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# Assessing the Agency in Media Narratives for Community-based Peacebuilding

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**Abstract:** This article assesses the dominant debates about the agency in media narratives for community-based peacebuilding. By locating the common challenges facing the agency in media narratives for the purposes of community-based peacebuilding, the article contributes to the ongoing debates on ways in which media discourses can be tailored toward the prevention, management, and resolution of conflicts between, within and among communities. This is predicated on the assumption that conflict is a function of discourse, and that media narratives take active part in the construction, negotiation, and circulation of discourse, all of which inform the degree of congruity between news content and expected outcomes. The primary objective of this article is therefore to generate conceptual and theoretical debates on the agentic and formative roles media narratives play in community-based peacebuilding.

**Keywords:** community-based peacebuilding, media agency, community media, conflict resolution, media elite-capture

## Introduction

Although community-based peacebuilding is a contested term with varying views on what it means and/or how it should (or should not) be implemented, it broadly suggests that "problems in communities have solutions in communities, and that people should participate in the matters that affect them at the community level" (Checkoway, 1995, pp. 3–4). This is because communities, just like individuals, have competing interests, expectations, and lifestyles. Thus, community-based peacebuilding is predicated on the assumption that communities need to take an active part in peacebuilding initiatives, so they can influence peace outcomes from which they are the primary beneficiaries. Allowing community members to articulate their views of what peace should (or should not) look like is therefore at the center of community-based peacebuilding.

The critical assumption is that the liberal peace model, driven by Western ideals of peace, leaves local perceptions untapped or less integrated into the overall peace-

building strategy (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). One dominant criticism levelled against liberal peace is that it emphasizes universality over autonomy on issues such as human rights and freedoms. Universality, however, ignores the varying meanings such concepts have across societies. In the process of liberal peace, locally-situated and context-specific knowledge barely form part of the peace policies at the local level (Omeje, 2018). Community-based approaches to peacebuilding are believed to respond to this disconnect in the sense that they underscore the centrality of local participation, empowerment, and respect for locally-situated knowledge such as traditions (Donais, 2012). For the most part, recognizing this specificity is what determines whether communities will rationalize and legitimize peace processes put forth since it better represents their needs.

One way of legitimizing community participation in the overall peacebuilding strategy is by integrating local authorities in the process, as they have a deeper understanding of relationships and deep-rooted issues that inform conflict within and across the communities they serve (Rashid, 2009). This is important because peacebuilding is predominately about restoring order and rebuilding relationships (Boege, 2011; Lederach, 2005; Paris, 2010). Local media[1] outlets are one such channel for integrating local views into the overall peacebuilding narrative. Because of their reach and target audience, local media holds the potential to influence the direction a given conflict takes at the micro-level, including trade-offs for peace. This depends on the kinds of information circulated and the manner in which competing issues are framed by journalists and promoters of peace. That is, whereas peace narratives can be conveyed directly through the local media by the promoters of peace, "conflict sponsors" can also use the same avenue to disseminate their views and/or beliefs on issues of contention (Bratic & Schirch, 2007; Brisset-Foucault, 2011; Martin & Wilmore, 2010; Ryan, 2011). Therefore, the power as well as the limit of integrating local media narratives into the overall peacebuilding strategy is inherent in content and audience reach.

However, the agentic role of media for creating change has long been a subject of debate given the structural, institutional and technological factors that inform content production, availability and consumption. Further, the materiality of media has been shown to be a site of meaning, as it contributes to the overall meaning associated with media content (Gross, Bardzell & Bardzell, 2014). For the most part, the agency that journalists have over media content has been emphasized, notwithstanding other agentic forces that stem from the interaction between different media and how they inform audiences' experience. For instance, while much has been written on the transformative roles of media in community development (Martin & Wilmore, 2010; Shaw, 2008), there is relatively little work published on the agentic role of media and how it connects with community approaches to

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[1] The term "local media" is used here in opposition to national media, which focus primarily on issues of national importance. In this regard, community media (e.g. community radios) can be considered as part of the broader local media outlets because of its content and target audience. In short, the difference between local and national media lies in their agenda (emphasis on local issues versus national issues) and their contexts of operation (e.g. structural and institutional factors).

peacebuilding. Yet, the success or failure of development and peacebuilding projects often hinge on how they are conveyed to the audience.

