



Graduate School of Development Studies

**Media meanings and practices in post-war
Liberia: Dissecting Star Radio's claims of 'truth'
and 'objectivity'**

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Bobby Weetol Livingstone

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Members of the examining committee:

Dr Dubravka Zarkov [Supervisor]

Dr Helen Hintjens [Reader]

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Inquiries:

Institute of Social Studies
P.O. Box 29776
2502 LT The Hague
The Netherlands

Kortenaerkade 12
2518 AX The Hague
The Netherlands

Telephone: +31 70 426 0460
Fax: +31 70 426 0799

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my dear mother, Olivia J. Weetol whose early sacrificial effort and support to my education continues to be the fountain from which I draw motivation. I am who I am today because of the great sacrifices you made then.

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Acronyms

CEMEPS	Centre for Media and Peace Studies
COPTIL	Coalition for Peace and Tranquillity in Liberia
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ECOMIL	ECOWAS Mission in Liberia
E-I-C	Editor-in-Chief
ELWA	Eternal Love Winning Africa
FEWCC	Forum for the Establishment of War Crimes Court
GOL	Government of Liberia
IBTD	I Beg to Differ
IGNU	Interim Government of National Unity
INPFL	Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia
LBS	Liberia Broadcasting System
LMC	Liberia Media Centre
NTGL	National Transitional Government of Liberia
LPC	Liberia Peace Council
LURD	Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy
MODEL	Movement for Democracy in Liberia
NCM	National Consciousness Movement
NCO	Non- Commission Officers
NEC	National Elections Commission
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
NPP	National Patriotic Party
NTGL	National Transitional Government of Liberia
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
PUL	Press Union of Liberia
RTLM	Radio- Television Libres Mille Collines
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
ULIMO	United Liberation Movement for Democracy
UN	United Nations
UP	Unity Party
USA	United States of America

Abstract

This study of Star Radio in Liberia examines the relationship between journalists' claims about 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' on one hand, and on the other, how they present practices on a radio as revealed through framing, focalization and categorization of peace, justice and impunity issues within the phone-in program *I Beg to Differ*, using this evidence as an explanatory variable to situate the radio station in the strong objectivity discourse which views journalistic objectivity from the perspective of marginalized publics. It dissects claims and practices in the realms of media representations with the argument that complexities and power politics embedded in the media arena tend to contrast actions and words. The study essentially finds that claims of objectivity and neutrality are just the ways that people convey specific dominant notions of power and truth, and these to a large extent dictate the patterns of media reportage.

Relevance to Development

Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan once said: 'By giving voice to all people and visibility to the poor and the marginalized, the media can help remedy the inequalities, the corruption and ethnic tensions that cause many conflicts.....' Because radio can be a mobilizing tool particularly in developing countries, for educating, informing and facilitating decision making processes such as elections, it is inextricably linked to development. This study hopes to visualize the effect of the media on development policies and to widen the knowledge of its essence for development practitioners.

Key words

Radio-Liberia-reconciliation-representation-strong objectivity-neutrality-impunity.

1. What this paper is about

1.1. Background

Radio has fast become that medium that annihilates space and time, tears borders and makes communication faster, more direct and participatory (Neuman 2006:136). In this era of globalization, radio has become a strategic medium for creating new participatory spaces including contributing to building sustainable peace in war affected countries (Betz 2004:38). Radio Okapi in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, illustrates that radio can be a trajectory on which different voices may be thundered and heard notes Betz (2004:44). In Liberia, the radio is the most popular medium of information dissemination and awareness and therefore may be a powerful instrument to strike a new voice for strengthening its nascent democracy (¹CEMEPS 2007). One of the objectives of this study is to test some of the above assertions about radio and its capacity to include marginalized voices in the context of post-war Liberia. I look at the award winning phone-in program, *I Beg to Differ* of Star Radio which explicitly defines itself through codes of professionalism, inclusiveness and respect for others. Using the concept of strong objectivity that calls for the inclusion and respect of marginalized perspectives, I endeavour to explore whether journalists of Star Radio actually practice such inclusiveness in their work. I do it by analyzing how they speak about their work in relation to its core values, and then compare their interview narratives with narratives they produce within the phone-in radio programs they host. Taking politics of media representation as a larger theoretical background, I analyze how journalists frame the discussion, and what perspectives are focalized and what categories are created in the programs. Thus this study seeks to conduct an analysis of what is declared and what is actually taking place at a radio station. Bearing in mind that Liberia still remains a fragile post-war country, this research intends to unpack if the media with emphasis here on radio is serving as a medium for peace building.

1.2. Contextual Background (1989-2009)

1.2.1 *The Liberian Civil War*

Liberia, in West Africa was founded in 1822 by the American Colonization Society as a haven for freed slaves. It is a country which has never been formally colonized, although its pseudo colonial 'mother country' United States has had a longstanding role in shaping its history (Burrowes2004:1). Since the declaration of independence in 1847, there has been a historical class driven cleavage between the descendants of the freed slaves from the USA known as Americo-Liberians and the indigenous or 'native' people that are classified in 16 tribes, many of which are interrelated culturally and linguistically and sometimes referred to as 'African Liberians' (Atkinson 1999:193). For 133 years, the Americo-Liberians ran an oligarchy to the exclusion of the indigenous population, a division that has dictated the political developments in the country (Moran 2006:2). The perceived superiority of the settlers over the natives and their proclaimed civilizing mission has served to justify this domination and imbalance, and as Atkinson (1999:195) observes: 'this class divide has been a factor that has affected the political history of the country'. On April 14, 1979, the first street protests were held against the

¹ CEMEPS is the Center for Media and Peace Studies which is involved with media development and research in Liberia.

government's decision to raise the price of rice, the nation's staple. Dubbed as the 'Rice Riot', the protests were brutally suppressed, signalling the start of a long period of political turmoil and violence. Tensions in 1979 were a springboard for longstanding grievances over the inequitable distribution of resources, political exclusion of the vast majority of the citizens and fuelled the first military coup d'état on April 12, 1980, when President Tolbert and 13 of his cabinet ministers were assassinated. Thereafter, 17 inexperienced and primary educated Non-commissioned Military Officers (NCOs) led by Sergeant Samuel Doe ascended to the helm of power, marking the first native Liberian leadership of the country.

Under Doe's rule, power struggle in the ranks and file of the coup makers on one hand and politicians who previously held top positions in the new military regime on the other, was the source of another leadership imbroglio (Atkinson 1999:198). As these tensions intensified, Doe embarked upon consolidating his grip of power by strengthening his patron-client relationship with allies, mainly members of his Krahn tribe. By the mid 1980s, corruption and predation of the state had exceeded pre-coup levels, with writings that state collapse was imminent. In this continuing military and political stalemate, Thomas Quiwonkpa, a member of the Gio tribe from Nimba and former Commanding General to Doe, staged a coup on November 12, 1985 following rigged elections believed to have been won by another Nimbaian (Ellis 1999:279). The coup was staged with the apparent support of radicals from the Americo-Liberian class including Charles Taylor and some progressive politicians (the brains behind the agitation against the Tolbert regime). In what followed, Gios and connected ethnic groups became target of reprisals by Doe and allies.

