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**Peacebuilding and Public Service Media:**

Lessons from Star Radio and media development in Liberia

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MSc in Media, Communication and Development

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# **Peacebuilding and Public Service Media:**

Lessons from Star Radio and media development in Liberia

**Elizabeth Goodfriend**

## **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the case of Star Radio in an effort to contribute to the debate about media development in peacebuilding contexts. Star Radio, one of Liberia's leading nationally-broadcast radio stations, went off-air at the end of 2010 following a staff strike. Started as an international project with funding from international donors, the station did not have the capacity to compete in a challenging market when donor funding stopped; financial problems were what ultimately resulted in the staff grievances. Staff perceptions that the station's management lacked independence, however, prolonged the stand-off, which proved impossible for the station to overcome. In uncovering these dynamics and exploring Star's role in the media landscape, this study highlights a number of important issues about media development in post-conflict countries.

As a review of the current literature about media development reveals, the liberal democratic principles upon which media development was founded often lead to prioritizing support for both local and private media. In contexts of peacebuilding, however, both national and public service-style media may be of critical importance to the concurrent state-building and nation-building exercises. Using interviews to understand the issues that led to Star Radio's closure, this study argues that it may be impossible for stations attempting to provide national public service to be either fully commercial or partially state-financed. In such cases, it is important for all actors to prioritize the value of public service-*style* media, rather than focusing on a debate between the value of the two business models: private- versus public-*sector* media. Delinking the concept of public service from public sector and embedding media development needs within broader national development strategies may allow media development and development actors to identify more creative approaches to supporting public service-*style* media.

## INTRODUCTION

In January 2011, amidst much public controversy, one of Liberia's leading nationally-broadcast radio stations officially – though ostensibly 'temporarily' – closed. The station, Star Radio, had effectively been off-air since November 2010, starting when station staff, demanding salary arrears and the resignation of the station manager, had gone on strike. In the intervening months a series of bitter negotiations, at times brokered by the Ministry of Labor (Bangulu, 2011), had ensued. On one side of the dispute were Star Radio employees, demanding back-pay and the resignation of the manager, and on the other were Star Radio senior officials, including the station manager and members of the Board of Directors. By the end of December 2010, salary arrears had been made and the station manager did resign, but shortly thereafter the Board, wanting to 'start afresh' (Collins, 2011) retired all staff, awarded them severance packages, and invited new applications for all positions. Besieged by new financial, staffing, and credibility challenges as a result of this controversy, however, the struggling radio outlet has yet to recover. Eight months after its closure, at the time of writing in August 2011, the station had not reopened.

Star's closure came only two years after the station had transitioned from an internationally-funded project to a locally-managed commercial media outlet. Having begun in 1997 as the collaborative project of two international non-profit organizations – one, Fondation Hirondelle, focused on building independent media in conflict and post-conflict zones and the other, IFES, focused on providing technical support to elections processes – the station was later closed in 2000 by then-President Charles Taylor. Following a political transition in 2003, the station was able to reopen in 2005 with renewed donor support. This donor support, however, was only available for three years (Vuillemin, 2011). After attempting to compete commercially – from 2008 to 2010 – at times with small grants aimed at improving the station's business development capacity, Star Radio eventually ran into the financial problems that precipitated the staff strike and the station's subsequent closure (Swen, 2011; Toh, 2011).

This closure comes in advance of Liberia's second national elections of the post-war period. The elections, scheduled for October 2011, will be Liberia's first successive multiparty elections since a 1980 military coup upset the country's political stability and ultimately led to 14 years of civil war. They are understood to be an important milestone for the country (Johnson Sirleaf, 2011), which finally saw a cessation of hostilities with the signing of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement (ACPA) in 2003<sup>1</sup>. In the run-up to the elections,

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<sup>1</sup> A copy of the ACPA can be found online at: [www.usip.org/files/file/resources/collections/peace\\_agreements/liberia\\_08182003.pdf](http://www.usip.org/files/file/resources/collections/peace_agreements/liberia_08182003.pdf)

media practitioners are increasingly taking cognizance of their role in ensuring a successful electoral process (Burke, 2011; Joseph, 2011; Nelson, 2011), and Star's absence is being felt across the media landscape (Nmah, 2011).

It is yet to be seen whether the loss of Star Radio will prove significant for the upcoming elections or the media environment more generally, but concerns about its absence in the midst of an election cycle reflect the perception of Star's influence in Liberia's political environment and its contributions to the ongoing 'democratization' process. Prior to its closure, the station, credited with providing some of the best 'democratic quality news' in Liberia (Spurk, et al, 2010), was the most widely listened-to commercial station in the country (LMC, 2010: 16). Though the media landscape has evolved significantly since Star reopened in 2005 (IREX, 2009; IREX & LMC; 2010; International Media Support, 2007), the loss of such an important broadcaster, known to some as the 'BBC of Liberia' (Boweh, 2011), begs some questions about the priorities, modality, and approach of international media development initiatives.

In many ways, Star radio is a classic example of 'media development', a growing 'paradigm' in development and peacebuilding communities. Researchers estimate that the United States alone spent \$600million in media development between 1994 and 2004 (Hume, 2004: 19). By 2005, funding for media development, globally, reached nearly \$US1billion (Becker & Vlad, 2005). This increase in donor attention has been accompanied by the growth or advent of numerous organizations and initiatives around the world involved in all aspects of media development (Berger, 2010). It has likewise been accompanied by the creation of multiple indices, frameworks, and other media development assessment tools<sup>2</sup>.

However, this growth of the media development 'industry' has not come without its critics. Scholars question the assumptions of much of the media development paradigm, arguing that the liberal qualities that media development practitioners promote ('independence', 'plurality', and 'diversity', for example) are not as inherently democratic as claimed (Karppinen, 2007; Nyamnjoh, 2004; Ogundimu, 2002) nor as universally appropriate as generally assumed (Bama, 2010; Beckett & Kyrke-Smith, 2007; Nyamnjoh, 2005; Wasserman, 2006). As media development moves into the realm of peacebuilding, additional concerns about media development's neoliberal underpinnings are also being raised, emphasizing the incongruity of these approaches with the particular challenges and needs in post-conflict countries (Allen & Stremlau, 2005; Institute of Development Studies and BBC World Service Trust, 2009; Putzel & van der Zwan, 2006).

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<sup>2</sup> A comprehensive listing of these frameworks can be found in: BBC World Service Trust (2006: 52-54).

What is clear is that, as the field grows, ‘academics, donors, and practitioners have arrived at no clear consensus about either the theoretical underpinnings or practical realities of this type of work’ (Kalathil, 2008: 9). Part of this lack of clarity arises from the fact that many media development projects are done in an ad-hoc manner, with few learning opportunities between different projects (Himelfarb & Chabalowski, 2008; Hume, 2003; Myers, 2009). By looking at some of the lessons that can be gained from the experience of Star Radio, this study attempts to respond to this gap and contribute to the growing body of literature about media development in post-conflict environments.

To consider some of these issues in further detail, using the example of Star Radio as a case study, this paper is divided into four further sections. The first section outlines the relevant theoretical debates about media development. This theory provides the conceptual framework that is then ultimately used to frame and guide the overarching research question. The second section, on methodology, briefly explains the use of interviews to collect and analyze data. The third section, which focuses on results and analysis, presents the themes that arose from the interview material and the implications of these findings in relation to the theoretical literature. The final section, the conclusion, discusses the implications for the broader media development debates and makes suggestions for further innovation in media development practice and research.