This article therefore contributes to the literature on peacebuilding by identifying and discussing the main challenges facing the agency in media narratives for community-based peacebuilding purposes. We begin by situating community-based peacebuilding (CPB) within the broader "local-turn" debates, then unpack how we understand the term agency as it relates to media content, and how it fits within human, structural, institutional, and technological conditionalities of content production, negotiation and consumption. The article then brings to focus the potentials of agency in media narratives and how it connects (or not) with CBP objectives, followed by a discussion of the core challenges facing the agency in media content in these contexts. The conclusion reflects on the prospects of combining conflict transformation framework (Lederach, 2005) with Howard's (2002) five-point typology of media interventions as a means to address the challenges addressed in the article, while, at the same time, revisits some of the limitations of such a framework.

## Community-based peacebuilding and the "local-turn" debates

In order to contextualize community-based approaches to peacebuilding, it is important to understand why the "local-turn" debates are gaining traction in peacebuilding literature. The liberal agenda for peace has always been a topic of heated debates (Chandler, 2010; Paris, 2010; Pugh, Cooper, & Turner, 2008), since it has resulted in many contradictions including those that surrounded the crises in Afghanistan and Iraq. These were only a few of the primary examples that added to the characterization of liberal peace as being insensitive to local realities or complexities of peacebuilding (Jarstad, 2008; Paffenholz, 2015). The failures of such interventions raised questions about needing the meaningful participation of local communities in shaping the agendas for peace. As a result, there were increased calls for donors and the perceived beneficiaries to participate in peacebuilding strategies (Donais, 2012). As Leonardsson and Rudd (2015) observe, "more recent analyses of the failures of peacebuilding, or of instances where the peace implemented is too shallow, too centralised or neglects the local context, have exposed the use of the local as a rhetorical tool, implemented in practice to a limited extent" (p. 825). Liberal values do not allow for the full participation from the community and therefore it becomes a hindrance for community peacebuilding.

The "local-turn" in peacebuilding theory and practice therefore emphasizes locally-initiated, context-specific, and people-oriented peace processes (Futamura & Notaras, 2011; Ozerdem & Yong Lee, 2015). It calls upon peacebuilding theorists and practitioners to find ways of empowering communities, so they can actively and collectively participate in peace efforts (Chandler, 2014; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Paffenholz, 2015). Although discussions around the inclusion of the "locals"

in peacebuilding is not new, this conceptualization was the first major shift from liberal peacebuilding where external actors had previously directed most of the peace efforts based on Western ideals and/or interests (de Coning, 2013; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Mitchell, 2010). In hindsight, Western practices do not include meaningful participation from internal actors and instead rely on the 'expertise' of external professionals. In order to transform peacebuilding practices, empowerment and relationship building are impactful means through which the locals are enabled to take active part in peace efforts. The result is facilitating a sense of local ownership that internal actors are invested in their own peace as beneficiaries of the outcome.

Conceptually, local ownership describes "the range of measures necessary to transform conflict towards sustainable, peaceful relations and outcomes" (Haider, 2009, p. 4). This in turn requires direct and substantial participation and empowerment of the perceived beneficiaries. Although it is common to view empowerment processes as externally initiated, scholars such as Checkoway (1995) argue that it is important "for people to recognize and act upon the power or potential power that they already have" (p. 4). This, according to the author, would allow target communities to capitalize on their power and influence the direction the peace processes take. Of course, this is not always the case given the complex levels of decision-making characterizing peace efforts. The questions of who participates, when, and at what levels remain largely unanswered. In addition, "mainstream peacebuilding has been criticized for maintaining shallow forms of ownership, in which 'local ownership' amounts to local acceptance of schemes conceived, funded and managed from the outside (perhaps with the assistance of local or national elites)" (Mac Ginty, 2014, p. 551). In order for meaningful participation to take place from the local level, the definition and understanding of community peacebuilding must be reflected in practice.

