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From watchdog to lapdog?

The impact of government intimidation on the public watchdog
performance of peace media in processes of democratisation

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MSc in Media, Communication and Development

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From watchdog to lapdog?

The impact of government intimidation on the public watchdog performance of peace media in processes of democratisation

Michael Spiess

ABSTRACT

Despite increasing literature on the role of media in processes of democratisation, the field suffers from considerable research gaps. Not only is Africa neglected and the Central African Republic unexplored, but intimidation, a key obstacle to media watchdogging, has been scantily researched, and more knowledge is needed of peace media as potential facilitators of democratic transition.

To tackle these gaps, the article explores the case of Radio Ndeke Luka, a UN-backed peace radio in the Central African Republic. It investigates whether government intimidation influences the radio's public watchdog role and, if so, in what ways and to what extent, and whether and how the support of a European NGO and the UN influence the impact of the intimidation. The conceptual framework for framing these questions is established by applying the media watchdog theory to processes of democratisation and interweaving it with peace-oriented media and Althusserian theory. The empirical data are gained through twelve semi-structured individual telephone interviews with journalists, an editorial delegate, local civil society representatives, a former diplomat and the Central African Minister of Justice.

The study shows that government intimidation does not transform Radio Ndeke Luka into a lapdog but significantly reduces its bite. It is argued that protecting journalists from intimidation so that they can best act as watchdogs not only requires long-term efforts to change cultures and systems that breed press violence, but also necessitates new approaches that may lead to faster and smaller scale results. Other conclusions include a need for more differentiated knowledge of intimidation and for more empirical evidence to assess the importance of media watchdogs in practice.

INTRODUCTION

As a former communications consultant to the United Nations (UN) in the Central African Republic (CAR), I clearly recall how local journalists performed their work in spite of the adverse circumstances imposed on them by the country's barely successful democratic trajectory. CAR was ruled by autocrats from its decolonisation in the 1960s until the early 1990s, when the ruling dictator succumbed to growing pressures and allowed the country to enter the 'liberalisation phase' of the democratisation process, as characterized by bolder civic rights and the emergence of a formal political opposition (Freedom House, 2007; Ghura & Mercereau, 2004). The first democratic presidential elections were held in 1993 (Mehler, 2005), signposting CAR's entry into the 'democratisation phase' of the process. To boost this process, and to sensitise the population for the second presidential elections to be held in 1999, the UN Mission in CAR established Radio MINURCA in 1998 (Biener, n.d.). When MINURCA's peace-keeping mandate came to an end after peaceful elections in 2000, Radio MINURCA was taken over and transformed into Radio Ndeke Luka (RNL) by Hironnelle, a Swiss non-governmental organisation. The newly created radio was financially supported by the international community and operated 'under the aegis of the United Nations' (RNL website, n.d., n.p., a; Hironnelle website, n.d., a). It was reborn as a so-called peace-oriented media (Hironnelle website, n.d., a) whose aim is to contribute to peacekeeping and democratisation.

Today, the objectives of peacekeeping and democratisation remain essential for CAR. The country has yet to proceed to the 'consolidation phase' of the democratisation process, marked by a power handover among democratically elected governments (Randall, 1993). CAR has seen numerous undemocratic setbacks, notably a coup d'état in 2003 by the current president François Bozizé. There have been some improvements (UNHCR, 2008; HDPT, 2008b; UNESCO 2007b,d), but the country has achieved neither the structural preconditions nor the democratic culture needed for consolidation (Freedom House, 2007; International Crisis Group, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2007). Rather, it is part of what Rakner et al. (2007: 13f) refer to as 'hybrid regimes' that are 'stuck in incomplete democratisation processes'.

It is therefore obvious that RNL has been unable to transform CAR into a democracy. Nonetheless, my own research suggests that RNL has contributed to the democratisation process; it not only offered impartial information and fostered democratic culture, it also set and framed the agenda and acted as a watchdog (Spiess, 2009a). Colleagues, however, highlighted that RNL journalists have suffered from verbal and physical violence, particularly from the government and the military. This was the impetus to investigate whether

government and military intimidation influences RNL's public watchdog performance – this is particularly significant because RNL is the only impartial media outlet available throughout the country (U.S. Department of State, 2008a; BBC, 2008).

To conceptually frame this research topic, the 'media watchdog theory' is applied to processes of democratisation and interwoven with both 'peace-oriented media' and Louis Althusser's notion of 'Repressive State Apparatuses'. This multi-theoretical approach captures the peculiarities of RNL, conceptualises the impact of government intimidation and provides insights regarding several fields of study.

This article aims to contribute to the existing knowledge in several ways. Most importantly, it seeks to shed light on the impact of government intimidation on the public watchdog performance of media. As anti-press violence in general, intimidation has been 'understudied and undertheorized' (Waisbord, 2002: 92). In so doing, the paper also attempts to address the little explored role of media organizations in democratisation processes (Hyden & Leslie, 2002; Voltmer, 2001) and the absence of systematic research on this topic for the African context in particular (see Ogundimu, 2002). I further attempt to tackle the academic neglect of African journalism (Wassermann & de Beer, 2009), address the lack of knowledge about the media in CAR¹ and foster an increase in the generally sparse knowledge of the country.

Another objective is to offer fresh empirical insights regarding the mostly normatively and theoretically discussed media watchdog role and Althusserian theory (his concepts of *Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses* were developed in 1971 and reprinted unrevised in 2008). The paper also hopes to shed light on peace journalism and address its neglected limitations and the dearth of empirical research (see Lee et al., 2006: 501), and to offer insights on whether interviews can help research press violence, although they have been little used to investigate the impact of intimidation, with some exceptions (e.g. IREX ProMedia, 2000).

The article proceeds in four sections. The theoretical chapter synthesises the relevant theoretical and empirical literature to establish the conceptual framework and highlight the research questions. The ensuing methodological section explains why and how individual, semi-structured telephone interviews have been used and discusses the methodology and

¹ This article is the first piece of academic research devoted entirely to CAR's media. This neglect is well illustrated by Nyamnjoh's (2005) three-hundred-page book on media and democracy in Africa, which fails to mention CAR even once. In terms of non-academic work, most press freedom organisations have not been working on the country or have not included it in their annual reports for several years (e.g. Article XIX; Reporters without Borders).

limitations of the study. The third part presents and discusses the results of the empirical work, while the conclusion outlines the contributions and implications of the study, as well as the directions for further research.

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

This chapter is divided into a review of the existing literature, a section establishing the conceptual framework, and one that explains the design and methodology of this piece of research.

Literature Review

Media Watchdogs in Processes of Democratisation

Watchdog journalism (WJ) is here understood as what is elsewhere referred to as investigative journalism, although it is merely one of the types of journalism encompassed by the latter (Coronel, 2009). The term ‘investigative journalism’ was rejected because it ‘reflect[s] experiences and practices in the United States’ (Waisbord, 2000: xix), albeit the concept has quite a different meaning in an African context where western liberal democracy is neither achieved nor necessarily desirable (Nyamnjoh, 2005).

Investigative journalism, or what is here understood as WJ, has been conceptualised in different ways. Gaines (1994) and Aucoin (1995), for example, characterise it through its methodological approach to newsgathering, while Protess et al. (1991) see the distinctiveness of investigative journalism in its consequences. Both approaches are flawed, as information for muckraking need not necessarily be doggedly dug out and ineffective exposure journalism can nevertheless be seen as watchdogging (Waisbord, 2000: xix). I therefore rather follow Coronel (2009: 3), who conceptualises WJ as reporting that serves ‘the exposure of wrongdoing in the public interest’, although it is of course impossible to ‘set down absolute rules, saying this is watchdog journalism and nothing else is watchdog journalism’ (Marder, n.d., n.p.). This definition is also echoed by Tettey (2009: 7) and Waisbord (2000: xix). It is preferred to that of Bennett and Serrin (2005: 169) because it emphasises that watchdogs not only provide information but particularly focus on malfeasance, which is closer to my research focus.