## **1. Theoretical Chapter**

### **1.1. Media development: the history of a liberal approach**

Media development, as it is generally understood today, refers to a ‘discourse commonly (although not inherently) [that] entails the very specific sense of interventions – and especially externally originating proactive steps to ‘develop’ the media, and usually between North–South developers and ‘developees’ (Berger, 2010: 550). The practice of media development had its origins in the bigger ‘modernization’ development projects of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and has sometimes been considered a subset of the bigger development communication field (Manyozo, 2007 & 2011; Servaes, 2008). Contemporary media development, however, focuses on building democratic and democratically-supportive media environments (Myers, 2009), and in many ways emerged in response to suggestions that came out of a UNESCO report published in 1980 about the state of global communications (Manyozo, 2007: 44). This report, commonly referred to as the ‘MacBride report’, ended with extensive recommendations about improving media regulation, media infrastructures, and enhancing the skills of media professionals (International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, 1980). The practice of media development grew significantly during the wave of ‘democratization’ transitions in Latin American, Africa, and post-Soviet bloc states during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Becker & Vlad, 2005; Hume, 2004; Hyden & Okigbo, 2002; Rozumilowicz, 2002), and continues to be a growing area of donor engagement (Myers, 2009).

Though the scope of media development interventions is sometimes interpreted very broadly (Berger, 2010; Kalathil, 2008), drawing on the approach of other researchers, this study focuses on ‘media development’ as an integrated approach to improving the democratic characteristics of media sectors, focused on reforming or developing regulatory and legal frameworks, technical infrastructure, and human capacity (Myers, 2007: 99).

#### **1.1.1. Liberal assumptions and the evolution of media development**

The principles that underpin much of media development emerged from the dominant understanding throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century about media’s role in democracy (Berger, 2010; Gagliardone, et al, 2010; Putzel & van der Zwan, 2006). Though this literature primarily emerged out of western contexts and tends to reflect the particular historical trajectories of media’s role in European and North American democracies, it became ‘conventional wisdom’ in thinking about the way media and democracy relate the world over (Curran & Park, 2000: 3-4).

This literature often emphasizes the liberal ideals of free speech and a free market place of ideas as the means through which citizens become informed about, and can participate in, political issues; there has been general consensus in the scholarship that media is necessary in modern democracies to: 1) inform and educate citizenry; 2) represent the diversity of views in society; 3) watchdog against powerful interests; and 4) create a sense of collective identity (Allan, 2009; Curran, 2011; Dahlgren, 2009; Street, 2001). Different theories prioritize these roles to different degrees, but these are the key tenets of the proposed relationship (Scammell & Semetko, 2000).

In the transitions of the 1980s and 1990s, the underlying assumptions of media development continued to be the idea that ‘freedom of expression and of the press are essential for democracy. Without these basic freedoms [...] totalitarian and other undemocratic societies cannot become democratic’ (McConnell & Becker, 2002: 1). Media, a significant amount of democratic theory insisted, was needed to enable an environment in which the core democratic principles of competition (for political power) and participation (in decision-making) could develop (Rozumilowicz, 2002). To encourage a ‘free press’ and ‘free market place of ideas’ in the context of heavily state-controlled media in post-authoritarian, post-communist transitions, the emphasis of media development in the 1990s was thus on ‘liberalizing’ media ownership and regulation and ‘breaking’ the state monopoly in a range of sectors, including the media. What emerged at this time was a prevailing understanding that media sectors in democratizing contexts should be primarily driven by the market, with an emphasis on ‘free’, ‘independent’, ‘plural’ and ‘diverse’ media actors. (Gunther & Mughan, 2000; Price & Rozumilowicz, 2002; Ogundimu, 2002; Randall, 1993; Putzel & van der Zwan, 2006)

### **1.1.2. Challenges to the liberal approach of media development**

This focus on ‘free’, ‘independent’, and ‘plural’ characteristics of a media landscape, however, has not gone unchallenged. Critiques take several forms, many of which were first highlighted by the MacBride report but failed to impact policy or practice at the time (Mansell & Nordenstreng, 2007). Firstly, there are those who question the assumptions that the attributes of ‘independent’, ‘plural’, and ‘diverse’ are automatically, in-and-of-themselves, of benefit to democratic objectives (Karppinen, 2007; Nyamnjoh, 2004; Ogundimu, 2002). There are also those who question the appropriateness or relevance of the overall conceptions of both media and democracy for non-Western contexts (Bama, 2010; Nyamnjoh, 2005; Wasserman, 2006). Scholars also argue, from a political economy perspective, that the neoliberal reforms to media sectors promoted by international actors are maintaining the

interests of global capital elite, and thus then warn about the dangers of media imperialism (Freedman, 2006; McChesney & Schiller, 2003; Nyamnjoh, 2004).

Additionally, there is a growing concern about the sustainability of media development projects (Dean, 2007). Those concerned with sustainability acknowledge that there is a limit and lifespan to donor support, and that media development initiatives, in order to justify their expense and ensure longer-term impact, should be designed so that they can become self-supporting once donor funding has ended (Dean, 2007; Myers, 2007; Ottaway, 2007). Though sustainability is an issue media development frameworks and assessments do discuss (UNESCO, 2008; USAID, 1999), the focus is mostly on financial sustainability, and not other dimensions, such as 'institutional' or 'social' that have been defined elsewhere (Bell & Morse, 2008; Siemering & Fairbairn, n.d.).

### **1.2. Media development and peacebuilding: beyond the liberal model**

These concerns continue to be echoed as media development practice moves from post-authoritarian and post-communist countries into those that experienced the types of 'post modern' internal conflicts that followed the end of the Cold War (Hammond, 2007). However, they are also accompanied by new critiques, critiques that relate to the particularities of these new 'peacebuilding' contexts in which media development is taking place. In these contexts, 'peacebuilding' refers to the 'broad range of measures implemented in the context of emerging, current or post conflict situations and which are explicitly guided and motivated by a primary commitment to the prevention of violent conflict and the promotion of a lasting and sustainable peace' (OECD, 2008). Within this paradigm, democratization is also a primary objective but it means something very different from many of the democratization transitions of the 1990s. Instead of trying to weaken the control of strong states, democratization in peacebuilding contexts is often characterized by the need to strengthen 'fragile' states, repair state-citizen relations, and promote reconciliation among previously at-war segments of the population (CIDA, et al, 2007; Hayner, 2011; Newman & Schnabel, 2002; OECD, 2007).

Within such contexts, there has been growing evidence about 'the significant role of media in determining governance and development outcomes' (Institute of Development Studies and BBC World Service Trust, 2009: 2), but this role has yet to be fully understood. Indeed, the theoretical debates about the role of media in democratization are far from settled (McConnell & Becker, 2002). Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that the literature about, and approaches to, media development suffer from significant conceptual ambiguity (Berger, 2010; Kalathil, 2008). In media development in peacebuilding contexts, these ambiguities manifest in empirical and theoretical debates about how to prioritize practice along two

principle axes: 1) the level at which media development is most successful; and 2) the appropriate role of the state in managing the media sector.

### **1.2.1. Community or National Media?**

According to Ottaway (2007), one of the first dilemmas media development practitioners face is whether to work at the local or the national levels. Siochrú suggests that a growing trend in the media and democratization debate is the ‘emergence of civil society influence, and the rise of ‘people’s media’” (2004: 32). With the rise of ‘people’s media’ seems to have come an increased focus on local level media development initiatives. Indeed, as Myers highlights ‘most evaluations of media support emphasize the importance of indigenously driven processes and ownership’; according to her, ‘community media – particularly radio – provide some of the best examples [of this]’ (2007: 106). Similarly, as Berger paraphrased, ‘scholars like Paneerselvan and Nair (2008) are strongly critical of the nation-state horizon, arguing that ‘media development’ should be assessed at the (lesser) level of ‘spheres of influence’ that are exercised by ‘media development’ organizations’ (2010: 559). This trend has become embedded in the way major media development actors understand their roles: BBC World Service Trust, for example, states that its aim is to ‘strengthen local media’ (BBC World Service Trust, 2011). Internews similarly seeks to ‘empower local media worldwide’ (Internews, 2011), while IREX intends to advance ‘local institutions that support independent media’ (IREX, 2011).