Further, determining what "local" really means is itself a subject of debate. For scholars such as Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013), the term "local" includes all civil agencies, institutions and actors present during and after a given conflict. For them, one important characteristic of these agencies is that their influence hinges on whether they are regarded as legitimate by both local and international representatives. This recognition is what situates local ownership as part of the broader community peacebuilding effort. It facilitates a shift in peacebuilding agency from cosmopolitan perspectives of what peace is (or should be) to communitarian views where "everyday peace" becomes the modus operandi for creating and maintaining peace (Mac Ginty, 2014). According to Mac Ginty (2014), the concept of everyday peace highlights "the routinized practices used by individuals and collectives as they navigate their way through life in a deeply divided society that may... be prone to episodic direct violence in addition to chronic or structural violence" (p. 549). The "local-turn" debates centre on this deep-rootedness of conflict and speculate how community level structures can facilitate peace in a meaningful and sustainable sense.

**Agentic role of media in community-based peacebuilding**

Whereas there is a growing number of studies regarding community media and development (Brisset-Foucault, 2011), there is relatively little research on the agentic and formative roles media plays in community peacebuilding. Yet the manner in which communities perceive their interests (e.g. gains and losses) or articulate their fears in conflict situations is almost entirely dependent on the kinds of narratives that are circulated by key influencers or "conflict/violence sponsors" through the media.

Understanding this complex process of content creation and dissemination is therefore an important step toward meaningful peacebuilding efforts (Curtis, 2000; Wolfsfeld, Alimi, & Kailani, 2008). This is because the media may choose to advance certain narratives of peace while ignoring/omitting others. In the process, new relationships (positive or negative) are formed. Ultimately, these relationships determine the direction a given conflict/peace process takes (Wolfsfeld et al., 2008). However, the question of agency in peacebuilding still remains a topic of debate. What is more, how and when to integrate media into the overall peacebuilding strategies remain largely unexplored. For the most part, emphasis is put on the role media plays in community development rather than in peacebuilding (see Brisset-Foucault, 2011). Other studies have also examined how information equilibrium contributes toward a balanced representation of views on matters relative to peacebuilding (Haider, 2009; Jarikre, 2017). The underlying assumption here is that the plurality of views provides room for dialogue and open communication between individuals within a given locality or community (Ali & Matthews, 2004). This is, however, limited by power asymmetries in media content.

This invites discussion on the agentic role media plays in CBP given the complex processes accompanying the production, negotiation and circulation of pro-peace messages within the community. Issue-framing provides an important lens for understanding such processes (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010; Entman, 2010). Robins and Jones (2009), for example, examined how 'powerless people' can turn into a widespread lethal threat through media exposure. Indeed, media narratives can promote or even facilitate mass violence by stoking fear of the 'other', personifying specific groups as evil, and generating moral panic (Cohen, 2011). Similarly, "the media has the ability to frame the issue(s) in a way that influences how individuals and policy-makers respond to the issues" (Savrum & Miller, 2015, p. 14). What matters, therefore, is the goal and tilt of media (Entman, 2010).

One predominant problem, however, is that violence-based terms are used more frequently in the mainstream media than peace-based terms (Ozohu-Suleiman & Ishak, 2014). This may explain why alternative media has flourished in recent years as a more "reliable, unfiltered, and unbiased" form of media (Savrum & Miller, 2015, p. 14), even though the reality of this being true is yet to be determined. In principle, all sources of media, local or national, have similar potential for influ-