The conception of the media as a fourth estate is closely linked to the famous arguments of John Stuart Mill (2005) for the freedom of expression and the philosophy of press freedom,

without which media watchdogs could barely bark. Although originating in a liberal democratic context, the watchdog notion can also be applied to other contexts, not least because the media can contribute to each phase of the democratisation process and to good governance (Coronel, 2009). In fact, wakening watchdogs can facilitate the initialisation of the liberalisation phase by criticising autocrats and helping to establish a culture of constructive criticism (Myers, 1998; Randall, 1993), more mature watchdogs may expose electoral malpractice during the first democratic elections, and even more established watchdogs can bark against die-hard authoritarian habits, thereby contributing to the smooth handover of power among democratically elected governments, which marks the entry into the consolidation phase of the democratization process (Randall, 1993).

While media watchdogs can therefore contribute to each phase of democratisation and in several ways, including policy-making and law abidance, their main contribution is to hold powerful actors accountable. This is particularly true of governments. According to Voltmer (2008), government accountability depends on how much the media act as watchdogs. This argument is supported by the negative correlation between press freedom and undemocratic ills and exemplified by cases such as the media-triggered dismissal of corrupt presidents (Brunetti & Weder, 2003; Odugbemi & Norris, 2009; Ahrend, 2002; Coronel, 2009).

CAR is therefore in need of loud watchdogs that contribute to its democratisation. Media muckrakers could do more than lessen the ‘extensive opacity of government transactions in Africa’ that obstructs the surveillance of government by citizens (Tettey, 2009: 3). They could also remedy CAR’s membership of what Waisbord (2000: 247) describes as countries ‘with bulging files on abuses but spotty accountability records’. One could even argue that watchdogs are more important in CAR than in established democracies, where state authority is usually subject to close scrutiny and strong law enforcement institutions (Curran, 2006).

But the media can also harm fledgling democracies. Excessive criticism and ‘attack dog’ journalism (Voltmer, 2009: 5), which is common in CAR, nurture intolerance and diminish faith in democracy and democratic leaders. Unprofessional and unethical watchdogs can erode trust in the media, thereby undermining a vital ingredient for a well-informed citizenry (Tettey, 2006). Also, sensational and ‘adversarial watchdogism’ causes detrimental frictions (Louw, 2005: 64) and journalists in need of sensational stories, coupled with informants who strategically leak information, reinforce the power of elites rather than holding them accountable (Waisbord, 2000). Many of these phenomena apply particularly to emerging democracies and their deficient media markets and lack of professionalism. CAR, for example, scores as low as 1.38 on the IREX (2007) professionalisation scale.

There are also considerable challenges to muckraking in emerging democracies and countries stuck in transition.² Not only because journalists behave ‘like prisoners whose prison suddenly disappeared’ at the end of autocratic rule (Smid, quoted in Randall, 1998: 643), but also due to insufficient equipment and financing, lack of organisational capacity and professional associations, as well as limited media pluralism and poor journalistic commitment and audience reach. Newspapers in CAR, for example, are limited to the capital’s wealthy and literate elite (Freedom House, 2008).

Perhaps the most important obstacle to watchdogging in emerging democracies, however, is a hostile government. This can manifest through explicit or implicit censorship (e.g. Radio-Télévision Centrafrique), blocking access to public information, instrumentalisation through advertising pressures, repressive legal frameworks, violation of liberal laws or, where press offences are decriminalised, as in the Central African Republic, the use of criminal or civil libel suits (IREX, 2007; Freedom House, 2008; Reporters without Borders, 2008a; Tettey, 2001, 2009; Ogundimu, 2002; Open Society Institute, 2008). Arguably, intimidation is among the most significant challenges to muckraking, and one to which RNL journalists have also been subjected. This is undoubtedly widely due to RNL’s conception as a peace radio and the intimidation-triggering watchdog role that results from this.

Radio Ndeke Luka: a watchdog peace media

The notion of peace journalism, introduced in the 1970s by political scholar Johan Galtung, denotes a journalistic approach that is distinct from war and mainstream journalism. As Lynch & McGoldrick highlight (2005: 271), peace journalism is not just peace-oriented (vs. war-oriented) and focused on the truth (rather than propaganda). It is also people-oriented (vs. elite-oriented) and presents solutions (rather than victories), which makes the reporting of peace media conflict-sensitive rather than conflict-exacerbating. RNL, for its part, is clearly committed to peace journalism, not least because it is backed by the UN. Particularly relevant for our purpose is RNL’s truth-orientation, which includes performing a watchdog role (ibid) and is probably the main reason for its muckraking activities.

² In liberal democracies challenges to watchdogging are different but perhaps no smaller. They notably include increasing trivialisation and sensationalisation, which leaves little space for watchdogging (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Curran & Seaton, 2003), media owners who seek beneficial relationships with governments as they depend on them as reliable and constant sources of information (Herman & Chomsky, 2002), and avoidance of corporate criticism due to corporate ownership or intertwined interests and executives (Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Curran, 2005; Curran & Seaton, 2003).

Peace journalism has received wider attention in recent years and has become a guiding principle of several peace media, and peace radios in particular. Besides RNL in CAR, this includes Radio UNTAC in Cambodia, Radio Okapi in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Radio Miraya in Sudan, Cotton Tree News in Sierra Leone and Radio UNMIR in Rwanda (Bratic, 2008a). In addition to their focus on promoting peace, these media are also the result of top-down initiatives and have been established and/or supported by the UN. These similarities to the structure of RNL suggest that the results of this study may to some extent be relevant for UN-supported peace media more generally.³

As a peace media that exposes the ills of CAR, RNL barks particularly but not exclusively against the government, which is one of the country's most important wrongdoers. RNL is a direct government watchdog in that it reports official misconduct (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2004) but, more indirectly, it also scrutinizes the government by reviewing government-critical articles published in the printed press (ibid) and helping citizens denounce official misconduct on air, such as a gang-rape by presidential guards (Hirondelle, 2003). RNL is also an indirect watchdog in denouncing poverty and social inequality by giving voice to marginal women and street children (RNL website, n.d., b) and enabling regime-critical talk shows where participants can even accuse the president of tribalism and clanism (Patara, n.d.). That RNL is indeed a barky government watchdog, be it directly or indirectly, is highlighted by the fact that the population considers that it broadcasts state secrets and that it is the 'Best Protector of Human Rights' (Hirondelle website, n.d., b; Manengou, 2006).

Intimidation and the Central African Republic's Repressive State Apparatuses

Such muckraking challenges the government. This can be through tangible results, as in helping to identify rape perpetrators (Sapey, 2003), or more subtle accomplishments, such as strengthening opposition to official misconduct. This can threaten the permanently contested ideological hegemony that governments must maintain to rule legitimately, as Gramsci pointed out (see Morton, 2007).

³ Peace media are interesting not just because their mushrooming in developing countries is a very recent phenomenon. Such media are also noteworthy because they are run by civil society and backed by the UN, and thus they highlight the inappropriateness of the still widely shared market vs. state dichotomy of media. Furthermore, peace media support the argument for a multi-theoretical approach to alternative media (see Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier: 2008) as they are best understood as 'alternative media' but do not fit with any mono-theoretical approach.

It comes as no surprise that the ruling elite therefore attempts to control the media, which are considered to be key vectors in the ideological struggle (Althusser, 2008). As a consequence, the media mostly promote ‘the ideology of “the ruling class”’ (ibid: 20). The influential Neo-Marxist Louis Althusser therefore sees media organizations as *Ideological State Apparatuses* (ISAs) that serve the reproduction of the capitalist and exploitative status quo, alongside other ISAs such as the educational system, religious organisations, the legal and political system, family and culture.