Although the Liberian civil war might have being predominantly portrayed in western media as an 'ethnic war' with identity central to the violent crises, such was not the case. Identity was the knife used by warlords, to dismantle cohesive opponents and penetrate the ranks and files of either Gios or Manos on one hand or Krahns on the other (Hintjens 2006:43), but the causes of violence are much more complex, and linked to the processes of persistent political, economic and social marginalization.²

On Christmas Eve 1989, Charles Taylor's NPFL launched a rebellion from the Nimba Town of Butuo on the Ivorian border, starting a spiral of violence that will be referred to as 'the first Liberian civil war; that will last until 1996. At the onset, the main objective put forward was to restore democracy and free the Liberian people from Doe's tyrannical regime. However, the war was a continuation of the power struggle among the political elites (combination of progressives and Americo-Liberians) and the new political actors of the military who were not part of the pre-coup reform group (Williams 2002:66). In 1997, after the internationally brokered ceasefire, Charles Taylor and his party won an election, but the war did not come entirely to a halt. Internal divisions and regrouping in Liberia, coupled with involvement of Sierra Leone have continued to be destabilizing factor. In 1999, violence erupted again focusing on the capital Monrovia. With the UN and USA intervention the war ended in 2003. In 2006, Charles Taylor was arrested and sent to trial to the UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone, sitting at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, though not for the war crimes committed in Liberia, but those in Sierra Leone. Collier (2006:91) argues that economic agendas are central to understanding why civil wars are fought, and Liberia's war seems emblematic, if one looks as the increase in the number of political

² However, the causes of the Liberian war are not the focus of this research, so I will not go further into it.

factions and their relations to economic interests. The numbers went from two in 1990 to 11 at the end of the civil war, and factions clamoured for a piece of the national pie through sale of primary commodities such as diamond, gold, timber and rubber in their controlled areas. Involvement of transitional elites from western countries (France, Netherlands, USA) as well as Libya and Burkina Faso, in business deals with different armed factions is also documented (Adebajo 2002:45).

This mixture of economic and political interests of different armed factions, with the presence of rich natural resources has been devastating for the civilian population. By the end of the civil war, over 250,000 people were killed and over one million displaced. The war violence in Liberia took a feature of what may be likened to Kaldor's (2006:1) definition of 'new wars'. The political nature and form of violence, unleashed excessive human rights violations against civilians. Ellis (1999:261) observes there were practices of cannibalism by warring parties, and that LPC, AFL, ULIMO faction were mainly involved with eating human parts. This practice is grounded in long held mythical notions that power and position can be achieved through human sacrifice. Rooted also in this ritualistic belief is that for example, human blood possessed the power to make fighters win military victory against opponents (Ellis 1999:263). Moreover as documented in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2009 Report, countless records of torture, rape, and massacres were systematically carried out by all factions (TRC Report 2009: 21).

1.2.2 Truth and Reconciliation: Addressing Peace and Impunity

The establishment of a (TRC)-Truth and Reconciliation Commission was part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed on August 18 2003 by belligerent parties. Following its creation, TRC members were vetted from civil society, religious, media and women's organizations and subsequently named in December 2005, followed by their commissioning on February 22, 2006. The nine-member Liberian Truth Commission concurrently adapted the two transitional justice approaches of retributive justice and restorative justice. Section 4 of the TRC Act broadens its mandate to: 'Investigate gross human right violation of international humanitarian law, as well as abuses that occurred, including massacres, sexuality violations, and economic crimes, such as exploitation of natural or public resources to perpetuate armed conflict during the period January 1979- 14 October 2003' (TRC Report 2009:22).

After two years of work, about 18,000 statements were taken and over 100 public and institutional hearings involving key actors in the conflict were held. The Commission released its findings on June 30, 2009 and recommended in line with its mandate, prosecution for 91 former warlords for egregious domestic crimes and a 30- year ban from political office of 52 key financiers of the factions, including current President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (TRC Report, June 2009:331). In relation to TRC processes, Malan (2008:139) notes that 'people who suffered violations of human rights tend to emphasize on appropriately dealing with perpetrators'. What is 'appropriate' in dealing with perpetrators, however, is very much a matter of a perspective. Villa-Vicencio (2004:89) for example, observes: 'societies in transition from conflict to peace and democracy are often with the realization that the systematic prosecution of those guilty of gross violation of human rights could plunge the country back in to the war.' Boraine argues the opposite: 'that not prosecuting would leave the wounds of war un-healed and could expose country to return to violence' (2004:68). Also as Albert (2008:31) observes, post-war justice in recent years has a pattern of a top -down approach which follows western models and ignores local ownership. Albert argues that if transitional

justice processes are structured to follow a liberal peace agenda, i.e. they fall short of absorbing the unique local dynamics which are inevitably needed for societal harmony (Albert 2008:31, Doxtader 2004:27). In the context of Liberia, since the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Report, public reaction seems to be mixed and divided. One strand of the debate strongly maintains that peace and stability will be jeopardized if warlords are prosecuted. The other strand argues convincingly that failing to prosecute perpetrators of egregious domestic crimes would undermine long term peace prospects. As Shaw (2005:5) argues, transitional justice mechanisms are put in place in post-war countries without necessarily considering the frame of mind of the locals. She adds in the case of Sierra Leone for example, that ordinary citizens had maintained a posture of 'forgive and forget' (Shaw 2005:6). Similarly in Liberia, it is not also clear whether public view on a workable model was sought, but there are equally longstanding local patterns of social healing which could offer valuable lessons. In a survey conducted in December 2008, Afrobarometer, a transnational non-partisan instrument which gauges political, economic and social developments in Africa, 59 % of respondents in Liberia from a sample size of 1200 said war criminals should be prosecuted³.

Eisikovits (2006:249) and Fiona Ross (2004:59) argue that while TRCs provide platforms for victims to tell their story and they are portrayed as moral agents worth listening to, this does not recognise that victims also want a sense of dignity restored. However Eisikovits challenges the 'amnesty-for-truth' model adopted by the South African Truth Commission and observes that it was a political compromise and thus its proceedings were guided in a specific way leaving a few cans of worm unopened. As Malan (2008:141) puts it: 'The outcome of a TRC should contribute to a climate of reconciliation, arguing that while retributive justice is focused on perpetrators, restorative justice is focused on both victims and perpetrators.' Murithi (2008:18) observes that traditionally rooted patterns of reconciliation should be absorbed in transitional justice mechanisms as was in the case of Rwanda with the concurrent processes of ICTR and the restorative formula applied through the gacaca. In the case of Liberia where the security apparatus is being reorganized, infrastructure is shattered and economic conditions at the lowest ebb, the arguments are that the need for prosecution may be counterbalanced by a realistic demand to preserve and cement the emerging possibilities of peace and social recovery. In summer 2009, when the TRC Report was published, these arguments were also carried out by the media. (See appendix 1 for events leading to establishment of the TRC).