ence through framing. Therefore, alternative media structures hold the same ability for threat and should be met with the same level of skepticism as any other media source. For instance, just like the mainstream media, alternative media sources align with liberal values that have shaped peacebuilding theory and practice (Ibrahim, 2009), which, by extension, promote top-down policy models (van Leeuwen, Verkoren, & Boedeltje, 2012). Since community-led alternative media are often funded by external donor agencies, anti-government and anti-elite messages are more likely to lead to government interference on content (Curtis, 2000). This creates a polarised push-pull effect on the equilibrium of information where local and state level needs often pit against each other. Closely related to this is the fact that media actors are faced with the dilemma of criticizing power holders and face censorship or tailor the content in a manner that meets government demands and faces credibility issues. In short, the agentic role of media in CBP can be assessed based on the goals/objectives of media actors, including institutional norms, structural factors and environmental contexts within which the media operates.

## Situating agency in media narratives

In writing about the question of agency, Duranti (2004) reminds us that "any attempt to arrive at a definition of agency is a difficult task because it forces us to take a stand with respect to a number of thorny issues including the role of intentionality and the ontological status of the semantic (or thematic) role of Agent and other, related notions" (p. 453). This shows that locating agency and control in media narratives is not a straightforward endeavour. The question that often arises is whether media content is the result of agency, structure, or institutional norms. The sociology of journalism, for example, perceives media content as the outcome of institutional arrangements (Dickinson, 2008; McNair, 2017). For this reason, scholars such as McNair (2017) have called for the reevaluation of the objectivity principle, arguing that "the contemporary crisis of objectivity can be rooted in the capacity of the globalised public sphere – digitised, networked, relatively uncensorable and rapidly evolving as it is – to disseminate information which is difficult to verify in short time frames, but ever-more difficult for competitive and, indeed, objective news media to ignore or dismiss" (p. 1328). In other words, the question of objectivity is not only influenced by journalistic standards, but also by the transformations within the media landscape (structure, rules, and societal norms) that inform the autonomy of media actors.

In a sense, this shows that the agency and control in media narratives stretch beyond the journalistic field (e.g. editorial influence and journalistic standards) to incorporate structural and technological transformations that change how media content is produced, negotiated and consumed. Accordingly, "the transformations and struggles taking place within the journalistic field in the age of big data, point [...] out that larger political-economic forces are influencing the uptake of automation in newsrooms and causing journalists to react to this trend in distinctive ways.

Reactions of journalists, in turn, have transformed the journalistic field into a site of struggle" (Wu, Tandoc & Salmon, 2019, p. 429).

In addition to issues of journalistic autonomy, the centrality of media objects in content creation, availability, and consumption is at the core of debates about the agency in media narratives. Equally, studies on intermediality, loosely defined by Jensen (2016, p. 1) as "the interconnectedness of modern media of communication," have shown that the communicative interaction between different media underscores the complex and interwoven nature of agency in media narratives. The nature of media not only informs its functional affordances as materials of interaction, but also the "distinctive aesthetic of experiences that are difficult or impossible to achieve in other media," including expressive traditions (Gross, Bardzell & Bardzell, 2014, p. 638).

Given the complexity in locating the agency and control in media narratives, one needs not only to probe the structural and institutional transformations within the journalistic field, but also to assess issues of materiality and how different media communicatively interact with one another to generate meaning. Put simply, the agency of media actors is not only shaped by the kinds of media they use (i.e. material objects), but also by the environments within which they operate (e.g. historicity and social practices). This is especially true because, as Wu, Tandoc & Salmon (2019, p. 431) remind us, "agency has a direct impact on structure, as agents in the field can themselves reorient the field to spearhead this change or resist" depending on the forms of capital that they have within their disposal.

Acknowledging both the materiality of media and intermediality as factors influencing the overall agency in media narratives also means paying attention to the very fact that media audience increasingly have agency over how they "consume" content beyond journalistic narratives. As Jensen (2016) observes, "media [not only] condition the communications that orient other social interaction…; the nature of individual reflection and social interaction through the media [also] depends on the latter's organization, financing, and regulation as institutions" (pp. 7-8). In short, in acknowledging the inevitability of journalists as "real agents" making choices about the kinds of content to disseminate, their agency is also shaped by factors such as the materiality of media (i.e. the relationship between form/technology and content/culture), the environment within which they operate (i.e. structure, institutions, and rules), and the interplay between different media (i.e. intermediality).