To tame insubordinates, ruling elites employ what Althusser terms *Repressive State Apparatuses* (RSA). Consisting of the legal system, imprisonment, the police and the military, ISAs aim to discipline opponents of the dominant ideology, the state and the status quo. The use of RSAs and threats to do so are precisely the reaction of CAR’s authorities to critical journalism. Officially, CAR’s president acknowledges that ‘good democracy needs an active and efficient press which correctly informs citizens about state affairs’ (UNESCO, 2007a: n.p.). Bozizé symbolically donated money to RNL on Press Freedom Day (Hirondelle, 2009). As a matter of fact, however, ministers warned journalists to remember ‘that not every truth should be told’ (Reporters Without Borders, 2004, n.p.), vowed to ‘re-establish censorship in order to educate journalists’ (Article 19, 2005: n.p.), and even threatened to kill journalists ‘like flies’ (IREX, 2007: n.p.).

Due to its watchdog function, RNL has been particularly targeted, finding itself regularly ‘at odds with the political authorities, security forces and pressure groups’ (IPDC, 2004). Its journalists have suffered much intimidation by government and military officials without a day going by ‘without a telephone call or interference from the military’ (Human Rights Tribune, 2007). The home of a journalist was ‘raided by the military’ (IREX, 2007: 66), another was almost kidnapped by presidential guards (interview Momet, 2005), and five were threatened with arrest by a corrupt minister criticised in RNL’s press review (CPJ, 2004), while two journalists were threatened with death by members of the presidential guard (Amnesty International, 2005). Such intimidation by government and military officials equals the use of RSAs or threats to do so. It is clear that the objective is to curb the RNL’s watchdog role and maintain the ideology of the government, in this case the use and toleration of undemocratic practices.

It remains unclear, however, whether and how this intimidation influences the watchdog performance of RNL. Organisations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, Amnesty International, Reporters without Borders and Human Rights Watch meticulously document attacks on journalists, and journalists discuss intimidation for numerous countries (Mtetwa,

2007; Maja-Pearce, 1994; Chobanoglu, 2009; Gonzalez-Foerster, 1994; Chanel, 1994; Campbell, 2008). However, these sources are mostly limited to anecdotal evidence.

Academic research has even less to offer. Many scholars content themselves with making general assertions. Tettey, for example, claims that autocracies often succeed in reducing the bite of media watchdogs (2009: 15), Waisbord asserts that intimidation 'drives reporters to self-censorship' (2007: 119), and Coronel argues that intimidation fails to entirely silence muckrakers (2009: 6). Much academic debate also implicitly or explicitly assumes that intimidation does have an impact on journalists. Regrettably, it does so without systematically and empirically researching whether this is truly the case and, if so, to what extent and in what ways (see e.g. Waisbord, 2001; 2002).

Violence against the press has therefore been neglected (Waisbord, 2002: 92), particularly with regards to emerging democracies. The few available insights (e.g. IREX ProMedia, 2000) cannot be further generalised to CAR because 'muckraking cannot be examined apart from larger institutional dynamics' (Waisbord, 2000: xxiv) as the impact of intimidation *inter alia* depends on the health of a democracy and its media market (IREX ProMedia, 2000).

With CAR being unexamined, it remains unclear whether intimidation of RNL journalists impacts their willingness to bark. De Beer et al. assert that journalists generally just 'go on reporting as if nothing had happened' (quoted in Ogundimu, 2002: 217), but RNL journalists themselves confess that they 'remain fearful' of being 'arrested at any time' (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2004).

Conceptual framework

Against this backdrop, the article aims to investigate whether intimidation influences RNL's watchdog performance and, if so, in what ways and to what extent. Press intimidation is here understood as verbal or physical violence and threats against RNL journalists, although it could be seen to include fines, confiscations, denial of authorisation renewals and so forth. My scope is further confined to researching intimidation by the government and the military (which are RSAs in Althusser's sense), as authorities are often the principal wrongdoers and intimidators in emerging democracies.

To address this research aim, four theories are interwoven into a conceptual framework:

- the media watchdog theory
- media in processes of democratisation
- peace-oriented media
- Althusser's notion of *Repressive State Apparatuses*

The watchdog theory is applied to media in democratisation processes to take into account the fact that CAR is stuck in transition, and that the challenges RNL faces in its muckraking are very different from those in established democracies. The notion of peace media is needed to embed RNL in its ideological context and explain its watchdog commitment. And the media watchdog theory and Althusser's concept of RSAs - in spite of or perhaps thanks to their different origins – enable a conceptually grounded analysis of the power exercised by RNL on the government and vice versa. In fact, the watchdog concept captures RNL's check on government (exposing its wrongdoings and threatening its ideological hegemony), and Althusser's RSAs help conceptualise the government's reaction (intimidation to curb RNL's watchdog role).

Research objectives

Based on this conceptual framework, the primary research question can now be rephrased and complemented by sub-questions:

1. *Does the intimidation by CAR's government, that is, the use of its Repressive State Apparatuses, or the threat to do so, impact the public watchdog performance of RNL? If so,*
2. *In what ways do CAR's Repressive State Apparatuses impact the government watchdog performance of RNL? And*
3. *To what extent do CAR's Repressive State Apparatuses impact the government watchdog performance of RNL? And*
4. *Does the support of a European NGO and the UN influence the impact of intimidation and, if so, how?*

In addition to responding to these questions, the study aims to shed light on the role of the media in processes of democratisation, particularly in the scantily researched African context. The scholarly neglect of African journalism (see Wassermann & de Beer, 2009: 430) and the absence of academic research on the media in CAR shall further be tackled. In so doing, I also aim to foster knowledge of CAR, which has been neglected by the development community (IRIN, 2008) and academics alike, although there are a few exceptions (e.g. Mehler, 2005,

2009; Titley, 2002). Another objective is to provide empirical insights regarding the still influential Neo-Marxist Althusserian theory and the much-heralded media watchdog theory. The paper further addresses the neglected limitations to peace journalism and the dearth of empirical research on the topic (see Lee et al., 2006: 501), and it seeks insights as to whether interviews can be fruitfully applied to research the impact of anti-press violence.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter successively outlines the research strategy and procedures and critically evaluates the limitations of the study.

Research Strategy

Personal experience (memories of being a RNL listener and exchanges with other listeners) and documentary evidence (various reports and recordings of RNL programmes) were used as information sources. As they do not allow for the answering of research questions by themselves, however, they were triangulated with interviews, the primary research method.⁴ Online methods, critical policy analysis, secondary data analysis and visual media analysis were rejected, since they do not provide answers to the research question. Content and critical discourse analysis would have been unsuitable as only a selection of current broadcasts, partly in the local language, is available (see RNL website, n.d., c).⁵ Combining interviews with ethnographic observation would have been desirable, to enable personal observation and complement potentially biased self-reported interview data (Deacon et al., 2007). However, travelling to CAR was rejected due to financial reasons and as it remained highly uncertain whether the short observation period would coincide with intimidations.

Among the various forms of interview structures, semi-structured questioning was selected. Structured interviews were rejected because they constrain respondents to predefined questions and thereby limit exploration of complex issues due to obstructing follow-up questions and the emergence of unforeseen topics, and because they pose challenges to rephrasing questions to ensure appropriate understanding (Möhring & Schluetz, 2008). Unstructured questioning, which is an alternative that encourages self-reflection by

⁴ Three current or former RNL journalists were interviewed for the pilot study (Spiess, 2009b). The data obtained is also used for this article.