The assumption behind support for community media seems to be that the community is the most important level at which to establish the means for democratic dialogue. In some ways this seems a transposition of conclusions drawn in the debate about how to effect sustainable, participatory development (Cadiz, 2005; Gumucio Dagron, 2001; Hickey & Mohan, 2004; Manyozo, 2007; Servaes, 2008), rather than democratization. Though there is value in the claim that local media is better placed than national media to ‘empower’ citizens (Cadiz, 2005; Hickey & Mohan, 2004), the danger of focusing exclusively on community-level media development may be, as Curran and Park have suggested, that ‘the supra-national is [...] supporting the sub-national in a new global-local connexion that is eroding the national’ (2000: 7). If, as peacebuilding literature indicates, both state-building and nation-building constitute an important part of post-conflict recovery (CIDA, et al, 2007; Hayner, 2011; Newman & Schnabel, 2002; OECD, 2007), then media in post-conflict environments also needs to create platforms on which these relationships can be (re)established and enhanced. In other democratizing contexts, Voltmer has found that nationally-broadcast news covering a range of political issues ‘contributes to a strengthening of an audience’s democratic orientations’ (Voltmer & Schmitt-Beck, 2006: 242).

Thus, concerns appear to be growing about the focus of media development at the local level, to the extent that this focus seems to exclude or supersede other types of interventions. As Ottaway put it, 'It is very easy to be seduced, in a sense, by the idea of community-level interventions such as community radio [...] But not everything can be done from the local level up' (Ottaway, 2007: 23). Curran and Park have suggested that the 'interpretive paradigm' that leads to this focus on local media is 'faddish' and 'often based on an aerial perspective that simplifies' (2000: 13). Their concern is that this focus 'tends to underestimate the continuing importance of the nation' (13). In neglecting national level media, those promoting media development in fragile countries can overlook the fact that, as Nisbet argues, 'mass media play a role in maintaining the basic integrity of the overall political system while change takes place' (Nisbet, 2008: 459).

### **1.2.2. The appropriate role of the state: safeguarding citizens from market failures of private media?**

The second major debate revolves around questions about the appropriate role of the state in democratizing media sectors. This bigger question breaks down along two separate but related branches – the first focusing on the role of the state in regulating independent media, and the second focusing on the state's role in providing alternatives to private media.

In relation to the state's role in regulating media, some argue that the liberal democratic principles of a completely 'free' and 'independent' media sector can undermine the stability of democratization efforts in post-conflict contexts (Allen & Stremlau, 2005; Paris, 1997; Putzel & van der Zwan, 2006). For example, scholars like Allen and Stremlau (2005) emphasize that media can sometimes be used to promulgate hate speech and promote violence, referencing the extreme examples of Nazi Germany and pre-genocide Rwanda – though similar points have been made about the role of media in perpetuating the violence that followed controversial elections in Kenya in 2007 (Mukhongo, 2010). To Allen and Stremlau (2005), this suggests that in 'fragile' states, it may be important for government to exercise a stronger role in 'censoring' the media so as to ensure that media is not used to unbalance the stability of the nation. As Putzel and van der Zwan put it, 'in situations where national cohesion and consensus is lacking, state or public involvement in the media can, as part of the equation, actually be a constructive force for the social, economic and political reconstruction and development of a country' (Putzel & van der Zwan, 2006: 6).

Using this perspective as their starting point, others have also argued that the state might have a role to play in providing public service-style media, an alternative that often gets overlooked in the dominant thinking on the need to privatize media (Howard, 2003: 26; Putzel & van der Zwan, 2006: 11). While it is not accurate to suggest that media development

actors entirely overlook the issue of ‘public service’, the assumption inherent in much of the media development literature seems to be that private media will automatically offer public service-style programming if the right enabling environment is engineered (UNESCO, 2008; USAID, 1999). Though some media development practitioners do note that, in their work, ‘there is a need at the management level to inject public service values into the media business’ (Hume, 2004: 15), the notion that private sector ‘media *businesses*’ will naturally provide public service-oriented content and access ignores the experiences of elsewhere.

In Western democracies, for example, it is important to note that concerns about the detrimental effect of private media on democracy are prevalent. In such contexts, scholars have been challenging the assumptions that the liberal endorsement of private media is, necessarily, of benefit to democracy. Skeptics often propose the opposite – that contemporary private media is supporting powerful interests, eroding civic engagement, preventing full participation, and failing to meaningfully inform (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944; Corner & Pels, 2003; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Kellner, 2005; Meyer, 2002; Mindich, 2005; Postman, 1987; Putnam, 2000; Swanson, 2003).

Partly in reaction to this, there seems to be a renewed surge of interest in the role of public service broadcasting (PSB) in democratic media landscapes. Though PSB has come under challenge in the past decades – largely in response to market pressures and the need to remain competitive and dynamic in a changing global environment (Collins, et al, 2001; Harrison & Wessels, 2005; Raboy, 1996; Tracey, 1998) – there has been considerable attention paid in recent years in Western countries to ways to preserve and improve PSB going forward (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2006). Though a number of outstanding debates remain unresolved among academics and practitioners – including how PSB outlets should be funded, how they should be governed, and what type of programming they should undertake (Biltereyst, 2004; Collins, et al, 2001) – defenders are clear that PSB corporations, motivated by a sense of civic service rather than profit, are more likely to live up to the democratic demands made of media – to ensure universal access to information, promote greater representation in programming, provide more objective news coverage of political topics, and increase levels of social cohesion (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2006; Raboy, 1996).

Recognizing this, the recommendations of the MacBride report included the caution that: ‘in expanding communication systems, preference should be given to non-commercial modes of mass communication’ (International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, 1980: 260). Though this advice went unheeded in media development work in the democratization contexts of the 1990s, a series of case studies exploring the role of media in democratization nonetheless ‘debunk the current conventional wisdom that market forces

and the minimization of the role of the state and public-sector entities will enhance the quality of democracy (Gunther & Mughan, 2000: 442). Taking this one step further, Price and Thompson have in fact argued that ‘experience in the 1990s suggests that, due in part to economic constraints and national identity concerns, no better alternative than attempting to establish some form of public service broadcasting exists for societies riddled with corrupt and feeble media markets, ruled by ineffective media regulation, and saturated by state-controlled, politicized media’ (2002: 21).

Despite these findings and the Macbride report recommendations, scholars have noted that ‘changes in communication markets [have been] pushed through on a competitiveness agenda driven largely by the industrialized countries’ (Mansell & Nordenstreng, 2007). Thus, in pursuing media sector strategies in fragile states, international actors continue to promote ‘independent and privatized media organizations [as] a crucial element for the advancement of democratic values and economic growth’ (Putzel & van der Zwan, 2006: 5). An ‘operational framework’ for media and peacebuilding drafted in 2002, for example, suggests that, ‘a reliable, diverse and independent news media has an almost innate potential for contributing to conflict resolution’ (Howard, 2002: 3-4).

Those advancing more liberal models that limit the role of the state in the media sector have pointed to both the reluctance of many (African) governments to pass media legislation that would limit their control of media sectors as well as continued abuse of media licensing powers as evidence that many ‘fragile’ states are unwilling to enable a truly democratic media environment in the absence of external pressures to do so (Haberson & Rothchild, 2009; Mukhongo, 2010). Additionally, observers suggest that experiences trying to promote PSB in Rwanda and Sierra Leone have proven overambitious (Beckett & Kyrke-Smith, 2007; Orme, 2010), pointing out that where governments lack ‘the capacity to carry out [their] basic functions’ they will also be ‘unable to invest properly in media’ (Beckett & Kyrke-Smith, 2007: 37). As a BBC World Service Trust report indicated after reviewing the media sectors in 17 African countries, ‘despite the move toward or existence of legislation securing independent, publicly-owned media, this does not guarantee; 1) freedom from interference [...], or; 2) strong patronage’ (2006: 55). Thus, though the value of PSB has been highlighted by several scholars mentioned above, PSB is neither prioritized by the dominant assumptions driving media development nor is its future assured through ‘fragile’ state governments.