Pending these discussions, the agency in media narratives is regarded here as the outcome of these inside-outside agentic forces in media content creation, negotiation and consumption. It integrates the agency of journalists (i.e. human factors) as well as the agency resulting from the complex interaction between media artifacts which also bear other traces of agency (e.g. the material dimension of media). In short, we believe that the primacy of human agency (e.g. the agency of journal-

ists and editors) over media content depends on other agentic forces, making the agency in media narratives a discursive and constitutive force beyond the conditional nature of the choices made by journalists, editors, media owners, etc.

## Challenges facing the agency in media narratives for community-based peacebuilding

In an attempt to prevent conflict or strengthen peacebuilding efforts, the media can serve multiple roles. This includes the reinforcement of diplomatic relations, guiding policymaking, building/bridging relationships, and promoting peace (Bratic & Schirch, 2007). However, the integration of media and its usefulness in CBP still remains unclear. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on the core challenges affecting the agency in media narratives more broadly. We have narrowed down these challenges to problems of participation, "elite capture," reluctance to embrace community-led/produced content, disconnect between peace-oriented messages and the "shock value," power dynamics in media content, choice of language for content dissemination, and funding inadequacies.

### *Problems of participation*

Balancing individual interests within the community to ensure inclusivity in media narratives refers to the equilibrium that has already been addressed. This sense of needed balance adds to the challenges of participation in various peacebuilding initiatives at the community level. The fact that there is no consensus on the meaning of community also explains the ambiguity surrounding the idea of community participation in peacebuilding efforts. This article puts forth, agreeing with Brisset-Foucault (2011), that the term community suggests a united and/or homogenous group of actors. However, this presents another problem, as it presumes mutual obligations despite individual interests. In fact, studies have shown that, even individuals united through beliefs such as ethnicity, religion, nationalism, etc., still have varying views on what community is or should be (Savrum & Miller, 2015). So even with the understanding of the meaning of community, the concept itself presents a question of whether it is possible to contextualise so many views into one peace strategy effectively. Also, how to integrate these varying views into the overall "community message" is not certain given the problems of human agency already discussed above.

Further, conflicts among and/or between communities emerge when shared beliefs are pitted against competing beliefs (Savrum & Miller, 2015). This means that community-idealism has the inverse ability to both generate peace and conflict depending on the goal of the community itself. Although balancing views from the community might prove to be difficult, research shows that increasing participation and allowing user-generated content provides people with choice alternatives when it comes to determining what actions to take (Somerville, 2017). In other

words, even when human agency is called into question, the kinds of media used to allow for increased participation might lead to differentiated forms of content consumption. In addition to its agentic role, local media can also be a tool for access to information that could otherwise be scarce or inaccurate (Curtis, 2000). Of course, participatory action is better informed with local media reflecting the perspectives of the community it serves, but the question that arises is how and by whom that sense of community is constructed. This is why it is imperative to determine which view is being portrayed and how it can potentially impact the community (and conflict/ peacebuilding effort).

### Issues of "elite capture"

The impact of "elite capture" on media narratives also influences peacebuilding outcomes at the community level. This is because elites are a main component of most political structures in developed and developing countries. Elites continue to have the ability to further their own self-interests through economic and political corruption, most of which are conveniently and witfully articulated through the media (Curtis, 2000; Jarikre, 2017). For example through the use of radio, "the 'community'… is very often reduced to local elites, labelled 'representative'" (Brisset-Foucault, 2011, p. 215). This label is self-serving for the elites who use media under community pretext. However, this pretext is argued as part of the liberal peace model which ignores or downplays the tight grasp the elites have on local institutions, including media outlets (Paffenholz, 2015). This is not to say that efforts within the liberal peace model have not sought to completely remove the sources of power associated with the elites (Roberts, 2012). Instead, there is limited capacity to ignore the will of the elites since they are an integral facet of many communities with entrenched legitimacy for their power. The literature on international development, for instance, points to this worrying trend of "elite capture" in the implementation of development projects (Acemoglu, 2006). Therefore, how to establish media systems likely to navigate the dynamics of "elite capture" is yet to be determined. Also, it is still unknown whether it is useful to do away with elitist systems or elite agency in societies where they have historical and cultural roots.