⁵ Even if a wider range of broadcasts was available, critical discourse and content analysis would remain of limited use as they cannot explain possible changes in editorial stance or attribute them to intimidation. Moreover, evidence of self-censorship, that is, critical stories which may not have been broadcast to avoid intimidation, could not have been captured.

respondents and maximises data richness (Deacon et al., 2007), was also rejected. This form would have required more interviewing experience, poses a challenge to ensuring that all key aspects are covered and lends itself less well to telephone interviewing (Schroder et al., 2003; Möhring & Schluetz, 2008).

Individual interviews were preferred to group interviews. One reason for this is that they better capture the opinions and experiences of an individual person (Flick, 1998; Bauer & Gaskell, 2000), which is essential as intimidation may affect RNL journalists in different ways. Also, they do not require same-time availability of respondents and moderating group interviews by telephone is very challenging (Kvale, 1996; Deacon et al., 2007). Individual interviews were further preferred because they help to avoid risks linked to the presence of peers, including 'groupthink', a 'spiral of silence' or a stronger social desirability bias (see Schroder et al., 2003; Noelle-Neumann, 1984). The emotional accounts obtained during the pilot, for example, may not have been obtained in group interviews.

Finally, telephone questioning was selected over face-to-face interviewing and online interviews. Face-to-face interviews would clearly have been the most suitable. This is not only because they are the least exhausting and the most informative, but also because they offer visual cues and facilitate rapport development, thereby fostering the willingness of respondents to discuss sensitive topics. Face-to-face interviewing was nevertheless rejected because travelling to Africa is expensive and not all interviewees were available during the same period. Online interviews were rejected because several respondents lacked internet access, because spontaneous verbal cues cannot be analysed in written interviews, and since rapport development is more challenging. Furthermore, it takes more time to produce comprehensive responses in writing, which may lead to poorer data (Shuy, 2002; Deacon et al., 2007).

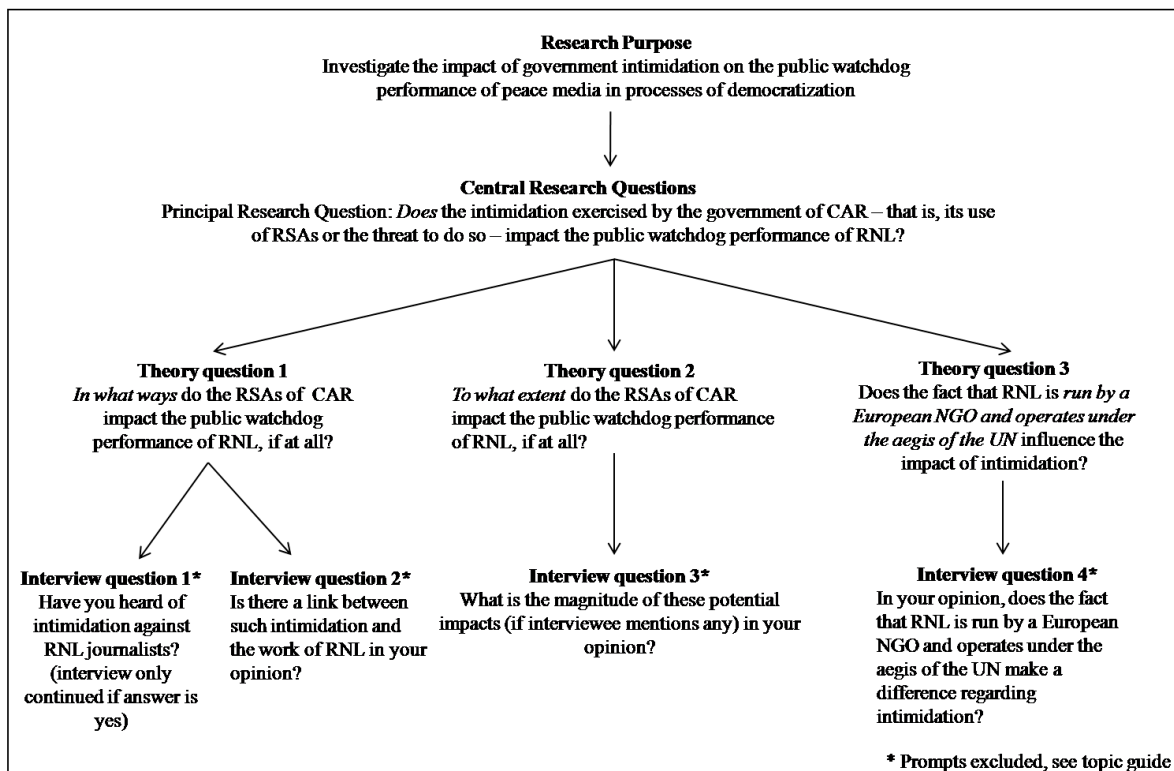
Research procedure

After an analysis of potential ethical concerns, a variety of respondents from different backgrounds were selected to best address the research questions. Interviewees notably included four current and former RNL journalists, in order to assess the impact of intimidation on their work. These interviewees were selected by an a priori research design (see Warren, 2002: 87f) which required that respondents were intimidated by government or military officials and that they work or have worked for RNL. The population of potential respondents was identified through press freedom reports on CAR, and the four selected RNL

journalists were determined by their availability (accessibility of contact details, etc.). As the self-reported behaviour of the interviewees bears the risk of social desirability bias, that is, underestimating the impact of intimidation, interviews were also conducted with other informants such as the editorial delegate at Hironnelle’s Swiss Headquarters, the former director of Radio-Télévision Centrafrique, the editor of a private daily, the Head of Catholic media, two local NGO representatives, a former diplomat and the Minister of Justice (the Minister of Post and Telecommunications refused an interview).⁶

The interview topic guides were developed on the basis of Wengraf’s pyramid model (2001: 63) and adapted to the different target groups. The pilot study had shown that this approach helps to systematically derive the interview questions from the central research question and the theoretical framework, thereby ensuring the validity of the topic guide.

Table 1: Development of the interview topic guide



Source: Own illustration, based on Wengraf’s pyramid model (Wengraf, 2001: 63)

The pilot study revealed that the topic guide should be shortened to ensure comprehensive responses. Therefore, only few questions were included, complemented by an introductory

⁶ All respondents except the interviewed RNL journalists, the Minister of Justice of CAR and Hironnelle’s editorial delegate were recruited by snowball sampling and according to their availability and familiarity with the topic. For a list of the conducted interviews refer to [p. 39](#).

section, a section on the respondent's background and a concluding section. Care was taken to create a dynamic topic guide that avoided double-barrelled, negative or leading questions, while using colloquial language and no loaded terms (see Kvale, 1996; Deacon et al., 2007; Schroder et al., 2003).

In conducting the interviews, I steered the discussion as recommended by Holstein and Gubrium (1997), while also following the advice of Kvale concerning 'openness to changes of sequence' (1996: 124). Disambiguation was frequently applied to clarify unclear statements, and the interviewing challenges included poor telephone lines, issues of control and the *spokesperson problem*, which is common in elite interviewing (Delaney, 2007).

A near-verbatim-representation was used to transcribe the interviews as the pilot highlighted that verbatim transcription was dispensable. The transcriptions were based on the conventions suggested by Flick (1998: 291f) and the transcripts were double-checked against the audio files to eliminate errors. Transcript anonymisation was only necessary in one case, where a respondent requested anonymity. While interviewees were given the author's contact details, they were not sent the transcript to avoid related concerns (see Poland, 2002).

As in the pilot, theory- and data-driven coding (Esterberg, 2002) have been combined to analyse the interview results. Theory-driven coding allowed the inclusion of elements from the interview schedule (e.g. impact of intimidation on reporting style), while open coding helped to identify elements that surfaced spontaneously in interviews (e.g. dismissal of government-critical RNL journalists, possibly caused by intimidation). Interview sections were categorised accordingly and analysed systematically. In terms of quotations, the rationale was to choose those that seemed to best reflect the interviewees' opinion, where a respondent was particularly articulate or where information was succinctly summarised.