1.3. Media and War in Liberia

In 1960 the Liberia Broadcasting System was established by the Tubman Administration but for the purpose of this study, the reflections on the intricacies of the Liberian media take into context developments from the period 1989-2009. It is worth noting, however, that the establishment of the ELBC was followed by creation of several Christian radio stations, including ELWA- Eternal Love Winning Africa and the Catholic radio station (ELCM Community Radio now called Radio Veritas). Throughout the 1980s, ELCM was the only

³ <http://www.publicagendaneews.com/> accessed on October 16, 2009.

station that carried news stories that were critical of the military junta and broadcast messages of now ailing Archbishop Michael Francis condemning the excesses of Dictator Samuel Doe. The ELCM was however limited in terms of coverage, and had fewer hours of airtime as large portion of its airtime was allotted to airing the Holy Eucharist and messages from the Papacy (Burrowes 2004:5). In the pre-war era, there was no media that focused on helping citizens make well informed choices, a role that may be argued to be vital for building a democratic society.

Interestingly during the war, the Liberian broadcasting media was entangled in the politics of war, as was evidenced by divisions among the media. Radio FM 89.9, the state-owned radio frequency was taken to Charles Taylor's headquarters in Gbarnga (known then as Greater Liberia), while the Interim Government of National Unity of Amos Sawyer set up FM 99.9 in Monrovia. Newscasts and programs of media were loaded with the sentiments of warring factions and some factions operated their own media organizations⁴. As Fardon and Furniss (2000:3) argue, radio was used as a medium of mobilization of support. 'Having unhindered access to radio stations was seen as headway for warlords and their propaganda machinery', argues Utas (2006:166).

These were biased and were used as purely propaganda tools. As a result, during the war, journalists were bifurcated under labels of 'Greater Liberia' and 'Monrovia based'. For most part of the conflict and the immediate post conflict period, this divide was held in the ranks and file of the media (interview with Stanton Peabody⁵ August 13, 2009). When the brief period of normalcy was restored in 1996, the cloud of mistrust amongst the media was evident. The belief that Taylor's party enjoyed leverage in terms of media coverage above the others, pushed mediators to deal with the dilemma of creating a level playing field as preparations were made for elections in 1997, won by Taylor anyway. This, among other factors, necessitated the establishment of Star Radio in 1997. As already noted violence then resumed from 1999 till 2003.

Since the 2005 elections, there has been an exponential growth of media⁶ in Liberia. Still there are reports on crack down on the media. Centre for Media and Peace Studies in a report, 'The Triumph of Impunity', reported threats of closure issued by a Government Minister to close down radio stations that use vulgar language (CEMEPS 2008). Even with that, since 2005 Liberia has enjoyed relatively more press freedom than at any time in its history. In terms of media's economic survival, the low level of private investment suggests that Government is the highest purchaser of advertisement, which poses serious challenge to media institutions. Also non-existing public facilities such as electricity is serious challenge, suggesting that media institutions are barely surviving, as there are serious overhead costs for power generation. A private media manager noted in an interview that a generator accounts

⁴ Some of those included the Scorpion Newspaper operated by the INPFL, Radio Liberia International, Kiss FM and the Patriot Newspaper, operated by the NPFL.

⁵ Stanton Peabody is a 77- year-old Editorial Consultant at the Daily Observer newspaper in Monrovia. His arrest in 1964 by President Tubman prompted the establishment of what is now the Press Union of Liberia.

⁶ Presently there are 39 newspapers, 12 FM Stations, two shortwave stations and 45 community radio stations (Reporting the Liberia PRS Liberia, LMC March 2009).

for up to 60% of expenses monthly (Aaron Kollie⁷, August 19, 2009). Be that as it may, the media is still considered to be a crucial player in the political dynamics of the country. A recent study by the Liberia Media Centre argues that the lack of public information on the Government of Liberia Poverty Reduction Strategy was due to poor media coverage on the time frame for meeting deliverables under the PRSP (Reporting the PRS, LMC May 2009). Public perception about the media is also considerably changing. A report further shows that radio listeners in Liberia have a very high expectation as to the quality of radio programs and share common values attributed to good journalism. Christoph et al (2007: p.14) in the report on the quality assessment of the Liberian media said Star Radio covers wider perspective of public discourse. Out of 246 news reports analyzed from five radio stations, Star Radio devoted 22% to public discourse and 53.2% of its news reports also carried various views, including ordinary people's perspective. This was the highest percentage amongst the five stations according to the survey. Given these findings, it is worthwhile analyzing the practices and the views of the Star Radio journalists, as well as the perspectives present in the programs they produce.

1.4. The Purpose of this Research

This study of Star Radio examines relationships between journalist practices on the one hand, and on the other, forms of media representation as revealed through framing, focalization and categorization of peace and reconciliation issues within the phone-in program *I Beg to Differ*. The purpose of this examination is multiple. It also aims to contribute to the body of theoretical knowledge on how media engage in representation of issues of peace, justice, impunity and reconciliation in a specific post-war context, using example of Liberia. Additionally, the study endeavours to compare journalists' claims of 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' with actual practice in the specific radio programme. I hope that my findings will trigger a revisit of some dominant narratives about role of radio in reconstruction and reconciliation and lead to exploration of its potential role in helping to rebuild social relationships and trust in post-conflict societies, taking Liberia as an example. The second, also important aim of this research is to contribute to enhancing role of radio in post war reconstruction and reinforce ethical standards for journalistic practice in Liberia in future.

This study further endeavours to contribute to the field of development studies by widening the knowledge on role of radio role in post-war reconstruction by encouraging researchers and policy maker to consider media studies as relevant to the field of development studies. As a Director of Public Information of the National Elections Commission of Liberia, it is my ardent desire that this research broadens the scope of current conceptualization of media in the context of conflict transformation and contributes constructively to the 2011 elections. These are likely to be a litmus test for more open forms of media communication, and for the democracy in Liberia. I also hope that the findings of this research may provide some much-needed optimism about the possibilities of supporting a more positive role of the media in consolidating democratic political processes in post-conflict countries.

⁷ Aaron Kollie is a broadcast journalist, owner and manager of Power FM and Power TV in Monrovia.

1.5. Research Questions

The main question of this research is:

What are the possibilities for Strong Objectivity as guide of journalist practice in the context of a post-war reconstruction?