### **1.2.3. Moving the debates forward**

As evidenced, questions about the appropriate approaches to media development in peacebuilding or post-conflict contexts remain open to debate. Academics and practitioners alike recognize that ‘one-size-fits-all media development doesn’t work’ (Hume, 2004: 10), but

the practice nonetheless remains shaped by the assumptions of the historical trajectory from which it emerged and into which it has become institutionalized (Berger, 2010). As practice evolves, however, it is important to question these assumptions, building on empirical experience to shape and guide the way in which media development will advance. Having reviewed the relevant literature about these issues, this paper now turns to a brief review of the key concepts that guide the research objectives of this study.

### **1.3. Conceptual Framework**

This study draws on a number of the concepts that emerged from the theoretical discussions presented above in order to examine the case of Star Radio in relation to the broader debate about media development and post-conflict democratization. The concepts that are of particular relevance to this research are briefly contextualized below.

#### **1.3.1. Democratization and peacebuilding**

Though Liberia has been credited as Africa's 'first' democratic republic, the coup d'état of 1980, followed by the outbreak of internal conflict that dominated the social and political landscape from 1989 to 2003, constituted a decided break from adherence to its long-standing democratic constitution (Dennis, 2006; Ellis, 1999; Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2009). Though a 1996 peace agreement ultimately failed, it resulted in the initiation of many democratization and development projects, most notably the 1997 national elections for which Star Radio was initially created (Kintz, 1999). Fighting began again in 1999, however, and a new peace agreement was not successfully coordinated until 2003. The reforms and developmental initiatives that have been undertaken since the signing of the ACPA constitute a renewed effort to 'democratize' the country's governance structures and practices. A significant portion of these efforts focuses also on 'peacebuilding' (Republic of Liberia, n.d.). These efforts are ones that Star Radio was mandated to support, and it is within this context that the station was restarted and attempted to operate, independent of donor support, as a commercial radio station.

#### **1.3.2. Media development**

Star Radio represents both an infrastructural and human-capacity oriented media development project, which restarted in the context of ongoing attempts to reform the country's media legislation.

### **1.3.3. Public service broadcasting**

As will emerge in the analysis below, Star Radio's mission was to provide public service-style broadcasting. Though not a PSB in the sense that the station received national public-sector financing, the station's commitment to universal access and representation, along with its initial independence from the commercial sector (given donor funding), resulted in the institutionalization of a public service-ethos.

### **1.3.4. Sustainability**

As a media development project that ultimately failed in the absence of donor support, Star Radio clearly suffered from sustainability problems that this study aims to investigate.

## **1.4. Research Objectives**

Relying on these concepts as its foundation, this project is an attempt to gain insight into the broader post-conflict media development paradigm based on the particular experiences of Star Radio in Liberia. Taking its cue from recommendations that came out of a 2009 research symposium on the role of media in fragile states, this research project endeavored to 'start with the formulation of questions (with as much practical relevance as possible), rather than quasi-theorising' (Institute of Development Studies and BBC World Service Trust, 2009). Given that Gunther and Mughan have further suggested that 'the proper focus for studies of the relationship between the media and politics is not the search for universal generalizations, but the search for more middle-level and contingent theoretical propositions' (2000: 403-4), this project was oriented towards understanding the mid-level dynamics that resulted in the station's closure, in order to present some contingent propositions about what these dynamics reveal about contemporary priorities and approaches to media development in post-conflict countries. Thus, the two overarching and interconnected questions around which this study was organized were:

- *What were the factors that resulted in Star Radio's inability to function sustainably once donor funding had stopped?*
- *What do these factors suggest about the sustainability of media development initiatives in post-conflict environments?*

To answer these questions, a subset of additional questions also had to be explored, some of which were strictly historical in nature, but many of which also focused on understanding how Star Radio related to the ways in which the concepts described above were manifest in Liberia. For a more detailed set of questions, please see the master interview guide in

Appendix II. It was only by understanding answers to these questions that this study was able to provide answers to the two overarching questions that this paper ultimately intends to address.

## **2. Research Design and Methodology**

Before describing its findings, this section provides justification for the overall research strategy employed in carrying out this case study, weighing both the pros and cons of depth interviews supplemented by documentary analysis in comparison to other methodologies. It then offers an explanation of how the research methodology was carried out.

### **2.1. Research Strategy**

As a case study, this project conforms to Yin's (2003) explanation that such studies are best undertaken to answer questions about the 'why' and 'how' of a contemporary set of events, investigating them within the immediate context in which they occurred. Though case studies can be difficult to draw broad conclusions from, given the degree of variation between different contexts and situations, what is important is to make sure that 'the fit is good' for the question at hand (Hakim, 2000: 63). Given that this study is especially interested in questions about the sustainability of media development projects, Star Radio is a particularly interesting case. Prior to its closure, Star Radio had been praised as 'one of the most positive cases where peace broadcasting and media development coincide' (Price & Thompson, 2002: 18), and was generally considered a media development 'success story' (CIMA, 2009: 6). The fact that it has not proven sustainable in the long-run has led to much consternation among its international partners (as well as those on the ground) about 'why things went wrong'.

To understand more about what happened at Star Radio, this study made use of depth interviews, supplemented where necessary by secondary data and documentary analysis. Interviews were the most appropriate means in this instance to learn more about how and why Star had gone off-air. This required speaking with individuals 'whose understanding of the subject matter might prove helpful in interpreting events' (Hansen et al., 1998: 75). Thus, the interviews conducted were, effectively, what Flick (2009) would describe as expert interviews. Secondary data and documentary analysis was used primarily to corroborate factual information that came out of the interviews. Other methods, both quantitative and qualitative (such as visual or discourse analysis of media texts or primary analysis of policy documents), would not have helped to answer the questions under consideration.

The depth interviews were carried out on an individual face-to-face basis. Though this required travel to Liberia and thus proved cost-intensive, it was the best way to ensure that

all relevant actors were included in the study, given a number of the logistical challenges inherent in operating in Liberia. Had I not been there to meet people in-person, contacting individuals and scheduling interviews would have proven difficult. Conducting them would have proven equally hard given the limited telecommunications infrastructure in Liberia: the quality of voice connectivity options is extremely unreliable and many of the people with whom I wanted to speak do not regularly use email.

Given the sensitive nature of the situation at Star Radio – it was still a very hot topic amongst those involved when I was there, one that had the potential to be very politically charged – individual interviews were chosen over (focus) group interviews. This was partly in an effort to ‘establish a climate for mutual disclosure’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997: 12), wherein respondents could talk candidly about a sensitive topic. Additionally, as individual interviews began, it became apparent that the different ‘sides’ had cohered around a common narrative thread, and it seemed likely that later focus groups might only lead to further ‘group think’ or other biases around social pressures (Fern, 2001).

Each individual depth interview was conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, organized according to key categories. A master guide was developed at the beginning of the study, which was then tailored for each interviewee, depending on his/her position. Though the interview guides served to logically sequence and provide a framework for the issues under discussion, conversations were not limited to the topics on the guide. Recognizing that ‘qualitative interviews are always open to the unexpected and emergent’ (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002: 172) and that the benefit of depth interviews, as opposed to questionnaires, is precisely the ability to use ‘follow-up questions and pursue topics that interest the interviewer’ (Berger, 1998: 57), I allowed interviews to move away from the topic guide when interesting responses brought up new issues and concerns. Similarly, and in direct relation to this, the master interview guide, found in Appendix II, was regularly updated to reflect new and pertinent issues that emerged over the course of the interview process.

## **2.2. Method and Procedures**

Having lived and worked in Liberia for two years, from mid 2008 until mid 2010, running the communications and outreach strategy for an international NGO involved in justice and reconciliation work, I was already familiar with the media landscape and the key media experts and commentators operating therein, including Star Radio personnel.