Limitations

While the research methodology yielded valuable results, several research limitations must be acknowledged. In fact, triangulating interviews with ethnographic observation as well as content and discourse analysis would have enabled personal observation and detecting possible changes in editorial lines, respectively. It is also likely that face-to-face interviews would have provided richer results than telephone interviews, although the 'partial anonymity granted by the telephone' (Fenig et al., 1993: 896) may have enhanced the validity of responses. The concerns linked to elite interview data, the primary source of information

for this study, should also be acknowledged, although this could be limited by critically contrasting the opinions of several respondents (Delaney, 2007).

It would have been desirable to increase the number and range of respondents in order to gather complementary data, not only from audiences, but also from RNL journalists who had not been exposed to intimidation and from family members of exposed journalists. What is more, the impact of intimidation may not be fully captured due to the social desirability bias regarding self-censorship and government intimidation. This was particularly felt when interviewing current RNL journalists, the Minister of Justice of CAR and a foreign diplomat who interrupted the interview because the questions were 'quite delicate'. Allowing interview co-guidance by respondents, using subtle questions and the 'other people approach', as well as avoiding value-loaded terms such as self-censorship nevertheless helped with gaining intriguing insights.

It should further be noted that statements by other interviewees, for example assertions that changes in the radio's editorial stance are caused by intimidation, are opinions rather than factual evidence. In addition, they may be biased, for example in the case of a former editor-in-chief of RNL who, after being dismissed, was very critical towards his successor. Also, free participation was perhaps somewhat undermined, as RNL journalists may have felt pressurised to consent to be interviewed due to Headquarters' willingness to contribute to this research. Lastly, the fact that respondents knew about my former role as a consultant to the UN may have influenced their responses, particularly as RNL received much support from the international community. This potential bias could ideally have been tackled by using multiple interpreters (see Kvale, 1996).

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

This section outlines and discusses the results regarding each contribution the article seeks to make.

The impact of government intimidation on Radio Ndeke Luka's public watchdog performance

The first research question 'Does the intimidation exercised by CAR's government impact the public watchdog performance of RNL?' can be affirmed, as the response to the second research question shows:

The influence of the Repressive State Apparatuses of the Central African Republic on Radio Ndeke Luka's government watchdog performance

Avoidance of criticism

The interviews suggest that the RSAs of CAR reduce the watchdog performance of RNL because its journalists *avoid covering some critical topics* as a consequence. The editor-in-chief of RNL, Sylvie Panika, said she had not reported intimidation to local authorities or denounced them on air through fear. Timoléon Kokongo, Deputy Secretary-General of the NGO *Justice et Paix* and part-time collaborator with RNL, similarly asserts that when he discussed the death of former Gabon President Omar Bongo, who was close to President Bozizé, RNL's Head of Programming reminded him to stay within the framework of his citizenship programme and avoid such topics. This is particularly regrettable since Norris and Inglehart (2007) demonstrate that autocracies succeed in fostering popular support and antidemocratic values by silencing dissent in broadcast media.

Interviewees suggest that the *reporting style* of RNL is also affected by government intimidation. Mathurin Momet, editor-in-chief of the private daily *Le confident*, and Zéphyrin Kaya, a former Head of Programming at RNL, both say RNL has practiced some self-censorship regarding the murder of a police commissioner by a soldier as the radio station has not followed-up the story in depth due to the delicacy of the topic. Moreover, Zéphyrin Kaya and Tita Samba, a former editor-in-chief at RNL and a current adviser to the President of the National Assembly, suggest that newer journalists are discouraged from critical reporting as they 'have learned their lesson' from previously intimidated journalists,

which is a consequence of RSAs according to them.⁷ These examples are arguably attempts to avoid triggering RSAs and can therefore be interpreted as impacts of intimidation on the watchdog performance of RNL.

Impoverished programme scheme

The RSAs may also affect the watchdog performance of RNL by contributing to a shift of programming and a change in editorial line that are detrimental to watchdogging. Yves Laplume, the editorial delegate of Hironnelle, and Ms. Panika argue that these changes bring greater proximity to the population. Momet, however, sees this very differently:

There were contradictory debates, for example about democracy, and almost all parties were represented. The opposition, the power in place, unions. There were programmes about human rights (...) But now, is it still the same? I don't see any.

Bruno Gbiegba, the president of a local human rights NGO, confirms that RNL now offers 'other societal topics that are not as critical as before', and that only few 'political programmes' and denunciations of human rights abuses remain to be heard on the airwaves of RNL. This reflects the opinion of several interviewees. Asked why RNL has changed its programming in his opinion, Gbiegba says this is a consequence of RSAs:

Q: Do you see a link between the way topics are reported and intimidation?

IP: But this is logical. Because when you cave in to intimidation, you will also reorient most of your activities. This is only a logical consequence.

The existence of such a link is denied by Laplume and Panika, but several other respondents have similar opinions. Fernande Sakanot, a former Head of Programming at RNL and current Vice-President of the High Council of Communications, offers an explanation of what Gbiegba describes as a reorientation 'towards a less critical conception of the actions of the current power'. In her view, this is because the new director of RNL reacts too strongly to the instructions given by the managing organisation, Hironnelle, in a bid to avoid slip-ups and intimidation. This behaviour may be reinforced by the deterring murder of two journalists at Radio Okapi, which is also run by Hironnelle in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of

⁷ All quotes from interviews are translated by the author.

Congo (Reporters without Borders, 2008b).

The RSAs have arguably contributed to the restructuring of RNL's programme scheme, be it through instructions from Hironnelle and the local RNL director or due to individual adaptations by journalists. It is in fact difficult to see any other explanation of why certain topics have been avoided, since seeking greater proximity to the population does not bar them from maintaining critical programmes. According to Kaya, listeners have even complained that RNL refuses to denounce the human rights violations that soldiers have committed against them, saying that RNL was no longer dealing with such issues. This is disputed by its editor-in-chief, but it may be that RNL has aligned itself with the vast majority of sub-Saharan radio stations that avoid overt government criticism (see Hyden & Leslie, 2002: 16).

Biased selection of talk show participants and press review articles

Kaya further suggests that RSAs impact the selection of talk radio participants and press review items:

Q: Is there also an impact [of intimidation] on the selection of participants?

IP: Of course! Subsequently, those who express critiques won't be selected so as not to anger authorities

The viewpoint, expressed by Kaya, is denied by RNL journalists and other respondents and it must be judged with caution as he had recently been dismissed from RNL. Nonetheless, a representative of the NGO *Christian Action for the Abolition of Torture* confirms that he is no longer invited to human rights programmes offered by RNL. In his view, 'People with a different style are invited to talk on empty, uninteresting topics'.

This bias in selection may also apply to the press reviews offered by RNL. Kaya asserts: 'Articles are much more selective. Certain articles are not selected to avoid angering those in power.' In contrast, several interviewees assert that they have not noticed significant changes. While the truth cannot be established through interviews, strategic selection of articles and participants would clearly be a consequence of RNL avoiding government intimidation.

Dismissal of government-critical journalists

Another potential but disputed impact of the RSAs is the recent dismissal of two journalists who were highly critical of the government. Hironnelle's editorial delegate Laplume asserts that former editor Kaya was dismissed over financial issues. This is also recognized by other respondents, including Kaya himself. But Kaya suspects that he may also have become 'too disturbing'. Momet, editor-in-chief of an independent daily, confirms this point of view: 'Kaya was fired. Why? Because he criticized the slip-ups of the regime and this created dissatisfaction with him among the authorities.' Kokongo, who acted as lawyer to Kaya's family, similarly asserts that 'it's partly the authorities who orchestrated this'. In his opinion, and that of most interviewees who are familiar with Kaya's dismissal, the main reason for Kaya's departure was how RNL reacted to government discontentment. One explanation for such a reaction may be that the donors of RNL, which includes the international community acting as development partners, need to maintain good relationships with the government. The dismissal of Kaya may have contributed to easing this relationship, particularly because watchdog journalism in post-authoritarian contexts is mostly driven by 'lone wolves' (Coronel, 2009). Sacking Kaya may also have been part of a preventive measure by Hironnelle, which had just lost two of its journalists at Radio Okapi in recent attacks.

