporic media a certain level of influence and allows them to occupy a hegemonic position within the Somali media landscape (Gaas, Hansen and Berry 2012: 6). To study their involvement in homelands in conflict is therefore an important part of understanding the multifaceted transnational roles that diasporic media can play.

The study that this article is informed by, which is an extensive examination of Somali diasporic media involvement in the Somali conflict (Osman 2015), has found that although there is a lot of mediated effort to provide platforms for developmental and humanitarian progress, much of the day-to-day involvement leads to the re-creation of the conflict among the diaspora communities.

Conflict re-creation becomes a possibility when the sentiments and dynamics forming the root causes of the conflict are reproduced through the media. The Somali conflict is, broadly speaking, rooted in poverty and unequal access to resources, clannism and external

interventions. When the media re-enacts the silencing of the poor and marginalised sections of society, it reinforces the injustices already established by the conflict. Equally, when media platforms reproduce existing clan tensions and alliances, they can encourage relationships of conflict-centred connections and disconnections leading to clannism practices that have been part of the Somali conflict's root causes. The mediated operationalisation of conflict root causes that encourage the enactment of existing conflict dynamics can also lead to the conflict being re-created through the media.

The collapse of the state fractured Somali society. In their place came factionalised entities and conflicts based on traditional clan alliances. The conflict perpetuated existing social inequalities and unequally shared resources. It also drew a foray of international actors, each with vested interests, engaging and intervening in multifaceted ways, including western-centric approaches that were often incompatible with existing local politics, social norms and cultures. These various groups have engaged diasporic media to further their political ambitions, clan interests and ideological causes. The diaspora communities are therefore not only receiving information on progress and happenings in their homeland; they are also invited to engage with the dynamics of the conflict. Between 1989 and 2004, 94% of worldwide violent conflicts revolved around inter-group or group-state disputes (Harbom and Wallensteen 2005). As identity groups are at the core of most contemporary conflicts (Demmers 2007), analysing how diaspora groups are invited to participate in conflicts through diasporic media is especially important in modern times.

Diaspora-based journalists are an important component of how diasporic media re-creates the conflict. They reap the advantages of living in a safe and secure environment without fear of being killed or

persecuted as well as benefiting from advanced technological infrastructures (Osman 2015). There appear to be (at least) four structural factors in conflict-centred diasporic media operations that could lead to conflict re-creation:

1. Ownership privilege
2. Poor levels of accountability
3. Conflict-embroiled elites as primary definers
4. Economic advantages of war reporting

Ownership privilege

Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (1988) illustrated the penetrative role of owners in their propaganda model and highlighted how corporate values and central aims of owners are imbedded within the professional decision-making processes. This can also be found in the Somali media. The Somali journalists interviewed for this study have raised concerns about owners' input on editorial content and story selection, especially as it relates to owners giving priority to clan-centred and political stories. One journalist, who works for a London-based Somali media outlet, explained the financial benefit behind the prioritising of these kinds of stories:

> *"The importance of news items is determined by the owner. News is important if he states it is important. This means news items that relate to the selection or crowning of a new clan elder, stories covering a clan event or a particular business and political events like a politician hosting a meeting or an event get selected. These stories generate financial income as those that are being covered are willing to pay so we don't bother with background checks and balance."* – London-based Somali journalist

The financial lure of these types of stories has also trickled down to the journalists based inside Somalia, which adds to the volume of news reports diaspora journalists receive, creating a daily newsreel that is often dominated by political stories.

The involvement of owners in story selection seems to be a professional burden for some of the journalists who wish to focus on covering stories that serve public interests. One of them, who works for a media outlet in Birmingham, related the difficulty that journalists face every working day with regards to balancing owners' priorities and their own sense of duty:

> *"The conflict between owners and us is an ongoing battle and this is intensified when the owner does not come from a media background or doesn't have an understanding of how journalism works. My sense of duty regularly clashes with the owner's demands because he wants to make editorial judgements that serve political elites rather than the interests of our listeners. He also employs whoever he wants without them being qualified to do the jobs they're being hired for, which creates clashes between colleagues as well."* – Birmingham-based Somali journalist.