### **2.2.1. Sampling**

Initial respondents were thus contacted through my professional network. Thereafter respondents were selected using a ‘snowball’ sampling strategy (Heckathorn, 1997): I ended each interview by asking respondents for recommendations about other people with whom I should speak. The sample of interviewees was based primarily on these recommendations, and I was reassured by the fact that, overall, there was general consensus among the respondents as to who were the key actors who could comment knowledgeably on the situation. These actors presented a ‘variety of views on the issue in question’ an important consideration in finalizing an interview sample (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000: 41). This thus mitigated my concerns that this ‘snowballing’ approach to sampling might have only led to meeting with like-minded individuals (Heckathorn, 1997).

Respondents included former Star employees, Star management, government officials, Liberian media experts, and media development practitioners. In the end I conducted 21 interviews, which is approaching the ‘upper limit [of] the number of interviews it is necessary to conduct and possible to analyse’ for a single researcher (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000: 43). Unfortunately, I was not able to interview anyone from the donor community who had been directly involved in making decisions about media development funding in Liberia. This is perhaps the greatest weakness of this study, but did not hinder its ability to reach conclusions based on the data collected. For a complete list of interviewees see Appendix I.

### **2.3. Data Analysis**

Before beginning formal interviews, I met with several former colleagues to discuss the key issues relevant to this study. These informal conversations informed the development of the original master interview guide. Thus, though I did not carry out a formal pilot of it, I was nonetheless able to get feedback about my intended approach from individuals involved in the media landscape. Each interview was recorded and transcribed, though I also took notes during each conversation in order to capture brainstorming, linkages, and central themes as they occurred to me. This helped to avoid some of the dangers Kvale (1996) and Berger (1998) have noted in analyzing transcribed information after a substantial time-gap, and I looked through both transcripts and notes as I began analyzing the interview data. In carrying out a thematic analysis of the interview material, I looked for ‘clusters of linked categories conveying similar meanings’ (Subvasta Consultancy, 2011) and ‘pattern recognition within the data’ (Fereday & Cochrane, 2006: 83). These themes are discussed in the following section.

### **3. Results and Interpretation**

A significant amount of the research for this paper involved understanding the events that led to Star Radio's closure, as well as the history of the station from its founding, with a particular emphasis on its 2005-2010 operations. Some of this can be found in the Introduction. In this section, this paper draws on data from the interviews and documentary analysis to do three things:

The first is to understand Star Radio's role in the Liberia media landscape, which this section will argue was that of a public service-style broadcaster.

The second is to directly respond to the first overarching questions of this study:

- *What were the factors that resulted in Star Radio's inability to function sustainably once donor funding had stopped?*

In answering this question, this section identifies the two dominant themes that emerged from the interviews as Star Radio's key obstacles: an inability to successfully operate as a commercial station and concerns about the independence of its ownership structure.

Finally, this section attempts to address the second overarching question of this study:

- *What do these factors suggest about the sustainability of media development initiatives in post-conflict environments?*

In doing so, it contextualizes the answers from the first question within the broader Liberia media development landscape and offers some insights into how the experience of Star Radio might connect to debates about media development and peacebuilding explored in the literature review.

#### **3.1. The role of Star Radio in the Liberia media landscape**

Star Radio was initially conceived in 1997 as a means to provide 'accurate and accessible information [to diminish] distrust and [encourage] popular participation in change....[and serve as] a vehicle to collect, prepare, and provide information on the peace process and the election event' (Kintz, 1999: 8). By maintaining correspondents throughout the country, transmitting in both FM and, for brief periods, shortwave, and operating a concurrent news website, Star had soon established itself as a reliable, independent, representative and critical voice, able to reach a wide audience, including the diaspora community living outside of Liberia (CIMA, 2009; Kintz, 1999; Randall, 2011; Spurk, et al, 2010).

Station employees credited Star Radio's success to its high level of professionalism, well-trained staff, commitment to independence, coverage of news from all parts of the country, and a focus on people-centered stories. Staff discussed such priorities as renewing shortwave broadcasting and maintaining news broadcasting in all of Liberia's 16 languages as part of the station's mission to reach, represent, and speak to, all Liberians (Daffah, 2011; Toh, 2011). A content analysis study comparing four leading radio stations in Liberia found that Star Radio provided the most geographically diverse content and 'offer[ed] more public discourse and more often represent[ed] the perspective of ordinary people' (Spurk, et al, 2010: 189). Though penetration surveys conducted by the Liberia Media Center (2008) found that UNMIL Radio had the greatest reach in Liberia, Star Radio, as a 'public service competitor' (2008: 15) had similar reach, but also partnered with community radio stations to relay its news and information more widely than its technical infrastructure alone allowed. Additionally, when it broadcast in shortwave, it was able to cover the entire country (International Media Support, 2007: 26).

As Avery has highlighted, the tenets of public service broadcasting are 'the principles of universality of service, diversity of programming, provision for minority audiences and the disadvantaged, support of an informed electorate, and cultural and educational enrichment' (Avery, 2004). These were the tenets on which Star Radio operated, and in pursuing them, the station was effectively acting as a PSB in the absence of such an entity in Liberia. Though not all respondents explicitly characterized Star Radio in this way, as one media commentator said of Star Radio: 'They were very independent, very objective, and that...for me, they had a semblance of what a public service broadcaster should aim to be'. He recognized, however, that the station was not a PSB 'in the true sense of the word' as it did not receive public-sector funding (Joseph, 2011).

Though Liberia has had a state broadcaster, in one form or another, since 1964, the state broadcaster has never played an explicit public service function (Nmah, 2011). As one researcher noted, 'In [Liberia], state radio remains under the control of the executive, with more of a public information than journalism ethos' (Orme, 2010: 14). The current director of Liberia's state broadcaster, the LBS, confirmed that the station's role is to 'bring government policies to the people and to provide the people with a platform to voice their perspectives to the government' (Nmah, 2011). Since 2008 there have been efforts to reform the legislation that mandates LBS and transform the station into a public service broadcaster<sup>3</sup>, but this initiative has made little progress in the last four years (Joseph, 2011; Randall, 2011).

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<sup>3</sup> A version of the draft Public Service Broadcast Act can be found on the CEMESP website at: <http://cemesp-liberia.org/LBS.htm>

Under the current legislation, LBS's director admitted that, though he can work to provide as much critical news coverage as possible, at the end of the day he is still accountable to his appointing authority, which in his case is the president of the Republic of Liberia. UNMIL Radio, also credited with quality national reporting (LMC, 2010; Spurk, et al, 2010), is similarly bound by the UN's mission in the country, and as such 'can't say certain things' (Cooper, 2011; also CIMA, 2009; Marteh, 2011). Thus, there are no other stations providing the same level of independent public service-style broadcasting as had Star Radio.

### **3.2. Challenges of going commercial**

At first glance it might appear that the challenges Star Radio encountered were strictly technical, a product of both the economic environment in which Star Radio was operating and the skills-base at its disposal to navigate that environment. There is some truth to this, though it does not account for the entire puzzle. What is clear is that the catalyst for the station's troubles was financial insolvency. According to staff at Fondation Hironnelle, who continued to review Star Radio's accounting even after their official role in raising money for the station ended, Star Radio had only managed to raise 30 percent of its operating budget in 2010 (Vuillemin, 2011). The staff strike at Star Radio was precipitated by claims that staff had not received their full salary in nearly three months. This fact, compounded by grievances that staff had had to accept a reduction in both salaries and benefits when international funding ended, was one of the principal causes of the strike (Bowe, 2011; Daffah, 2011; Wenyu, 2011). In speaking with all interviewees, it became clear that Star Radio's financial troubles were the result of a number of different, though interconnected, problems.