Sackanot argues that Kaya's dismissal was also caused by his excessive 'insolence', but governmental threat to use its RSAs, that is, to close down the radio, may have contributed as well. This is in fact argued by several interviewees, suggesting that the RSAs significantly reduced the watchdog performance of RNL by replacing Kaya with an inexperienced and less critical journalist.

Impoverished working conditions

It is further argued that the RSAs have impoverished the working conditions of journalists, which has in turn reduced the watchdog performance of RNL. As well as reducing the amount of field research, even halving it for some periods according to Samba, intimidation has also reduced the quality of on-the-ground investigations according to Kaya. He asserts having been unable to attend events 'where the president or military people participated'. Panika even asserts that 'There were certain neighbourhoods which we avoided out of fear of being attacked by these soldiers [former Bozizé rebels criticised by RNL]'. Events in such neighbourhoods were therefore covered by junior journalists who were less known and susceptible to attacks. What is more, according to Sackanot some neighbourhoods were mostly covered by telephone interviews instead of personal field research. These precautions,

aimed at avoiding exposure to RSAs, reduced the watchdog role of RNL. In addition to reducing the autonomy of the radio station (limited mobility and dependence on callers), they affected the reliability and impartiality of RNL (limited content verification) as well as the quality of its reporting, as presidential events, for example, were covered by junior journalists.

Government and military intimidation may also impact the emotional balance and watchdog commitment of RNL journalists. For example, Samba left the radio station immediately after critical broadcasts while Panika avoided working late to be less susceptible to attacks. Several journalists were also forced to abandon their homes for security reasons, with Samba seeking refuge at the radio station for 51 days. Kaya, for his part, has been a victim of several hold-ups during which soldiers shot at his home and threatened his family. The concerned journalists deny that these circumstances had any impact on their work. This may nonetheless be the case because statements by elite interviewees must be questioned in general (Delaney, 2007) and particularly in this case, as it is assumed that journalists wish to portray themselves as strong and professional. The suspicion that emotional imbalance did reduce the watchdog role of the journalists is shared by Momet. He argues that every Central African journalist who experiences such intimidation lessens his critical stance at least temporarily, which he also admits for himself.

The magnitude of the impact of the Repressive State Apparatuses of the Central African Republic on the government watchdog performance of Radio Ndeke Luka

It becomes clear that government intimidation does influence RNL's watchdog role, as highlighted by the intimidated journalists' own confessions. However, the magnitude of the influence cannot be determined precisely. Not only are the statements of RNL journalists presumably somewhat biased by social desirability, but unaffiliated respondents also have limited insights into decision-making, grounding their testimonies on opinions and perceptions which may, in addition, be motivated by personal reasons. This *inter alia* explains why no aspect is recognized by all respondents and highlights that 'secured evidence' is unavailable.

This being said, critical argumentation based on empirical data allows much understanding. While RNL journalists assert that their overall watchdog role remains unchanged, which is paradoxical in view of their confessions, and although several interviewees say RNL remains critical, the chorus suggests that RNL has become a watchdog with much less appetite. In the

words of an interviewee who refused to be quoted directly:

It is true that you can do your job, but if you then find yourself with a bullet in your head because you try to do your job and your children are then orphans and stuff... I don't say that Ndeke Luka changed sides from one day to the next. They continue to do their work – but in a certain context...

Adaptation to such a context of intimidation is perfectly logical and understandable. But it nevertheless undermines the watchdog performance of RNL and prompts its journalists to avoid actions that could lead to further intimidation. There is in fact no other explanation for RNL talk show moderators interrupting discussions with music when President Bozizé is criticized (Patara, n.d.), which is not uncommon in my experience. This is, however, not enough evidence to conclude that RNL has transformed itself from a watchdog into a lapdog. It is rather argued that RNL continues to be a government watchdog in spite of intimidation, but to a lesser extent.

The influence of the support of a European non-governmental organization and the United Nations

The results also suggest that being managed by a European NGO and operating under the aegis of the UN limits the occurrence of intimidation and reduces its impact. Panika suggests that the perception of RNL as 'the radio of the United Nations' may deter intimidation of its journalists. The general public often ignores these close links, as Laplume rightly points out, but CAR's elites are only too aware of the powerful endorsement RNL enjoys. In fact, Kaya argues: 'What protects us, thank God, is the umbrella of the United Nations. Because we work under the aegis of the United Nations, which scares the military and civil authorities'. This fear of the UN was also palpable in discussions with former colleagues. They suggested that government officials feared losing foreign funding while military commanders, some of whom risked prosecution by the International Criminal Court, wished to avoid negative headlines. This may partly explain why not a single RNL journalist has been imprisoned, in contrast to the printed press, even though RNL is perceived as a regime-critical media, as its equation to *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines* highlights (Article XIX, 2005). Another explanation may be the unequalled coverage of RNL in CAR.

In addition to deterring intimidation, some interviewees say the support of the UN also limits the occurrence of intimidation in more practical ways. They argue that thanks to RNL's location in the UN compound, its journalists are somewhat protected by the unarmed UN

security guards, who in one case denied access to armed soldiers (Panika). Particularly threatened journalists could also seek refuge in the UN's premises and were transported in UN-flagged jeeps, according to Sackanot. Although journalists remain vulnerable, notably in public places, these benefits of UN support may curb physical attacks, most respondents say.

The support of the international community may also limit intimidation by discouraging RNL journalists from excessive government criticism. Although Hirondele's Laplume asserts that the UN does not say 'you must speak about this and speak about that', the UN may influence the editorial line of RNL in an indirect manner. For example, Kaya declares that the UN discourages them from excessively exposing human rights abuses as this could undermine consolidation efforts and the development partnership between the UN and the authorities.

RNL journalists themselves testify that the support of powerful institutions helps them to psychologically minimize the impact of intimidation when it occurs. This seems to apply more strongly to the UN than to Hirondele, which offers little protection to its journalists, a fact that is pointed out by former journalists and acknowledged by the editorial delegate of Hirondele.

In summing up, it is argued that the UN-supported media model helps to prevent intimidation and reduce its impact. To a certain extent, and for some contexts, such backing hence provides hints on how to resolve anti-press violence, a question yet to be answered (Waisbord, 2002: 92). The limits of this model are nonetheless clearly illustrated by Radio Okapi, which lost two journalists in just two years even though it is also managed by Hirondele and backed by the UN.

Media watchdog theory

The results of the interviews further have implications for the media watchdog theory. Insights have not just been gained into the impact of intimidation on the media's watchdog performance, which remains empirically and academically understudied. The conclusions also show that in this particular case the watchdog performance is non-negligible but smaller than is promised by much of the literature. This underlines the fact that more research is needed to understand the importance of watchdogging in practice and adapt the widely normative and theoretical academic discourse accordingly⁷.

⁷ There are some exceptions, such as Waisbord, 2000; Pinto, 2008.

This study accentuates the fact that media muckraking is only a means to an end and requires strong law enforcement institutions for its potential to be fully leveraged. Gross and widespread human rights atrocities persist in CAR (Human Rights Watch, 2007) in spite of RNL's non-negligible watchdog role, confirming arguments that watchdogs cannot ferret out the ills of society single-handedly (Waisbord, 2000; Tettey, 2009). To some extent, media can improve democratic prospects on their own, for example by fulfilling the need for democratic citizen education in democratic transitions (Coronel, 2009). To develop their full potential and tackle the exposed wrongdoings, however, media watchdogs depend on 'the configuration of social and political forces' (Coronel, 2009: 15). Such prerequisites are often not acquired and semi-authoritarian regimes like CAR are frequently unwilling or unable to tackle democratic deficits (Human Rights Watch, 2009; United Nations, 2009). It is therefore necessary to focus not only on much-conducted media development, but also strengthen the capacity of law enforcement institutions.