Owners giving editorial salience to news stories paid for by political elites are problematic on many fronts but there are two that are particularly troubling in relation to our discussion on conflict re-creation:

1. The political elite in Somali affairs are those that are in some form involved in the current conflict
2. Prioritising their news ensures their power to shape the narrative and direction of the Somali conflict

News selection based on representing the political players that have paid the most produces a hierarchy of representative power, one based on the players with the most capital having the biggest voice. In the context of Somali affairs this often translates into the dominant clans being the most represented. This re-creates the existing marginalisation of less powerful clans and re-ignites antagonism between clans on media platforms (Osman 2015).

Poor levels of accountability

As the conflict coincided with improved communication technology, the appetite for war reporting has become insatiable. Lasswell noted in 1927 how one British observer commented after the First World War that 'war not only creates a supply of news but a demand for it' (Lasswell 1927: 192). Mass media affords the public a more widely accessible way of witnessing conflict. What has come forth in the interviews is that this mass access to the public is enjoyed with an almost non-existent sense of accountability on the part of the journalists. This is interesting, as many of them would take a critical approach with regards to how their owners operate but seems to be less inclined to take a similar approach towards themselves.

They see it as an opportunity that brings them deeper levels of freedom in comparison to pre-civil war media reporting. This kind of reporting seems to be exercised especially when feelings of non-representation at government level start to surface as one Birmingham-based producer explains:

> *"I don't like how my people aren't represented in the Somali government. I hardly see anyone that I can relate to. So I have no problems highlighting their problems. I feel pressure from my*

clansmen too to underline that we aren't represented which drives the way I do some of the reports." – Birmingham-based producer

In addition to the lack of representation, poor levels of accountability seem to also be fed by financial uncertainty. Many journalists have related how they are not guaranteed sufficient salaries from their employers and often have to find ways to mitigate insufficient income, which may loosen their approach towards ethical reporting.

The issue of accountability in the context of diaspora-based Somali journalists, as can be seen, is a complex matter that shows the clan-based survival mechanisms journalists have developed to cover the news of a conflict-ridden homeland. But we also see the fragility of those mechanisms when one comes from clans that fall outside of the power bloc. We see how journalists and owners sometimes exercise the same logic to seek financial income. What these instances all have in common is how journalistic accountability can be pushed to the side to accommodate for working and surviving in a conflict-centred media environment.

Conflict-embroiled elites as primary definers

Hall et al (1978) highlighted the importance of how professional rules give rise to the practice of ensuring that the media is grounded in objective reporting and, where possible, authoritative statements are obtained from accredited sources. This culture sets a precedence of constantly turning to representatives of major social and political institutions because of the authority and institutional power their position grants them. The late Stuart Hall and his colleagues point out the irony of these very rules, which aim to preserve the impartiality of the media, and which grew out of desires for greater professional neutrality. In practice, these rules serve powerfully to orientate the

media in the 'definitions of social reality', which their 'accredited sources' – the institutional spokesmen – provide (Hall et al 1978: 57). The practical pressure of working against the clock and the professional demands of impartiality and objectivity combine to create a systematically structured over-accessing granted to those in power and elite positions, thereby reproducing symbolically the existing structure of power in society's institutional order. The result of this structured preference given in the media to the opinions of the powerful is that these 'spokesmen' become the primary definers of topics (Hall et al 1978: 58). Lance Bennet (1990) builds on this premise and illustrates how mass media news professionals tend to "index" the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic (Bennett 1990: 106).

This working hypothesis implies that "other" (i.e., non-official) voices filling out the potential universe of news sources are included in news stories and editorials when those voices express opinions already emerging in official circles. Thus, the media becomes what Bennett refers to as 'keepers of official records'. In the context of Somalia, although there is growing evidence of non-powerful groups and individuals finding alternative ways to get their voices heard, it is more common to find both Hall and Bennett's hypotheses unfolding in the form of prominent members of the international community, major clans and central and regional administrations being the primary sources that shape Somali news. Journalists interviewed for this study explained how events related to those primary sources are also headline news. Here is an account from one journalist/producer who works for a media outlet in London:

> *"Deaths, kidnappings and injuries of prominent members of the Somali government and the international community will take priority in our daily news coverage. We also give preference to international conferences that focus on Somalia such as the 2012 London conference. Headlining news would also include work that the UN and its agencies are carrying out. During the famine period for example, related events and issues would often be the headlining news, especially if international countries and donors pledged large sums of money or aid. We also gave the same prominence to meetings, events and conferences that addressed the famine and were organised by international community members."* – London-based journalist/producer

When asked who the most frequently featured newsmakers were, the journalists either stated international community members or Somali government officials or both. This hegemonic focus on elite figures creates a hierarchy of primary definers which side-lines the need for balance and plurality of voices. It reinstates the existing social inequality that the conflict produced where those who are silenced, continue to be silenced.