#### **3.2.1. Capacity Limitations**

To begin with, staff at the station had very limited experience in the business side of a commercial radio station. Though they received support for business management training and mentoring – including from Fondation Hironnelle, Humanity United, and Deutsche Welle – this still proved insufficient to take full advantage of the opportunities for business development. As the former business manager said, 'the institution still needed external help' (Swen, 2011). In a market survey carried out by Fondation Hironnelle on behalf of Star Radio, Fondation Hironnelle estimated that Star Radio would be able to raise 50 to 60 percent of their operating budget through a combination of advertising, sponsorship, and coproduction projects (primarily with international NGOs). Though advertising and coproduction revenue was generated, it is not clear that sponsorship opportunities were ever successfully sought, which Fondation Hironnelle speculates is a result of limited capacity and/or understanding of what this would entail (Vuillemin, 2011). In discussing marketing strategies with the former business manager and other departmental editors, it does not

appear that Star Radio ever had a clearly articulated strategy for positioning themselves within the competitive, but nascent, commercial media environment that has been growing in Monrovia (Randall, 2011). This is not uncharacteristic in the Liberian media environment; an assessment of it, undertaken in 2010 by IREX, found that ‘radio and TV stations experience difficulties in understanding and creating markets, and in some cases those who run the sales and business departments lack the skill and knowledge to effectively develop business plans and strategies to improve income generation’ (IREX and LMC, 2010).

One of the key lessons Fondation Hironnelle representatives attribute to the experience of Star Radio is that it takes more than three years to successfully strengthen management skills within media institutions so that staff can maximize commercial funding opportunities (Vuillemin, 2011). Similar concerns are being heard from many media development practitioners. Participants in a recent USAID supported workshop on media development best practices, for example, agreed that ‘in a postconflict society [...] media should be weaned off donor support as the appropriate enabling environment emerges’, but noted that this ‘can take a decade or longer to accomplish’ (Hume, 2003: 10). These sentiments echo recommendations that have been made in other forums about the need for longer media development time horizons (Howard, 2003; Kalathil, 2008; Beckett & Kyrke-Smith, 2007), and link to a growing consensus that the short time-line of many donor interventions in areas of development are not conducive to sustainability (Dean, 2007).

### **3.2.2. Limited Market / Weak Economy**

Even if the station had been able to capitalize on all opportunities, however, it is not clear that a sufficiently-substantial market existed through which Star Radio could have supported itself at its intended level of activity. As mentioned, a market survey suggested that Star would only be able to raise 50 to 60 percent of its operating budget commercially. Many of those interviewed discussed the limitations of the economic environment in which Star Radio was trying to operate as one of the sources of its problems (Burke, 2011; Morlu, 2011; Randall, 2011; Vuillemin, 2011).

Though Liberia experienced an estimated GDP growth of 6.1 percent in 2010, this growth was found primarily in the export/import sector (AfDB, et al, 2010: 6), and experts note that ‘the overall business climate in Liberia remains challenging’ (12). Indeed, economic conditions pose challenges for most of the Liberian media sector (CIMA, 2009; IREX, 2011; IREX and LMC, 2010; International Media Support, 2007). In a struggling post-war economy, it would have been difficult for Star Radio to compete commercially, even with the best of strategies. Even in countries with strong economies, however, media markets are changing, and media outlets the world-over are struggling to find new business models for the changing global

environment (Macnamara, 2010), and scholars have noted the need to identify business models in developing countries that do not mirror those that arose in the West (Hume, 2004: 15).

### **3.2.3. Resource Mismanagement Allegations**

Former Star Radio employees, however, were less inclined to acknowledge the structural limitations of the overall economic climate as a basis for Star's financial difficulties. Instead, five of the seven interviewed for this research raised allegations that the station manager had deliberately 'mismanaged' Star Radio revenue, to his own advantage. These concerns seemed to have made their way throughout media circles, and several other respondents alluded to potential problems of corruption, or 'eating money', in the way Star Radio managed its finances. Though impossible to corroborate, it would not be entirely surprising to discover some small levels of petty corruption at Star Radio, given the bigger cultural climate in which it operated. According to a 2010 report issued by Liberia's Ministry of Justice, corruption is 'systemic' at all levels of Liberian society (AllAfrica, 2011).

However, despite the prevalence of these rumors, it is important to note that representatives at Fondation Hironnelle, which served as a conduit for donor funding to Star Radio, found no discrepancies in the accounting records that were shared with them throughout the period during which Star Radio was moving into commercial practices (Vuillemin, 2011).

### **3.2.4. Lack of strategic vision**

Several respondents speculated that some of Star Radios' financial problems might have been resolved had Star Radio pared down its operations earlier, an option that had been discussed with Fondation Hironnelle but ultimately discarded (Morlu, 2011; Toh, 2011; Vuillemin, 2011). As has been noted elsewhere, 'a major hurdle to sustainability is over-sized support, where donors have come in which expensive equipment, facilities, high salaries and vehicles, only for the media organisation to collapse when donors pull out' (Myers, 2007: 108). This was one criticism made by a media development expert when he discussed his perspectives on missteps made by Star Radio's international partners (Randall, 2011). It is true that Star Radio had to relocate due to exorbitant rent in their original building, and they had had to ask staff to take a reduction in salary (though this reduction still meant that staff were earning on par with other Liberian journalists, if not more (Burke, 2011)), as two cost-cutting measures once international support stopped (Morlu, 2011; Toh, 2011; International Media Support, 2007).

Aside from these overhead reductions, however, station staff made limited attempts to scale-down the station's operations (Collins, 2011; Morlu, 2011; Toh, 2011; Vuillemin, 2011). Once the station had been established, those invested, both personally and professionally, in its structure and approach appeared unwilling or unable to conceive of running the station differently. This sense was articulated by all actors interviewed, both employees and management, who had a direct affiliation with the station. This inflexibility, or lack of creativity, was the source of criticisms levied by some respondents against the station's management and oversight body about a failure to strategically reposition Star Radio within an evolving media landscape (Randall, 2011; Vuillemin, 2011). Management concerns were not limited to those of 'visioning', however, and will be discussed again in the section below on 'Issues around independence'.

### **3.3. Philosophical difficulties: incompatibility of PSB and commercial business models**

Though the above challenges were very real and had a significant impact on Star Radio's ability to achieve sustainability, they were not the only obstacles Star Radio encountered in its attempts to go commercial. Given the station's commitment to its public service-style programming approach, it seems likely, based on experiences elsewhere, that even with the best skills, management, and market, Star Radio would have had a difficult time establishing itself as an entirely commercial entity. As others have noted, PSB is incompatible with commercial efforts, and it is 'over-optimistic to expect good-quality public-service journalism to sustain itself in developing countries without some sort of core support' (Myers, 2007: 102-3). The same has been said in the context of established democracies. As Banerjee and Seneviratne have put it, 'a genuine public service broadcaster cannot be expected to serve the public interest while at the same time compete with commercial broadcasters for advertising revenue and profitability' (Banerjee & Seneviratne, 2006: 3).

Thus, even under the best of circumstances, it would have been remarkably difficult for Star Radio to continue providing the same type of service it had been while competing in the commercial market. As the former station manager said, 'you cannot operate a station like Star Radio, in terms of the scope of activities we had been doing, in terms of the reach programming and so forth, to depend only on self-income-generation' (Morlu, 2011).

### **3.4. Issues around independence**

However, it was not only difficulties in finding and enacting the right business model that led the station to go off-air. As efforts were being made to resolve the station's late-2010 crisis, concerns were raised about the continued independence of the station's management. Real

resolutions to the negotiations were hindered by the perception that the station's independence might have been compromised.

These concerns only rose to importance once the station had run into the financial troubles that precipitated the staff strike of November 2010. It was at this juncture, as station employees were looking for solutions to the stand-off, that concerns about ownership and independence came to the forefront. Prior to this, none of the staff interviewed felt that the Board of Directors had exercised undue influence in the editorial policy or programming content of the station, and both Board members interviewed confirmed that they never considered this their role. The concerns about independence were not about editorial control, but instead centered on three key points: 1) the perceived relationship between Board members and the Government of Liberia; 2) the role of the government in resolving the crisis; and 3) a lack of clarity about the ownership structure of the station.