Sub questions

1. How are issues of ‘neutrality’ and ‘objectivity’ defined in Star Radio’s Charter and Code of Ethical Conduct, and how are they discussed and understood by journalists?
2. How do the hosts of *I Beg to Differ* frame and categorize the issues of Truth and Reconciliation Commission on *I Beg to Differ*, and whose perspectives they focalize?
3. What meanings of post-war Liberian realities are produced by the strategies of framing, focalization and categorization in the *I Beg to Differ* program? What is the relationship between journalists’ narratives about objectivity and neutrality on one hand, and their actual practice (as evident in the call-in program), on the other hand?

1.6. Paper Structure

The paper has been structured in four parts: Chapters 1 and 2 provide the contextual background, methodology and theoretical underpinnings. The reader is presented with the key ideas about media representations in war and peace, and the importance of the concept of ‘strong objectivity’ is highlighted and made visible through the framing, focalization and categorization approach. Chapters 3 and 4 analyse notions of ‘objectivity’ and ‘neutrality’ from the perspective of journalistic practice, mainly through interviews and a detailed account of five episodes of the phone-in program, *I Beg to Differ*, transmitted on Star Radio. The final chapter returns to some central questions raised in Chapters 1 and 2, and knits them together in the light of findings in Chapters 3 and 4.

2. Theoretical Perspectives and Methodological Approach

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the politics of representation, strong objectivity and journalist practice. These form the basis of my analysis of Star Radio in the politics of post-war Liberia. Durham argues that ‘The Media serves the interest of state and corporate power, which are closely interlinked; framing their reporting and analysis in a manner supportive of the privileged’ (1998:134). While there is preponderance of literature on how the radio has become a medium that plays a vital hegemonic role in promoting the values of the powerful, there is also growing scholarly attention on the means that enable the dispossessed to rise above the normalized conceptualization of the powerful and use the media to achieve position of power and strength (Fraely and Roushanzamir 2006:128). Against this backdrop of how radio has been used in war, as well as in peace, I critically examine the *I Beg to Differ* program, and the practices of its journalists. I do this through using concepts from several interrelated fields: from the politics of representation, from the analysis of discourses and power. Here I take a cue from Hall’s (1997:42) constructionist paradigm of representation. I also integrate theoretical debates on ‘strong objectivity’ into my analytical framework. This is grounded in standpoint theory, as proposed by Meenakshi Durham (1998) and Sandra Harding (2005) in particular. Finally, the analysis draws on discussions about public journalism, as propounded by Haas and Steiner (2001) and the critical media consciousness paradigm fused by Fraely and Roushanzamir (2006) and Hamilton (2000).

Moreover, this study recognizes that since there can be no absolutist claim about what forms media representation take, it reels on a contextual interpretation of framing, focalization and categorization as the basis for arriving at the analysis of journalist practices of Star Radio. Framing is defined here as the central organizing idea on the talk show that supplies context and evidently suggesting what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis and elaboration (Tankard et al in Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2008:54). Employing this tool, the study considers which issues are raised and at what levels and which positions are more emphasized than the others. This approach helps determine the main frames of the hosts. Focalization is used here as the connection between the subject of vision and that which is seen, i.e. as an answer to the question: from whose perspective is one allowed to see the subject in question (Bal in Meijer 1993:375). Employing this tool of analysis enables the study to determine which guests and which political positions were privileged in terms of airtime, and thus from which perspectives were the issues framed. Categorization on the other hand is defined as a way of establishing difference between speakers and their political positions. The tool of categorization aids this research to show how the hosts of *I Beg to Differ* constructs camps of protagonists and antagonists, ‘for’ or ‘against’ in the discussions.

Moreover as framing, focalization and categorization are forms of representations, this paper also inculcates an intersectional analysis of power, knowledge and truth, to consider the social dimensions which underpin the practices (act) and words (language) of Star Radio. Stuart Hall and Foucault’s perspectives on notions of truth discourse and power will guide the analysis of words and practices at Star Radio. The paper hopes to provide insights into how a radio station is also a social site where discourse, power and representation produce meanings and construct versions of truth that produce a way of acting on social and political realities

(Livingstone Essay 2009). I argue here, like Hall, that individuals use media spaces to convey and communicate meanings which are part of their own way of seeing the world (1997:25).

2.2 Radio in War and Peace

Neuman (1996:136) describes radio⁸ as: ‘the currency of the new global village. It can either be used to calm, cajole or criticize.’ Since the decade of the 90s there has been growing literature on how radio reportage has helped in inflaming war and promoting violence (Allen and Stremlau, 2005:2). According to van der Veur (2002:88), radio coverage of war has a direct link to the war as it is a main source of information which influences public opinion. Similarly in relation to media’s role in conflict in Africa, Jacoby (2008) highlights the media’s capability to influence exclusionary behavioural patterns that are breeding grounds for many conflicts. Jacoby argues: ‘conflicts and rebellions have dominated media coverage of Africa for example, and tend to paint particular images of the vulnerability of the continent, although these reports are often half truths or may tend to distort the actual happenings on the ground’ (2008:93). Media coverage of war in Africa is cited here to illuminate our argument of the capability of the media to contribute to stereotypes and notions of truth about particular people and issues (Francis 2008:7). In the case of the Liberian civil war, as Kaarsholm (2008:141) observes: ‘The interpretation of visual media such as Sylvester Stallone’s ‘First Blood’ was meant to portray the young Liberian fighters as violent and scaring barbarians to be mocked in world view’.

Similarly, Daryl (2007:96) and Kamilindi (2007:137) recall the use of RTL (Radio-Television Libres Mille Collines) to propagate racist anti-Tutsi ideology drawing on historical myths and stereotype. Daryl and Kamilindi argue RTL was crucial in escalating the killings that resulted in the Rwandan genocide in 1994, but that it has not caused genocide. Rather it became one of the necessary elements in specific political, developmental and historical context. Carver (2000) argues similarly that the genocide would still have occurred without the radio. He argues: ‘radio can only inflame that which has being planned or contemplated’ (2000:191). James (2000:201) also argues that recent conflicts have developed with radio playing a crucial role. Citing the SPLA in Western Sudan, he argues radio served as the vehicle in representing the political situation and was usually the medium through which power was exercised.

The tension has further intensified following 9/11, when interests have competed to legitimize ideologies and to champion the cause social transformation (Fraely & Roushazamir 1998:134). They argue these tensions are about neoliberal globalization and emerging social forces of resistance from the global south and the media are a part of the ideological struggle between these global actors. Radio therefore has had a legacy of division and power in recent history, especially in Africa (Betz 2004:43). Against this backdrop, the study found that the media in Liberia contributed to the perpetuation of the conflict by creating border lines, aiding factional propaganda, and disseminating misinformation and disinformation that help fuelled the conflict.