### Reluctance to embrace community-led/produced content

Despite the push for community participation in media content production, embracing community-initiated messages is still a challenge. This is due to competing views of community members and their interests, particularly in multiethnic societies. In addition, more focus is often put on content produced by peace-oriented NGOs, which, for the most part, bear the traces of externally located agency. Yet, locally sourced news content such as "community newspapers tend to reflect the structure and norms of the cities and towns in which they are based" (Robinson, 2014). In other words, externally-influenced content may essentialize the deep rootedness of a conflict or problem within the community. This, in turn, has the potential to lead to the search for quick fixes. Accordingly, humanitarian commu-

nication scholars such as Chouliaraki (2013) have argued that cosmopolitan perspectives of poverty, for example, generally supersede local or community views because of asymmetrical power structures. One example is that local needs are seen as less important when compared to mediated constructs of suffering. Although some may argue that such constructs produce benefits in the short-term (e.g. increase in fundraising), their long-term impact often remains uncertain. Of course, embracing locally-initiated content does not suggest that such content is free from influence or bias. It is true that measuring the objectivity in news outlets is not a straightforward process given the complex nature of news production which is characterized by inside-outside forces (Wien, 2005). Also, studies have pointed to the increasing role "online citizens" play in setting the agendas of news sources, whether national or local (Williams, Wardle, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011). This shows the increasing agency that the audience have on content. In fact, there is more of an overlap between the producers and consumers of media in the twenty-first century of online mass media (Srinivasan & Diepeveen, 2018). This means that there is more of a potential for media to influence both conflict and peace since the participation of online citizens can be more widespread and indicative towards that source's goals.

### *Delicate balance between peace-oriented messages and the "shock value"*

Another challenge facing the agency in media narratives targeting CBP is the "shock-value." Research shows that entertainment news and the "shock value/factor" is still more appealing than other types of news (Urwin & Venter, 2014). Shock value is meant to elicit strong responses from the public, not necessarily in line with truth or considered valuable information. Since immediacy contributes to the shock value, some have argued that media narratives are counterintuitive to peace efforts which require patience, calm, and less emphasis on the negative or 'shocking' aspects of a conflict (Wolfsfeld et al., 2008). Other than immediacy, media actors (e.g. journalists and editors) may choose to dramatize, simplify, or use ethnocentric lenses to cover a given conflict, thus bringing about the "shock value" (Bratic & Schirch, 2007). This may explain why certain scholars view the goals of media and peace processes as inherently contradictive (Galtung, 1998). This is reflected in Wolfsfeld et al.'s (2008) observations. They write:

> Peace is most likely to develop within a calm environment and the media have an obsessive interest in threats and violence. Peace building is a complex process and the news media deal with simple events. Progress towards peace requires at least a minimal understanding of the needs of the other side, but the news media reinforce ethnocentrism and hostility towards adversaries. The standard definitions of what is considered news generally ensure a steady flow of negative and threatening information about the other side (Wolfsfeld et al., 2008, pp. 374–375).

Although this observation points to the complexity facing the agentic role of media in peacebuilding strategies more generally, it is widely documented that locally-

produced content provides alternative information to those supplied by the state or international news sources (Montiel et al., 2014). This is likely to contribute to the information equilibrium discussed in the previous sections. The question that arises, however, is what can be done to incentivize communities so they actively and collectively contribute to content that strengthens community-led peacebuilding efforts. One strategy this can be achieved through is by using creativity and integrating community arts, theatre, and music into the overall peacebuilding messaging because they offer different ways of engaging with media content (Hunter & Page, 2014; Pruitt, 2011; Shank & Schirch, 2008). Creativity supports both community involvement and alternative strategies outside of the liberal peacebuilding repertoire. It also allows for the integration of cultural agency that is otherwise not so easily introduced into peacebuilding practices.