This article also points to the editorial challenges that watchdogs face under semi-authoritarian regimes. Care needs to be taken to not undermine democratisation by *polemic discourses* that can destroy the popular support required for democratic consolidation (Schmitt-Beck & Voltmer, 2007: 75). According to a respondent, some RNL journalists have not mastered this challenge and broadcast regularly that 'the president is an idiot, the president doesn't know how to do anything at all'. Justified but *excessive criticism* must also be avoided. This is not only because a media outlet can be closed down by the government and robbed of any chance to make a long-term contribution to democratization, but also because journalists intimidated or killed due to excessive criticism become a deterring example for others. Hironelle, for its part, seems aware of this risk and has prohibited its journalists from taking a position. These editorial challenges underline how difficult it is to bark after the ills of society while fostering democratic transition.

Althusserian Theory

The results of the study also have implications for Althusserian theory. They suggest that Althusser, who considered that the 'ruling class' is foremost that 'which holds State power' (Althusser, 2008: 24), neglected intra-elite frictions and the plurality of elites 'ruling' over different dimensions. For example, the UN possesses 'global sovereignty' and the government of CAR holds 'national sovereignty'. Their ideologies seem to be very different; the UN promotes good governance, for example, while the CAR government aims to maintain the corrupt status quo. These empirical observations speak to the struggles between the different

fractions of the 'ruling classes', emphasized by post-Althusserian researcher Nicos Poulantzas in 'L'Etat, le pouvoir, le socialisme' (1978).

These observations also offer insights into how the ideology promoted by the ISAs comes into being, which is neglected by Althusser (Kim, 1995: 83). The ideology of RNL, manifested in its editorial line, reflects the (contrasting) visions of the RNL management (peace journalism), that of the national government (expressed through RSAs) and journalists' own vision (not to be exposed to RSAs). The balance between these different elements is determined by journalists, suggesting that the ideology promoted by ISAs is more influenced by individual-level decisions than Althusser assumes in his account of class struggles among *societal segments*. Also, elites seem to control the ideology to only a limited extent, as Hirondele cannot control local language contents, according to one interviewee, and the government is unable to determine the editorial stance of RNL through the use of intimidation.

The results also underline that Althusser's generic conception of 'the media' must be refined. Althusser's primary concern regarding the media is to illustrate their general function as ISAs, and he therefore often refers to the media monolithically as 'the communications ISA (press, radio and television, etc.)' (e.g. Althusser, 2008: 17). Contrary to this simplistic view, the existence of different types of media that promote different diverse ideologies must be acknowledged. While *Radio Centrafrique* acts as the mouthpiece of government, for example, RNL functions as a peace media, not least due to its backing by the UN. Beyond recognizing the diversity of media outlets, attempts must be made to analyse how their different ideologies come into being. Helpful starting points in this regard include ownership structures, power relations and individual interests. All of these factors deserve more attention than they are given in Althusser's account as they influence both the output of a media outlet and its watchdog potential (Golding and Murdock, 1997; McChesney, 2008; Moscow, 1996; Nogara, 2009).

In Althusser's view, RSAs are tools in the hands of powerful elites, allowing them to perpetuate the exploitative status quo by ensuring the functioning of the ISAs (Althusser, 2008: 23f). Empirical evidence suggests, however, that this vision overstates the achievements RSAs may have, as RNL has not transformed itself into a lapdog despite intimidation of its journalists. This is highlighted not only by on-going threats, but also by watchdog reports such as the denunciation of a gang-rape by soldiers and lashing out against a dangerous road (interview with Kokongo).

It is also suggested that the concept of RSAs needs to be adapted to emerging democracies. In Althusser's view, RSAs constitute 'an organized whole whose different parts are centralized beneath a commanding unity' (Althusser, 2008: 23). The assumption that RSAs are controlled by *one commanding unity* implies that intimidation exercised by soldiers is sponsored by the government as the 'commanding unity'. This may often be the case, as authorities have repeatedly attempted to limit critical reporting by threatening RNL and obstructing its access to public information (IREX, 2007; CPJ, 2004; interview with Panika). In some cases, however, the source of intimidation may well be individual soldiers who seek revenge and escape the control of the government over its armed forces. Independent reports and killings between police and military indeed suggest that the government is not always able to control armed officials (Human Rights Watch, 2007; interview with Momet). Contrary to Althusserian theory, military violence can therefore not be seen exclusively as an attempt by elites to enforce their ideology. In the same vein, the existence of private security companies and combat elements (Renou, 2005), that is, the penetration of state apparatuses by the capitalist market, further challenge Althusser's concept of RSAs as a *state* apparatuses serving the ruling elite.

Journalism and media in Africa and in the Central African Republic

With regards to the neglect of African journalism (Wassermann & de Beer, 2009: 430), this article highlights that journalists still 'literally risk their lives' (interview Kaya) but that many seem to persist regardless of this. This is not only thanks to their strong commitment and personal sacrifice, but also because journalism is one of the few means to 'win bread' and 'become famous', according to some interviewees.

More importantly, the study is the first piece of academic research entirely devoted to the media in CAR. Besides confirming assertions by Reporters without Borders and IREX regarding issues of funding, equipment, training, professionalism and organisational capacity, the research also highlights some less mentioned challenges such as ethnically- and kin-biased reporting and recruiting. Kokongo further said that the government not only tolerates, but even actively promotes, the 'culture of impunity for crimes committed against media workers' that Freedom House (2008) sees as 'one of the primary restrictions on the practice of journalism'. In fact, Kokongo asserts that 'cases are always given to a judge who's not very tough with the government in place, so it's really a done deal'. Momet adds that legal complaints by journalists are commonly discarded. All interviewees testify that this, along with other forms of intimidation, causes widespread self-censorship. Kokongo even asserts that there is 'no newspaper that has never been censored'. *Radio-Télévision Centrafrique* is

particularly concerned, Manengou argues, pointing to the recent dismissal of its Head of Programming, who ‘took too many liberties’. Such issues of external pressure and censorship, self-censorship and professionalism show that UNESCO should urgently implement its plans (2007c) to reinforce press freedom in CAR, transform *Radio-Télévision Centrafrique* into a public service broadcaster and establish an academic department of journalism. At the same time, interviews suggest that improvements have been made in terms of professionalism, a fact that has been neglected by press freedom organisations and their naming and shaming politics.

This article also offers insights regarding the situation in CAR more generally. Unlawful killings by government forces, as well as government corruption, remain present according to interviewees. The hostility of public officials towards the media has also become clear. This was tellingly illustrated by the Minister of Justice during the interview. Explaining the statement of a former Minister that journalists must ‘tell the truth, and nothing but the truth, while remembering that not every truth should be told’, he said:

IP: ... he calls journalists’ attention to working, isn’t it, according to the deontology, isn’t it, of this profession. Is this sentence problematic? [...] No, I don’t see how this sentence is problematic.

The role of the media in processes of democratisation

The study highlights the *potential* of media as facilitators of democratic change. This is illustrated by the intimidation exercised in response to the watchdog role played by RNL, a fact that is acknowledged by all interviewees and in line with my own experience and research (Spiess, 2009a). As well as underpinning assertions that the media can significantly contribute to democratic transitions (Randall, 1998; Voltmer, 2006), this suggests that the media should receive greater attention in transition studies. This particularly applies to researchers working on governance and economic development, who continue to neglect the importance of the media in processes of democratisation (Dean, 2009).