Following Howard (2003:117), the radio can be understood as a double-edged sword. It can be a frightful weapon of violence when it propagates messages of intolerance and disinformation that manipulate public sentiments and can also be a medium of renewal in

⁸ The use of radio in effect is to highlight the media as a whole, both are used interchangeably in the context of the of media’s role in conflict and peace as a whole.

post-conflict societies. As also argued by Tomaselli (2002:153) and Butler (2009:124) radio can serve as a point of convergence for various power sources fighting to attain political legitimacy in post-conflict societies. Allen and Stremlau (2005:2) also note that radio was used as a key instrument to propagate Nazi war efforts. The same is true for the media in the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. Yet donors have long recognized the value of supporting radio as a means to disseminate positive ideas as the example of Radio Okapi in the Democratic Republic of Congo shows.

Putzel and van der Zwan (2005:5) also argue the media can have a destabilizing effect on politics. Nevertheless it has been recognized that the media is essential for promoting good governance and post-conflict recovery (Richards 2000:217, Howard 2002:9). Zarkov (2007:2) recounts the capacity of the media to construct realities through notions of 'truth'. She reveals that the direct and intensive engagement of the media of the different Yugoslav Republics contributed to the war by partaking in the production of ethnicities that were represented as in conflict. Zarkov's argument about the use of media in war is relevant to the aims of this study which sets out to examine how framing by radio can (re)create realities in a post conflict context. Also Sofos (1999:173) and Seaton (1999:44) acknowledge the contribution of the local media in creating moral panic that redefined Serbia communities and ultimately contributed to instilling sharp divisions that help to tear former Yugoslavia apart. In the analysis of Adesoji (2006:47), the media, by projecting images that lack credibility and moral standing, can distort cultural and political values; promote mediocrity and exploit gullible people through tension-packed messages.

In the Gulf War for example, as all the belligerent nations relied on the media to advance their cause and to sort of legitimize the war. They argue that the Gulf War was a media event in itself and was shaped by media positioning, a tendency that is prevalent in the media arena (Halliday 1999:129) and Allen (1999:4).

Hyden and Leslie (2002:7) for their part argue that there has been a paradigmatic shift in the role of the media in development. They observe that unlike the 1960s when development theorists privileged development over democracy, there is growing recognition that the media is necessary part of development processes. Similarly, Ogundimu argues that in the general African context, while the media is still wrestling with capacity problem, it has emerged in the last 15 years as one of the purveyors in the emerging new face of the continent (2002:217). Given the present state of the debate about the capabilities of the media, this study investigates the role of radio in a specific post-war context, namely Liberia, in the hope that new explanatory variables may emerge from our analysis.

2.3 Politics of Media Representation: On Truth and Power

According to Hall (1997:15), representation is the use of language to convey meaning. For this reason, I define representation in the context of the media, as the use of selected choice of words, language or jargon to construct and convey certain meanings to their audience. Hall argues that representation takes on three basic contours or forms: reflective; intentional; and constructionist approaches. He argues that the reflective representation is based on assumption that a meaning already exists in the real world; that is, meaning is assumed to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world. Language, in this form of representation functions like a mirror to reflect the true meaning as it already exists in the real world. Hall disagrees with this approach, as well as with the intentional approach to representation. In intentional approach, words are taken to mean what the authors intend they should mean, i.e.,

the speaker or writer presents his/her own impression of the world. Hall subscribes to the constructionist approach. Constructionists do not deny the existence of the real world but rather claim that the material world is always mediated through language systems embedded in social relations of power that convey meanings.

Hall (1997:19) notes that journalistic practices should not be understood as describing or depicting events in a bid to convey information, but should be seen as a way of producing meanings of the events, thus, meanings are created by the works of representation. He argues that concepts which function as mental representation help us to classify and organize the world into meaningful categories. 'Then we can say we know the meaning by signs, pictures or symbolic functions that we create' (Hall, 1997:17).

According to Hall, meanings depend on larger units of analysis and wider narratives. Citing Foucault, he shifts from language to discourse as a system of representation and draws a connection between what is said (language) and what is done (practice). Discourse constructs the topic and related actions. 'Discourse never consists of one statement, one text. It will appear across a range of texts and as forms of conduct at a number of different institutional arenas' (Foucault, in Hall 1997:44).

Hall accentuates further that there are no power relations without correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, and that: '(t)ruth is not outside power' (Foucault in Hall 1997:49). With respect to truth, Hekman argues from a feminist perspective that truth should be envisioned as situated perspective which is discursive (2004:237). These perspectives on truth, power and knowledge weaves with the underlying objective of this paper as it provides some tools for critically dissecting what the journalists of Star Radio say (language) in the interviews and what they do (practices) during the five phone-in talk shows.

Mills (2003:72) reiterates Foucault's thesis of the interweaving of power and information seeking and conveyance, drawing on the argument that it is impossible for knowledge not to embody power. Mills notes that where unevenness of power occurs, production of knowledge is evident. She cites the case where the marginalized, such as women, black, people, or the poor, become objects of knowledge and those who study them maintain the power asymmetry and thus to a large extent determine how knowledge about such groups are produced and reproduced. She also argues that if the marginalized can produce knowledge about themselves then they can alter the status quo. However Mills adds that given the unfathomable complexities of the global objective systems of knowledge, she is wary of any information that adds to the stock of human knowledge whilst maintaining the status quo. Mills suggests that how information is gathered and edited in a newsroom involve complex processes of mediation, and stage-managed series of negotiations between journalists, governments and elites (2003:73).

This is especially relevant in the case of a post-war terrain such as Liberia. Following Foucault, Mills argues that 'truth' is not abstract. These arguments about truth and power help the study to be critical about accepting journalists' claims about truth and objectivity. They further sharpen my analysis of framing, focalization and categorization of issues raised during the phone-in talk shows.

Sawicki (1991:23) introduces another feminist perspective in the debate of power, knowledge and othering, arguing that differences can be transformed into a capital for struggle and change. She accentuates like Foucault that power expands the political field to assorted collection of power relations operating at the micro level of society, and suggests evasion of

universal categories in analysis of power. Unlike Sawicki, Wylie (2004:346) asserts that those oppressed may tend to be more knowledgeable than those who are privileged because of their unique experience and how they understand and interpret such experience. Sawicki's and Wylie's argument for the marginalized part of the society corresponds well with Durham's (1998) argument of standpoint epistemology, as well as ideas about critical media consciousness (Fraely and Roushanzamir, 2006) and the public journalism (Haas and Steiner, 2001). Together, they form the driving theoretical force of this paper.

2.4 Strong Objectivity, Public Journalism and Critical Media Consciousness

The main theoretical approach of this paper is informed by the concepts of standpoint epistemology and strong objectivity. According to Durham (1998), strong objectivity is a system of journalistic self-evaluation that redefines objectivity as reporting from the perspective of the marginalized groups of society. For feminist Sandra Harding (2005:222) standpoint epistemology is grounded in women's experiences and takes into consideration the 'ruptures' between women's lives and the dominant discourses of society. Durham argues essentially that:

Standpoint theorists propose a reconceptualization of objectivity that offers a concretized way of maximizing reflexivity in reporting without relying on an individual's fragile moral conscience. It reveals ways in which different social locations of race, gender, class, disability and age can shape the facts set forth in news stories..... (Durham 1998:138).