### Power dynamics inherent in media content

Although media plurality is key to establishing democratic cultures and a diversity of views, there are structures of power embedded in media content that can potentially disorient peace efforts. This is because media narratives are a function of discourse. These narratives have been identified as a 'critical consciousness', which are subject to various realities that can ultimately narrow the "scope of civic voice" (Tuunanen & Hirsto, 2018, p. 206). For this reason, some perceive media narratives as a "double-edged sword" in that local/community media has equal capacity to both encourage constructive dialogue and analysis from both sides as well as be used to spread propaganda (Jarikre, 2017). This duality underscores the centrality of understanding power dynamics often entrenched in media content, which, for the most part, is the result of competing human agency (e.g. the agency of journalists, editors, sponsors, etc.). In other words, social constructs can be reconstructed through media discourse to advance different causes that may shape the outcome of conflict or peace efforts (Wolfsfeld et al., 2008).

Other social institutions besides politics have also been keen on extending their influence through media. Religion has become one such institution interested in producing narratives of peace through the media (Ozohu-Suleiman & Ishak, 2014). These institutions often reimagine what constitutes as peace or conflict through discourse. As such, particular attention should be paid to the increasing relationship between CBP and the dynamics of power inherent in media narratives. Authors such as Curtis (2000), for instance, have argued that colonial dependency as a discourse has been cultivated through mass media's portrayal of cultural imperialism. This reveals a complex pattern of power dynamics that are at play when determining what peace should (or should not) look like. In writing about partnerships, power and peacebuilding, Dibley (2014) for instance, demonstrated the tensions existing between NGO representatives and local decisionmakers when it comes to negotiating the need and urgency of international aid in conflict-ridden areas. That is, local actors sometimes use local media to advance manipulative narratives as a means to take control of peace narratives or challenge the constructs of

urgency articulated by NGO representative. Such power asymmetries, if left unchecked, are likely to limit the chances for peace.

Additionally, news agencies from the more powerful states tend not to include the voices of weaker states. This has an important bearing on the kinds of content circulated with the consequences of this being that the citizens from the stronger state are not aware of the others' realities, nor are they able to empathize with the 'other's' position (Wolfsfeld et al., 2008). Furthermore, once media becomes ritualized, it is likely to be commoditized which eventually spreads the existing conflict through prolonged media exposure (Grimes, Husken, Simon, & Venbrux, 2011). Ritualized in this context refers to the presence of media obtaining significant social value within the community. Overall, there is need to examine how power dynamics in news media shape CBP, and how community-oriented media can disentangle itself from the neo-colonialist international sources.

### *Choice of language to communicate peace-oriented messages*

The language used to convey peace-oriented messages at the community level also requires particular attention when assessing the agentic role of media in CPB. In Africa, for instance, communities can be composed of several ethnic groups who speak different languages and dialects. It is common for opposing actors in a given conflict to speak different languages, further distancing themselves from common ground. Through language, media actors can display their attitudes and convictions about any conflict or peacebuilding strategy. This can be evident in the manner in which news is framed. In times of conflict, the manner in which conflict is reported and the justifications for peace can be at odds. That is, the language used by media can impede or facilitate peace efforts, more so when the intervener speaks a language other than those understood by members of that community. Further, the type of media used is also important since various media have disproportionate reach. This underscores the importance of the material dimension of media in content consumption. For instance, radio is still the most widespread means of information and communication in Africa despite the growing use of online-supported media (Gunner, Ligaga, & Moyo, 2011). Radio's versatility to promote the same message in multiple languages is thus much higher compared to other types of media in African contexts (Curtis, 2000).