#### **3.4.1. Relationship between the Board and the Government of Liberia**

According to several of those interviewed, Star Radio Board members were not supposed to hold positions in government. On this point there was general consensus, though it was difficult to verify, as it proved impossible to access any documents that detailed the composition of the Board, its functions, the processes for appointing and/or replacing members, etc. However, Board members did confirm that the Board policy was that individual could not simultaneously be Board members and run for *elected* office - as opposed to hold *appointed* positions (Cooper, 2011). Thus, at the time when a new board was appointed in anticipation of Star's 2005 reopening, an effort was made to ensure that no members had direct ties to the government (Morlu, 2011; Vuillemin, 2011). As part of this, Joseph Borkai, who had been a member of the Board during its 1997-2000 operations, did not continue his affiliation, as he was running for Vice President (a position he went on to win, next to presidential candidate Ellen Johnson Sirleaf). However, in the time between the appointment of a new Board and the 2010 strike, some members of the Board had been appointed to government positions. The Board Chairperson, for example, had been asked to serve as a Commissioner on the Governance Commission. Another member had been appointed mayor of a small city. A third was a Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. The Board members interviewed explained that they did not believe the political appointments prevented any Board members from being able to fulfill their functions in the original spirit in which they had been intended (Collins, 2011; Cooper, 2011).

### **3.4.2. Role of the government in resolving the crisis**

Whether or not this was true, the fact that some Board members were beholden to the government for their paid employment led to allegations that their handling of the situation at Star Radio was politically motivated. These suspicions were further complicated by the close relationship of the Vice President to the Star Radio Board. According to several respondents, Vice President Borkai had been asked by the President to intervene in Star Radio's negotiations, given his prior relationship with the organization. Staff claim, however, that he never met with them, and their dissatisfaction over this fact led them to question the motivations of the government, and the neutrality of the current Board of Directors, in settling affairs at Star Radio.

Given the financial basis of the problems at Star Radio, there was additional speculation about whether or not the government would, or should, provide temporary financial support as the station tried to organize its affairs. The perspectives on this were contradictory. In the words of the Minister of Information, the government found itself in a 'Catch 22' situation: either they provided financial support for the station and were accused of compromising Star Radio's independence, or they did not provide support for the suffering station and were accused of 'letting it die' (Sieh, 2011). The fact that all of this was happening in the run-up to an election year led to further suspicions about the potential political motivations of those involved, with actors on both sides of the negotiations speculating as to whether or not the actions of those on the other 'side' were motivated by political aims. Both members of the Board and members of the staff thought it possible that an external actor was influencing the other 'side' in order to ensure that the station would close in advance of the election cycle (Bowe, 2011; Collins, 2011; Swen, 2011; Wenyou, 2011). There is little overt evidence of this, but these concerns emphasize the heavy value placed on the station's political independence. As soon as suspicions arose that some actors involved with Star Radio might not be independent, the crisis proved impossible to resolve.

### **3.4.3. Lack of clarity around ownership issues**

Perhaps these concerns would not have risen to such prominence, however, had there been more clarity about who, in fact, owned Star Radio. There was not a clear understanding on the ground as to what ownership structures had been worked out once Star Radio transitioned completely to a nationally-owned and -managed entity. Given the other concerns about independence discussed above, this ultimately meant that station employees were able to question whether or not the Board was even the right authority to be making decisions about the station (Bowe, 2011; Kanubah, 2011; Wenyou, 2011). As one former employee said, 'the staff didn't know [that the station was owned by the non-profit]. The staff had

thought that [...] everyone had a share in [the station]. And so they said the Board should have nothing to do with it. In fact, they should let [the staff] take control of the station' (Swen, 2011).

In attempting to confirm the true ownership structure of the station, staff and other media professionals claimed that they could not find the station's articles of incorporation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where the station should have been registered (Quaqua, 2011; Wenyou, 2011). Whatever political, organizational, or bureaucratic roadblocks the staff may have encountered in trying to determine Star Radio's true ownership structure, all those involved in the management of the station, including Fondation Hirondelle – which provided copies of the documentation – are clear that a non-profit in the name of Star Radio Inc. was registered in 2005 when the station reopened. This non-profit, which was governed by the same Board of Directors that oversaw the radio station itself, officially owned Star Radio (Vuillemin, 2011). This is a common arrangement in the Liberian media landscape (IREX and LMC, 2010; Nelson, 2011), but one that had perhaps not been properly, or transparently, communicated to all station staff.

### **3.5. Implications for Media Development**

In identifying these two themes – the challenges of being commercial and the sensitivities around independence – it is important to note that the story of Star Radio is multifaceted and undoubtedly reflects a number of other societal tensions and dramas for which the station's situation proved a fertile backdrop. Though they do not incorporate all the theories discussed in relation to Star's struggle with sustainability, these two nonetheless encapsulate the majority of the discussions about what happened.

Despite the complexity of the issue, the emergence of these two trends highlights a number of important issues in the broader debates about media development in post-conflict environments. Many of the more technical issues that arose – insufficient capacities, too-short donor timelines, weak economies, etc – have been discussed in other literature referenced in the discussion above and thus will not be reiterated here. Instead, taking heed of the caution that, 'for too long, donors have treated the issue of communication in post-conflict and fragile environments as something that can be dealt with on a tactical level' (Kalathil, 2008: 57), the rest of this section instead tries to focus on the more fundamental issues that the Star Radio case reveals about the underlying assumptions of media development as it is practiced today.

### **3.5.1. Community versus National Media: both, not either-or**

As the literature highlights, the contemporary emphasis in media development is on community-level private media. This is exemplified in Liberia by the fact that the biggest media development project currently in operation – a five-year, \$US11million USAID-funded project being implemented by IREX – is targeting community media, and one of the project’s key components is in the area of business management and marketing (Burke, 2011). Indeed, community media is the focus of several assessments about the needs of the Liberian media landscape (CIMA, 2009; International Media Support, 2007; Arogundade & Randall, 2009). This type of support is crucial to the development of the media landscape, but such an emphasis can lead to a neglect of other important elements of a media environment that is supportive of democracy. As one workshop on media development in Liberia concluded, ‘The increased number of media outlets has not necessarily created new space for citizen dialogue or increased transparency. A single quality news station is better able to do this than a lot of unprofessional stations’ (CIMA, 2009: 5). Though there are clearly some resources available for media development projects, this funding is not being directed towards national-level media of the type that Star Radio exemplified, despite recognition that this type of media is important in the Liberian context.

It is true that there are other nationally-broadcast radio stations in Liberia, most notably UNMIL Radio and LBS. LBS, however, does not provide the same type of independent coverage that Star Radio offered, and in the absence of movement on the proposed PSB legislation, it is unclear whether or not it will be able to. In the meantime, UNMIL Radio may come close to filling this void, but it suffers its own limitations and will eventually close when the peacekeeping mission ends. In other contexts, most notably Sierra Leone, there have been efforts to reform PSB legislation in advance of handing peacekeeping radio stations over to the state (Orme, 2010), but anecdotal information suggests that this has not proven successful and the sustainability of such processes needs further reflection. In any event, this model would seem to fail to address additional challenges that the Star Radio example illustrates.

### **3.5.2. Public versus Private Media: focus on service, not sector**

These challenges relate to the difficulties inherent in post-conflict states attempting to offer PSB in the early transitions to democratic governance. Unfortunately, in a context as politically-charged and resource-poor as Liberia, it is unlikely that the state will be in a position to support truly independent PSB in the short-, or perhaps medium-, term. Even if the resources were available, the sensitivities around independence mean that public-sector support for public service media, no matter how well-meaning or how well-insulated its

channels, might compromise such a media outlet's credibility. As one commentator in Liberia remarked about the possibility that an independent branch of the government might provide funding for Star Radio: 'It's immaterial what segment of government the money comes from. It comes from government; that's the point' (Joseph, 2011). Indeed, as Price and Rozumilowicz have emphasized, 'only in appropriate economic circumstances can advertiser-supported or publicly-supported media find some space for independence' (2002: 255).