Hamilton argues that the media today are mass in terms of consumption, but extremely limited in terms of participation. Hamilton suggests an alternative media dedicated to educating and mobilizing the masses in the service of challenging the status quo to make possible the verbalization of a social order opposed to hegemony (Hamilton 2000:362).

Similarly, Fraely and Roushanzamir (2006:125) call for more democratic approaches to producing media content. Critical Media Consciousness, they observe, broadens media literacy and equates media participation with social participation. I argue then, that media can contribute to resistance and agency of previously marginalized parts of society. These propositions go well with the way Haas and Steiner (2001:127) define public journalism: as journalism that reinvigorates civil life and encourages people to participate more actively and meaningfully in democratic processes. Growing out of the above claims, I argue that is a but objectivity in its true sense remains but an illusion; what Manoff (2004:3) calls a '(v)ital illusion'.

For this study, I define strong objectivity in the context of Liberia as media practice that disentangles itself from the web of the status quo to play a liberatory role of listening to the silences or near silences of the marginalized: the *yana* boys, market women, shoeshine boys and sweepers of the society. By public journalism, I speak here of a kind of journalism that places the 'community agenda' or 'masses agenda' at the apex of journalistic practice. Thus, in this study, I dissect to what extent Star Radio focuses on the interest of the down trodden and the marginalized, and to what extent its journalists practice helps these groups rise above the normalized tendency of silence.

2.5 Examining Journalist Practice: Analytical Tools

As stated earlier, this study will employ framing, focalization and categorization as its main analytical tools. Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2008:52) define frame as how individuals cognitively comprehend and file events, making frames important determinants on how news story is told. They argue that frame influences how people understand, remember, and act upon a problem (Riese in Papacharissi et al 2008:53). The authors locate frame in four places: the communicator, the text, the receiver and the culture. They further describe two kinds of frame: episodic frame which presents events in a dramatic, visually compelling, more descriptive and less analytical manner. On the other hand, thematic frame provides context and background for the issue at hand; it is less descriptive and more analytical. These ideas will be used in the analysis of *I Beg to Differ* program.

Meijer (1993:375) defines focalization as a form of representation that connects the subject vision and that which is seen. A reader and a viewer always approach the text and image from a very specific perspective provided by the writer or the camera. Who and what is seen and how, thus, is not incidental: it is part of social position of both the viewed and the viewer. For my research these issues can be translated into the question: which/whose perspectives on the issues of war crimes, truth and reconciliation are present in the radio program and how? For example, following Meijer, I argue that representation of TRC in the five examined *I Beg to Differ* programs normalizes masculinity as the guests, hosts and callers were all males, ignoring the potential implications of back-benching women in the post-war justice (about which the programs presumably centred).

Using a membership categorization analysis framework (MCA), Leudar, Marsland and Nekvapil (2004:262) note that categorization is done with an underpinning motive. The most common categorization of 'us' and 'them', 'self' and 'other' is not just a part of the local ordering process, but is situated in a dialogical network of radio stations and newspapers articles to establish central and reactionary dispositions, with an aim of justifying future (political, military, social) actions. Reflecting on specific instances of membership categorization which followed the 9/11 attacks, they argued that the use of 'us', 'our', 'them', 'their' categories was aimed to separate victims and perpetrators and to send a warning that ground for eventual military action was being prepared (2004:248). Thus the authors argue that categories are representations that are directly linked to actions; actions which are constitutive of membership categories, i.e., in the case of speeches after 9/11: war between the civilized (USA and allies) and the barbarians (Osama Bin Laden and the reactionary nationalists), (Leudar et al 2004:263).

I find that the argument of Leudar et al (2004) broadens the scope of the analysis in that it asserts that categorization is not an individual matter, but is almost unavoidably linked to anticipation and justification of specific actions. McMulty (1999:268) writes that the media becomes an accomplice in the power politics that characterize most conflict. Citing the Rwandan genocide as an example, he argues that media often go for ethnicization of conflict and that their classification of war tended to propound the exigency of western intervention, which is done often at the expense of countless casualties. This shows how media are themselves embroiled in the dichotomy of the powerful and the marginalized. In his work on western media ethnicization of conflict, Atkinson (1999:209) also argues that most media do not provide detailed analysis of the causes and issues in conflicts, especially when these are far away from the west. Rather, media merely brief western audiences on the developments of the war, aiding superficial analysis. Using example of Liberian conflict Atkinson shows how BBC

focuses on child soldiers' barbarism: images of child soldiers brandishing guns meant to categorize the war as ethnic, remote, worse and different from wars in Europe and elsewhere. Headline in the *Time Magazine* 'Swirling new ring of hell,' (1996) is one example. Author notes that these uncorroborated materials become accepted analysis of the war by policy makers. This argument by Atkinson reiterates McMulty (1999) that media is key machinery that drives dominant narratives through variant practices of representation.

Spyer (2005:153) looks at under-reporting as a representational practice. She argues that minimalist form of reporting on violence by journalists in Maluku, Indonesia is a negative form of media agency. Under the banner of avoiding proactive form of reporting violence, as the journalists in Maluku claimed, the stripped-bare form of reporting which did not unfold clearly identifiable patterns of violence and origin of conflict becomes in itself a form of representation and ushers the media in a spiral of more merciless events, such as killings and marginalization of minorities (Spyer 2005:161). I will draw upon these insights to analyze framing, focalization and categorization in Star Radio's discussions of post-war justice and violence within the *I Beg to Differ* program, as well as to analyze the interviews with the journalists about their practice.

3. Journalists' Notions of 'Objectivity' and 'Neutrality'

3.1 Introduction

This Chapter introduces Star Radio and its Code of Ethical Conduct and then examines ten face-to-face in-depth interviews held with the Star Radio Board and management, as well as the editors and reporters.

I start with the short history of Star Radio during and after the Liberian civil war, in order to position it within the political and social context of the country. This history is relevant background for the Code of Conduct that the station defined, and journalists should adhere to, in their practice. Concepts of professionalism, impartiality, and truth are embedded in the Code, and are crucial for the way the station defines itself. The interviews are analyzed in relation to the Code and from the perspective of Strong Objectivity in order to determine whether Star Radio counters 'hegemonic' perspectives on peace and reconciliation, with a bias towards the marginalized publics, or not. While analyzing all the interviews, I pay special attention to the interviews with two reporters who are hosts of the five *I Beg to Differ* programs that are analyzed in subsequent chapter. The purpose of this special attention is to compare what they say in the interviews with what they do in the program, i.e. what strategies of framing, focalization and categorization they use as hosts. Also this chapter brings to fore how the station preserves ethos of institutional of integrity and the factors dictating or influencing notions of objectivity and balance, if there are any. I have herein used the initials of journalists interviewed and titles for the rest of the interviewees to avoid conspicuous identification.