The choice of language for peace messages is also important, particularly in rural areas where illiteracy is still predominant (Ryan, 2011). The agency of language also conditions meaning. Cultural subtleties, which are important elements in peacebuilding, are easily relayed in a language people know or use the most. However, politicians and combatants have also used locally accessible language to disseminate their messages, which might impede peace processes. Put simply, the agency of language can be used as a weapon to "stigmatize the 'other' on the basis of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other forms of group membership as well as using gestures, conduct, or writings which can incite people to

violence or prejudicial action" (Jarikre, 2017, p. 292). Language is thus central in shaping people's perspectives on conflict, whether real or perceived, since "othering" is a common function of language usage (Hackett, Soares, & Nyamnjoh, 2015). The 'self' and 'other' are further used to speak to unfamiliar or uncommon language. Language, in this regard, adds to the degree of separation between opposing groups.

## *Funding Inadequacies*

Institutional and structural factors that determine how media operate are also important when considering the agentic role media has on CBP. Funding is one of these factors that is key to the success or failure of the media's integration into peacebuilding strategies. This suggests that donors for media outlets have considerable agency over content and reach. For instance, studies conducted by Brisset-Foucault (2011) in Gulu, Uganda demonstrated that organizations with elaborate budgets received full-time airtime compared to those with limited budgets. The same study found that media outlets supported by international NGOs received most of the aired programming compared to locally-produced content. What the study reveals is the vulnerability of community-based content programming, with interests of donors, corporations, and state advertising guiding the kinds of debates or issues addressed. A poorly funded community-led media also runs the risk of having its content compromised through poorly trained staff or lack of adequate broadcast equipment. This may bear the risk of sensationalist coverage of conflict.

Therefore, funding models for community-led media need to be revisited to increase its agentic role in CBP. Progressive regulations and/or policies may not only reinforce community-initiated content, they are likely to protect such media from political interference. In fact, a growing number of studies have started to identity context-specific funding models for various types of media; particularly in the African context (see Mdlongwa, 2019). Other studies have also emphasized a rethought of funding models for community media in contexts of social and institutional sustainability (Brevini, 2014; Fairbairn, 2009). As seen with the "elite capturing," power, money, and influence create asymmetrical structures which incapacitate or hinder the ability to construct community peacebuilding strategies.

## Conclusion

By mapping out the challenges facing the agency in media narratives, this article offers a window into understanding some of the core factors influencing media's role in community-based peacebuilding. The question that arises, however, is how one can navigate such challenges to allow for a meaningful and actionable integration of media narratives into the overall CBP strategy.

One possible way of addressing these challenges is by merging conflict transformation (CT) framework (Lederach, 2005) with Howard's (2002) typology of media interventions to probe the complex and multilayered relationship between media, conflict, and peace. This is because CT is mainly concerned with *positive peace* and long-term transformation of both relationships and interests, while Howard's model establishes a five-point typology allowing for the assessment of media environments likely to support peace efforts. This includes a) journalistic training and how it connects with issues of ethics, b) responsible journalism and issues of investigative and critical news coverage, c) peace journalism and issues of news sensitivity and/or sensationalism, d) proactive media messaging rather than reactive news reporting, and e) purpose-driven media programming targeting long-term relationship building. Given the centrality of media in transforming attitudes and behaviors, the merge between CT and Howard's typology sets up the possibility of constructive evaluation of both the agency in media narratives and the agency in peacebuilding, all of which depend on structural and institutional factors.

Of course, there are limitations associated with such a framework. First, whereas promoting peace through the media could be regarded as an important step in strengthening CBP, such practices raise the question of neutrality, objectivity, and critical capacity. In areas where there have been gross violations of human rights might, for instance, this may allow "conflict sponsors/entrepreneurs" and power holders to go unpunished. It is also important to point out that media actors are also torn between respecting "the rules of the game" dictated by their socio-economic realities or structures within which they operate (e.g. strict media regulations) or adopting liberal values that demand certain standards in professionalism (e.g. universal validity).

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