In focusing on what sector – either private or public – funding for media outlets comes from, what seems to get lost is a focus on the overall mission or mandate of the media outlet to begin with. As Sparks has suggested, 'discussions about media and democracy need to shift their attention away from these debates about the relatively empowering virtues of the state and the market, and turn to relations between the media and the mass of the populations' (2000: 40). In other words, what is most important is to consider the service the media provides to its listeners.

One of the difficulties here, perhaps, is the taken-for-granted link between public service-*style* media formats and public-*sector* funding. What is needed is to delink these two, at the same time recognizing that true public service media is not compatible, as the literature has suggested, with completely commercial practices. If the emphasis shifts from 'private versus public-*sector* media' to 'media as a public *service*', this might allow all media development actors, including especially the donor community, to think creatively about how to encourage more public service-*style* media using new and innovative business and support models, rather than emphasizing the need to encourage a vibrant commercial media sector or relegating public service-*style* media to the realm of the state alone.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The case of Star Radio highlights at least two important considerations in media development theory and practice: 1) the value of, and role for, national-level media in contexts of both state- and nation-building; and 2) the benefit of public service-*style* media within these contexts, emphasizing the need to delink this concept from its traditional business model corollary of public-*sector* funding. This leads to a third conclusion about the need for further innovation and coordination in support for public service-*style* media in post-conflict countries, given constraints on both private- and public-sector resources. By focusing so exclusively on this particular case, however, this paper has been unable to explore, in depth, the many other ongoing media development efforts in Liberia, despite trying to understand the situation of Star Radio in relation to them. It is important to acknowledge that there is an active and nuanced debate happening at the national level about how best to strengthen the media sector in the country, led primarily by two Liberian organizations – the Liberia Media

Center (LMC) and the Center for Media and Peacebuilding Studies (CEMEPS) – with support from a range of other actors (CIMA, 2009; International Media Support, 2007).

Media development advocates, however, have struggled to persuade both international and national actors to take media development seriously as one component part of the overall development and peacebuilding agenda for the country (Arogundade & Randall, 2009). At the moment, the major development and peacebuilding frameworks drafted for Liberia are almost entirely silent on the need for media development: the Peacebuilding Fund's priority plan for Liberia, though emphasizing 'national dialogue' as one of its key pillars, says nothing about the role of media in enabling this (Republic of Liberia & United Nations Liberia, 2008), and the country's UN-backed Poverty Reduction Strategy (Republic of Liberia, n.d.), similarly lacks any significant discussion of media development (Arogundade & Randall, 2009). Actors worry that the lack of coordination may be hampering efficient and effective advancement of the media development agenda (Arogundade & Randall, 2009; CIMA, 2009). Similarly, it may be limiting the effectiveness of the development and peacebuilding initiatives alongside of which media development is happening. As other scholars have noted, when development and peacebuilding actors neglect media development, 'the net result may be a looming crisis in development assistance, where those essential media mechanisms are assumed to exist which can ensure such greater ownership and accountability that development strategies need to be underpinned by, but where in reality, those roles are under intense political and economic pressure' (Dean, 2007: 19). In contexts of peacebuilding, it seems evident that one such 'essential media mechanism' may need to be a national-level public service-style broadcaster.

Perhaps if media development were better integrated into these mainstream, comprehensive developmental and peacebuilding strategy documents, the value of national public service-style media would be easier to identify and support. If linked to these 'big picture' country-wide strategies, support for such media outlets might not seem as much of an 'expensive standalone', as some commentators suggested was the case with Star Radio (Burke, 2011; Randall, 2011; Vuillemin, 2011). However, in highlighting the above points, this study recognizes that there is a limit to donor support, and is cautious not to promote the type of 'donor dependency syndrome' that one observer suggested was at the root of Star's problems (Burke, 2011). Indeed, in urging donor communities to pay more attention to the role of national-level PSB, this study is cognizant of Ogundimu's warning that 'the media may be able to play a stabilizing role [in African democratization contexts], but it would be wrong to assume that they alone can make the difference as far as democracy goes' (Ogundimu, 2002: 234).

It is clear, however, that media has a role to play – one that needs to be better understood and more deeply contextualized than the current assumptions behind media development practice seem to afford. In Liberia, this is particularly important at the moment, given that the government is in the middle of developing its next broad development strategy, meant to guide the country and its partners until 2030<sup>4</sup>. For media development practitioners elsewhere, thinking about national PSB is especially critical at this juncture given the growth of China’s support to Africa’s media sector, which has been characterized by ‘significant support to state broadcasters’ (Gagliardone, et al, 2010). In Liberia, for example, it was speculated that reluctance to pass the PSB Act might be related to the fact that China had just provided significant funding to improve the state broadcaster’s infrastructure (Joseph, 2011; Quaqua, 2011). The need to better understand media’s role in peacebuilding – and how best to support this role – is also particularly relevant in a global context that sees media and communication technologies playing a greater role than ever before in linking populations (Krotz, 2007).

As the case of Star Radio exemplifies, the state-building and nation-building needs of post-conflict environments demand a reconsideration of many of the liberal democratic assumptions that underpin media development. Further empirical research on media development in these contexts, especially in countries like Sierra Leone where PSB initiatives are underway, are needed. Similarly, greater collaboration and interaction between actors involved in the development of various sectors is required in order to move the debate forward.

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<sup>4</sup> This process is underway in Liberia, though very little about it is yet public. More information about this plan, which will be called ‘Liberia Rising: 2030’, can be found on the Government of Liberia’s website at: [http://www.lifliberia.gov.lr/content\\_list\\_sub.php?sub=171&related=83&third=171](http://www.lifliberia.gov.lr/content_list_sub.php?sub=171&related=83&third=171)

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**Appendix I: List of Interviewees**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Interview Type</b>	<b>Date</b>
Cole Bangulu	Assistant Minister of Trade Union Affairs, Ministry of Labor	Government of Liberia	30-May-2011
Bruce Boweh	Speaker, Workers Technical Committee, Star Radio	Star – Employee	26-May-2011
Bill Burke	Senior Media Consultant, IREX Liberia	Media development expert	24-May-2011
John Collins	Board member, Star Radio	Star – Management	6-Jun-2011
Etweda Cooper	Board member, Star Radio	Star – Management	6-Jun-2011
Matthias Daffa	Former News Editor, Star Radio	Star – Employee	27-May-2011
Vivian Gartayr	Former Deputy News Editor, Star Radio	Star - Employee	31-May-2011
Malcolm Joseph	Executive Director, Center for Media and Peacebuilding Studies	Media development expert	27-May-2011
Ernest Kaizolu	Media Relations Officer, US Embassy	Liberian media expert	31-May-2011
Julius Kanubah	Former news reporter, Star Radio	Star - Employee	25-May-2011
Danesius Marteh	Liberian Journalist	Liberian media expert	26-May-2011
James Morlu	Former Station Manager, Star Radio	Star - Management	2-Jun-2011
Estella Nelson	Executive Director, Liberia Women in Media Action Committee	Liberian media expert	7-Jun-2011
Ambrose Nmah	Director, Liberia Broadcasting System	Government of Liberia	7-Jun-2011
Peter Quaqua	President, Press Union of Liberia	Liberian media expert	30-May-2011
Lawrence Randall	Executive Director, Liberia Media Center	Media development expert	1-Jun-2011
Cletus Sieh	Minister of Information	Government of Liberia	3-Jun-2011
Olivia Swen	Former Business Manager, Star Radio	Star - Employee	6-Jun-2011
Michael Toh	Former Programs Editor, Star Radio	Star - Employee	25-May-2011
Caroline Vuillemne	Chief Operating Officer, Fondation Hironde	Media development expert	5-Aug-2011
Moses Wenyoun	President, Workers Technical Committee, Star Radio	Star - Employee	27-May-2011

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