3.2 Star Radio

Star Radio made its debut as an alternative voice in the country when preparations were underway for the first in-crisis presidential and legislative elections in Liberia in 1997. Those elections were supervised by the regional body, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and held on July 19, 1997. The main contenders were several Monrovia based political parties and Charles Taylor, head of the biggest rebel group (National Patriotic Front of Liberia which was transformed to the National Patriotic Party). Taylor who won the elections was perceived to have had media leverage by key stakeholders since he operated a private radio station in Gbarnga in the central part of the country (Atkinson 1999).

Star Radio was first set up with funding from the United States Agency for International Development through the international elections group, IFES. Later Foundation Hirondelle⁹, Media for Peace and Human Dignity, came in the picture as a fundraiser. However due to its perceived critical reportage about the government, the station was banned by Mr. Taylor in March 2000, under the pretext that it was operated by foreigners and also violated 1975 Corporation Laws of Liberia which requires business entities to be registered. In 2003, the ban was lifted by the Transitional Government and as Liberia was heading for elections in 2005 Star Radio reappeared as a self-proclaimed independent station. The claim of independence is however contestable and needs to be proved. Firstly radio stations supported by international organizations may be mediums for creating legitimacy for international

⁹ Up to 2008 Star Radio was fully funded by the Lausanne based Foundation Hirondelle, Media for Peace and the Government of Netherlands, Hirondelle Foundation also funded the Radio of Rwanda International Criminal Tribunal (ICTR) and Radio Okapi in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

networks and a conduit for maintaining western ideologies. Secondly (as I will argue later) media often serve dominant political and economic agendas, even when they are not directly censored by the government.

Star Radio is a registered non-profit NGO transmitting nationwide and in the sub-region. The Programs Editor informed me that Star Radio presently has nine correspondents across the country and 15 vernacular announcers. 'With a new 3.5 kilowatt transmitter, Star Radio FM service is covering about 65% of the country,' the Programs Editor disclosed. The station broadcasts on FM 104; its shortwave is not operational at the moment (www.starradio.org). It broadcasts programs ranging from news to discussions on regional and national issues, economy and politics, as well as entertainment and chat shows. Among some of the programs aired on Star Radio are: Women Special; From the Counties, Faith and Society; We Too Have a Voice; NGO Forum; and People Talk. It is a Liberian entity with a Board comprising prominent Liberians, which include: Madam Hawa Goll-Kotchi, Chairperson, Cllr. Krubo Kollie, Co-chair, Mr. John Collins, member and Mrs. Etweda Cooper, member. The Board is the overseeing body that works to ensure that Star remains policy compliant. The Board Chair is an educator by training, formerly National Secretary of Liberia National Commission for UNESCO. Presently she is a Commissioner of the Governance Commission, a government think-tank. The Co-chair is a lawyer, and Deputy Minister for Legal Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a member of the ruling Unity Party. Mrs. Etweda Cooper is head of the Liberia Women Initiative, a very influential civil society group in the vanguard of advocacy for women rights, while John Collins is immediate past Managing Director of Roberts International Airport, now a businessman.

Figure 1: Star Radio Chemistry



Star Radio projects itself as value driven, as the picture of its 'Chemistry' shows. The internal core values are defined to guide the conduct of staff toward continuous efficient broadcast ethics. It is a virtuous cycle in which values lead to positive outcomes (Source: Star Radio).

3.3 Star Radio Charter and Code of Ethical Conduct

Written by the station's administrator on May 18, 2006 and 28 June 2006, the Code of Ethical Conduct and Charter is pivotal for the study in that it provides another angle from which the station can be further studied in relation to what journalists say, and their practice. Regulatory policies can help provide historical insights about organizational culture and self-understanding, and may serve as an explicit measuring rod for an institutional practice. Star Radio Charter and Code of Ethical Conduct is one way the researcher intends to bring to focus the institutional politics, values and the underlying assumptions of such policies vis-à-vis the narratives of staff and the practices of the two hosts of *I Beg to Differ* with the aim of pinpointing the inherent contradictions and linkages if there be any. The Charter of Star Radio states among many other regulations that: 'Star Radio is an independent station committed to broadcasting impartial and credible information on the situation in Liberia and

the region'(Charter, p.1) The relevant portions of the Charter and Code of Ethical Conduct focusing on journalist practice are included for review (the details are contained in appendix 2).

In the Code of Ethical Conduct, which has as its purpose the protection of the impartiality and neutrality of Star Radio, it is spelled out that: 'Star Radio treats it's public as fairly and openly as possible, on air and online. Star Radio's first loyalty is to the audience, to whom the station is accountable,' (Code of Conduct, Section 2 No.4). Additionally, The staff is urged not to accept any gifts, tickets or reimbursement from individual and organizations covered by Star (Code of Conduct, Section 3 No.3).

3.4 Board and Management: Ceremonials of Power

Star Radio has a five-member Board, although only four are presently named. Three of the current Board members are women. The Chair and Co-chair are officials of Government. The Chair is a Commissioner of the Governance Commission, while Co-chair is Deputy Minister, Legal Counsel of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Board Chair August 2009). Asked about why Star Radio was established, the Board Chair said:

Star Radio was established in 1997 to create a level playing field for all political parties who felt disenfranchised by Taylor's radio station during the elections that year....Later its scope of operations was expanded to include peace building and contact point for missing relatives....But when Star Radio was seen as being too critical of Mr. Taylor's government, it was closed down.

Thus independence, objectivity and critical perspective remain important for the Star Radio, and according to the Chair: 'The Board has a ceremonial role in the day to day running of the station and does not interfere with the editorial policy. We only try to ensure that Star remains policy compliant'. Moreover, regarding objectivity and whether her current position in government was affecting the credibility of Star Radio, she said:

We try to make sure that the station maintains is objectivity....For example some time ago, President Sirleaf sent financial gifts to media institutions and we returned ours with a nice letter stating that Star Radio would not accept the gift....We have a code of conduct and charter that guide the station the management, reporters and we are aware of these.

Thus while the highest functions in the Board are given to the members of the Liberian Government, a position is held by the Chair that this has no impact on the station and its journalist practice, and that Code of Conduct is a sufficient protection of station's objectivity and independence.

Interviews with members of the station's managements revealed another important factor that could influence station's independence and integrity: finances. I was told that Foundation Hirondelle, which was a fundraiser for Star Radio, has parted company after it said there were no further commitments from donors to fund Star Radio at the end of 2008¹⁰. The station manager explained that:

At the moment the station received some assistance from Humanity United through which we acquired a new FM transmitter that has just been installed and portion of the assistance is

¹⁰ It is worth noting that the point of view of the Board is a bit different than the management: Board Chair insisted that Foundation Hirondelle quitted when Star Radio raised questions about the transparency and accountability of funds mobilized by Hirondelle. This implies Star Radio's strong ethical standards.

being used to set up a viable marketing unit. We also received some assistance from another USA based group, Pro-Victims for technical support and we hope to get a SW transmitter soon.