It has further become evident how the (private) African press has been awakening from its coma under authoritarian rule, how it makes use of its (limited) liberties and contributes to democratisation through criticism of semi-authoritarian regimes. At the same time, the study highlights the challenges to this, and notably the ‘allergy of leaders to critics’, in the words of a respondent. These results may be relevant for other African nations whose economic, social

and political situations are similar to that of CAR, although overgeneralisations must be avoided.

Peace media

This article provides insights regarding the scantily researched peace-oriented journalism (see Lee et al., 2006: 501) that is frequently seen too positively and discussed in a normative and empirically wanting manner (e.g. European Centre for Conflict Prevention, 2007; Himelfarb & Chabalowski, 2008; Bratic, 2005, 2006).

Interviews suggest that peace journalism facilitates the media's potential contribution to democratisation, with several RNL journalists saying that peace journalism is their primary motivation and helps them to brave intimidation.⁸ Kaya testifies: 'Fortunately we have this conviction, this vocation to help the population: that's why we continue [playing a watchdog role despite intimidation]'. Listeners, for their part, think that RNL's commitment to peace journalism was an essential factor that contributed to its success. This contradicts Bratic's (2008b) evidence that peace-oriented media have low audience appeal.

The study further highlights that the (optimistic and normative) discourse on peace media should focus more strongly on challenges and limitations. Former RNL journalist Samba, for example, asserts that some former colleagues see journalism as a 'bread-winner' and a means to achieve celebrity, while others underlined that RNL is also affected by challenges posed by intimidation and political instrumentalisation, as well as lacking professionalism. These factors undermine peace journalism and support similar observations made by Bratic (2008b). They also reinforce his call that scholars must better account for practical challenges to peace journalism.

⁸ It remains unclear, however, whether peace journalism facilitates peace-fostering behaviour in practice (Bratic, 2005). This also depends on external opportunity structure, that is, 'the formal and informal contexts within which actors operate' (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005: 6).

Interviews as a method to research press violence

Despite the expected discursive adherence to journalistic professionalism, it was demonstrated that intimidated journalists provide intriguing information on press violence if subtly questioned. A journalist for example acknowledged that she had not spoken about the experienced intimidation due to fear. Interviewing concerned journalists themselves is nonetheless suboptimal for grasping the impact of intimidation and press violence. Other key informants, such as former and unaffiliated journalists or NGO representatives, who can speak about press violence more openly, should therefore also be interviewed. Interviews with such respondents helped to detect a delta between accounts of current RNL journalists and independent sources (e.g. dismissal of RNL journalists due to financial issues vs. ceding to government pressure?), allowing a better estimation of the impact of intimidation.

If used as part of an appropriate research strategy, interviews therefore offer a means to fruitfully research press intimidation and press violence more generally. Recognizing this helps to tackle the dearth of relevant research (see Waisbord, 2002: 92) without having to rely on archives, which are often not available in regions where press violence is endemic due to poverty or conflicts.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the many unfounded assertions available, this study produces empirical results and shows that intimidation *does* reduce the watchdog performance of the media in the case of RNL. Although RNL has not entirely lost its bite as a watchdog, intimidated journalists blenched from delicate topics, reduced critical reporting and reworked the programme scheme. Overly critical journalists may also have been dismissed as a result of intimidation, government-critical talk show participants were avoided and articles skeptical of authorities were not included in RNL's press review.

These insights underline that journalists must be protected from intimidation to enable them to best play a watchdog role. This involves efforts such as establishing and enforcing sound laws and educating officials and citizens on their roles and responsibilities. While such efforts are essential, it is clear, however, that deeply entrenched cultures cannot be changed overnight and that system-wide reforms require concerted long-term efforts. We should therefore simultaneously seek complementary approaches that achieve results on a smaller scale and in less time. The model of RNL – that is, operating under the aegis of the UN – has some potential, as this study has demonstrated. It should therefore be investigated whether

and to what extent the results of this study are also relevant for structurally similar media such as Radio UNTAC in Cambodia and Radio Miraya in Sudan, as well as Cotton Tree News in Sierra Leone and Radio UNMIR in Rwanda. Although this model is clearly not a panacea, as the assassinations of Radio Okapi journalists in the Democratic Republic of Congo quite plainly show, this model may go some way towards protecting journalists from intimidation.

It also remains to be seen whether and how the impact of intimidation varies among different types of media (e.g. broadcast vs. audio vs. print.), the size of a media outlet (major TV company vs. community media) and the position of an intimidated journalist (star reporter vs. junior journalist). Intimidation may also have different results depending on its form (physical violence vs. threats), the perpetrator (government vs. business vs. private person) and the larger context (autocracy vs. emerging democracy vs. liberal democracy). Interviews can help to investigate these and other aspects of intimidation, as this study demonstrates, but they should ideally be triangulated with other methods such as direct observation, content analysis and critical discourse analysis.

The study also has a number of theoretical implications. While Althusserian theory helped frame the research questions, it has become palpably obvious that its concepts fit uneasily with today's realities, particularly those in developing and transitional countries. Rather than updating this theory – developed in a very different ideological, historical and political context – and refining it to the subtlety of the media, media scholars may want to use or construct newer theoretical tools to guide their research.

This study also highlights that more research is needed to assess the practical importance of media watchdogs and to tone down the widely normative discourse, if needed. In parallel, efforts should be made to better approximate the practice of muckraking to the much-heralded fourth estate as it exists in the literature. Besides tackling intimidation, this includes limiting the trivialisation and sensationalisation of media content, which results in little space for watchdogging, mitigating the impact of powerful media owners seeking beneficial relationships with government, and ensuring that businesses are scrutinized despite corporate ownership and intertwined interests. Options to be examined include peace media, alternative media and community media, as well as public service media and media carrying user-generated content, while paying attention to issues such as verification, professionalism and balance.

The challenges are great but so are the rewards: boosting the media's watchdog potential contributes to strengthening democratic prospects.

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Appendix: List of conducted interviews

Twelve semi-structured individual telephone interviews with six groups of key informants have been conducted to gather the empirical data for this article:

Current Radio Ndeke Luka journalists

- Ms. Sylvie Jacqueline Panika Benguere, former Radio Ndeke Luka journalist and current Editor-in-Chief and President of the Association of the Central African Republic's women communication professionals

Former Radio Ndeke Luka journalists

- Mr. Tita Samba, former Editor-in-Chief of Radio Ndeke Luka and current adviser to the President of the National Assembly
- Ms. Fernande Sackanot, former Head of Programming at Radio Ndeke Luka and current Vice-President of the High Council of Communications
- Mr. Zéphyrin Kaya, former Head of Programming at Radio Ndeke Luka and former Radio MINURCA journalist

Unaffiliated Central African media experts

- Mr. Mathurin Momet, Editor-in-Chief of the private daily *Le confident*
- Mr. Jean Ignace Manengou, Head of Catholic Media at CAR
- Mr. Christian Ndotah, former Head of Programming at *Radio-Télévision Centrafrique*

Representatives of major civil society organisations

- Maître Bruno Hyacinthe Gbiegba, President of the NGO *Christian Action for the Abolition of Torture and Death Sentence – Central African Republic*, Lawyer at the bar of the Central African Republic, human rights trainer
- Maître Timoléon Kokongo, Deputy Secretary-General of the national NGO *Justice et Paix* and part-time collaborator with RNL, Radio Notre Dame and the Network of community radio stations

Current and former government-officials

- Mr. Ngon-Baba, Minister of Justice of the Central African Republic and former Minister of Water and Forests, Public Service, Foreign Affairs and General Secretariat
- Former foreign diplomat in Bangui (requested anonymity)

Representative at Radio Ndeke Luka's Swiss Headquarters, Hironnelle

- Mr. Yves Laplume, editorial delegate

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