Economic advantage of war reporting

War reporting often produces the dilemma to appear nationalistic and reconciliatory but also to be critical and not necessarily fall in line with the official government rhetoric. There is also the added pressure to increase audience that can translate into profitable shows and programs. The Somali journalists explained that they particularly feel the pressure to generate audience, which often leads to them framing stories and producing programs to purposefully incite existing antagonism. A London-based journalist says:

> *"The stories that feature two opposing clans generate audiences because members of those two clans would want to hear what their representative has to say and what the opposing clan member is accusing them of. We have several programs at our station that work within this framework. These programmes are put on our website and YouTube as well to diversify and further increase audiences."* - London-based journalist

Sometimes viewers complain about these programs but the journalist thought that these complaints were misplaced and journalists are not responsible for what the guests decide to say on air:

> *"The live discussions, especially the ones with in-house guests often cause complaints because the guests will praise their clan and progress that has been made in their towns and regions and speak ill of other clans that they have hostilities with. The viewers whose clan has been disrespected think of us as being responsible for that and log a complaint. We make a disclaimer at the beginning of the programs where we state we are not responsible for what people say but at the same time we warn participants to be respectful but we can't promise they will listen. This is mostly done for financial reasons as these types of reports generate large volumes of audiences and attract advertising."*- London-based journalist

There seems to be a misunderstanding of what journalists are responsible for, which is rooted in most of them lacking professional training in journalism ethics and practice as well as a poor general educational background. Pitting two opposing groups against each other can, at the very least, re-create the 'us-vs-them' dimension of the conflict but this can also very easily erupt into violent outbreaks.

Conclusion

This article's key aim was to present how journalists in their reporting can re-create conflict but it has also highlighted how owners meddling with editorial decision making for financial purposes can contribute to the re-creation of conflict as well. This is chiefly done through giving importance to key conflict dynamics such as political disputes, marginalisation of minority groups and voices, clan antagonisms and events which when transported to their audiences, becomes manifested and re-created.

There is also a general sense of lack of accountability on the part of both the owners as well as the journalists. The journalists tend to see this as a type of freedom effectively giving them free reign to air their political and ideological standpoints and this in and of itself can fuel certain aspects of the conflict and recreate it. This is particularly dangerous when journalists do not feel politically represented which manifests in them feelings of powerlessness, marginalisation and a lack of recognition.

The third highlighted factor was that of elite sourcing and tendency to prioritise elite stories. Journalists expressed a unanimous sentiment of international community members and Somali government officials being seen as the primary news definers. It creates unequal accessibility and a hierarchical mindset amongst the Somali public. It also reinforces the existing social inequality which further marginalises the voices of the less powerful members of society and authorises the elite members as being more important than ordinary citizens.

The final factor that this article shed light on was the need to generate audiences. There is a tremendous appetite for conflict-driven topics, particularly when hostilities can become apparent. There seems to be a

misunderstanding of what journalists think they are responsible for as complaints have been raised by audiences about these topics but the journalists shrug it off and place the responsibility on the guests of the shows.

Some of these factors particularly that of accountability and responsibility can be traced to the journalists' lack of professional training with poor education. Furthermore, there is not a regulatory body that journalists and owners feel accountable to since there are not viable regulatory bodies established in Somalia. With regards to regulatory bodies in their host countries, this study has shown that whilst laws and regulatory frameworks exist, there is a need for implementation.

In sum, what this study has highlighted is that although diasporic media is helpful in providing platforms for development and reconstruction efforts, which is especially important for homelands in conflict, it is playing a bigger than what current scholarship has warranted. Diasporic media also preserves immigrant identities, cultures and tradition. They can play a performative role in enacting conflict-laden sentiments and reinforce war produced identities that then comes alive many thousands of miles from where the conflict is taking place.

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