It was important to note that the Management as well as the journalists brought forth the relationship between shaky finances and the quality of the work, insisting that the latter does not suffer due to the former. One of the managers insisted that: 'In spite of the financial drawdown, the content and quality of our programs and news judgement remain unaffected.'

The manager also insisted that the management does not dictate content of the program. However, while the Board Chair noted that their role is simply to see that Star Radio adheres to the policies, manager had a bit less concrete description of the management role:

While we do not interfere with the editorial policy of the news department, the standing policy is to avoid creating chaos or panic in reporting. The station is not discriminatory in its services. It is a community-based radio station that deals with all people in the society; from the man in the street to the highest in the land.

In Liberia, there are news stories reminiscent of violence and may tend to cause stir in the minds of the public given recent experiences with war. Furthermore, at a recent press conference held by former warlords indicted by the TRC, they insinuated threats to the peace of the country if attempts were made to arrest them. The outside broadcast service of Star Radio and a number of radio stations was used for that press conference. In the end, the airwaves were saturated with panic because of the inflammatory statements of the TRC indictees. The management has reaffirmed its policy that use of its airwave to make inflammatory statement will not reoccur. In the five *I Beg to Differ* programs analyzed, this policy was often read to remind the guests to avoid inflammatory utterances on the program.

Important for the discussion on marginalized perspectives, the Station Manager said: 'Star radio is a community based radio station that deals with all people in the society; from the man in the street to the highest in the land.' This statement was further corroborated in other interviews.

3.5 Editors: Ambiguous Hierarchies of Gate- Keeping

The Editor-in-chief (M D) spoke of his job of gate-keeping at Star Radio and described what gate-keeping means in his view:

MD : We cannot boast of professional practices, but because of the level of trust we have built over the years, we are constrained to keep track of all the stories that are coming in, especially for reporters that are constrained, when it comes to balance, we follow-up on stories.... As gatekeeper, our job is to ensure that stories that go on the air are balanced and are professionally handled. Besides it being professionally handled from the reporter's point of view, we look at the choice of words. The station seeks to serve the interest of the people, so the choice of words that we give out to the people is not only words that will affect our newsmakers, but words that are too big at the level of the targeted audience that we have and our broadcast targets the ordinary people in the interior which consist of a large amount of uneducated people and small amount of educated.

The point made here that the audience may lack education for 'big words' and thus the language of reporting has to be accessible. This could indicate a care in Star Radio to avoid marginalization of the audience caused by lack of education. However the idea of 'gate-

keeping' is interesting, especially when coupled with the above statement that the station cannot boast of professional practices.

When the Editor spoke of Star Radio not boasting of professionalism, he was in a sense being figurative. In Liberian context, one is not expected to shower praises or grade him/herself. That task is left with others/society to do. By making that comment the Editor was actually implying the reverse.

The Deputy Editor-in-Chief (VG) also insisted that: 'there are standards to conform with; that is balancing and giving people the opportunity to be heard.' When asked how she would describe her reportorial work here, she answered:

VG: At Star Radio we have a policy to hear from everyone. We are not restricted to getting the view from one class of people. We talk to people from all classes, street vendors, just to give everyone the opportunity.

I also asked about relation of power between the Board, the Management and the editors and reporters, interested to hear how the speaker will describe hierarchical relationships at Star Radio.

VG: There has been a problem with the hierarchy of the station and there have been times when Board members who are largely government officials call the station manager and he gets frightened. The news department however has held its grounds.

This answer contradicts the statements made by both the Board Chair and the Management about their role in stream-lining Star Radio, and points the integrity and independence of the editors and journalists. To what extent this independence reflects in the actual journalist work will be examined in the next chapter. For now, a point where managers and editors seem to agree came as an answer to my question about what obstacles does the interviewee face in her job and how does she cope with them:

VG: We face both capacity and finance. Journalists are some of the least paid, which poses a serious challenge to professionalism. Another hindrance at Star Radio is that there are only two cars. Sometimes when a journalist wants to go on a developing story, there is no vehicle, and the person ends up missing breaking news.

3.6 Journalists: Professionalism, Despite and Above All?

In my interviews with journalists two issues stood out as important: firstly, journalists' claims of professionalism, objectivity and neutrality; secondly, the hardship they face with the unstable financial support to the station and poor technical equipment. They mentioned that working conditions are affected by unstable power supply, and lack cars and mobility for news gathering. Furthermore, these two issues were often linked in the narratives, as journalists often insisted that the falling support to the station and working conditions are not having any negative bearing on the professional or value judgment system of the station. All four journalists stressed that they do their job professionally, despite the hardship. And they all claim that, despite all, Star Radio still has a better situation than most other media institutions in terms of incentive and equipment. In their words, this enables Star to demand high standards from its staff. As one of the reporters said: 'The support our management gives, helps us not to fall into temptation as journalists from other institutions do' (SG host of *I Beg to Differ*). One of the two female journalists interviewees said: 'We walk with our heads above the waters at Star Radio (VK see appendix) and added: 'there is a policy at Star Radio that we are not allowed to take money in any form or manner. This policy has helped us to work

professionally; that everyone in the public wants to interact with because we have made a difference among our colleagues, given the low economic empowerment at other media institutions.’ Another reporter stated that he tries to be professional because the station is independent, and a lot of people depend on it locally and internationally for dissemination of factual news from Liberia. He said: ‘It is not easy coping with objectivity under these conditions that is why you find some Liberian journalists coming into conflict with their own ethics. At Star we are governed by rules. But it is difficult and tempting to objective’ (BB see appendix 3).

It seems that the Star Radio presents a viable alternative for employment, in terms of remuneration. Moreover journalists add that the station provides the enabling professional environment. In Liberian context, speaking of not ‘falling into temptation’ refers to the practice of accepting gifts or *carto* from people who are approached for information, or often enough, who approach journalists offering information (*carto* comes from a French word *cadeau*, which means gift or token). They are in Liberian media context called ‘newsmakers’ – people about whom the news are made. Politicians, business people, celebrities often approach journalists in order to get media time and offer *carto* as an incentive to a reporter to write or speak with him, about him, or about her. The fact that journalists spoke a lot about ‘newsmakers’, *carto* and struggles for keeping ethical code in the context of material and technical hardship is an indication of a practice that in its core not only corrupts production of news, but corrupts it in specific ways: by surrendering media spaces to the rich and powerful (those who can give *carto*). If the practice would be widespread, poor sections of society would never have a chance to present their views in radio.

3.6.1 I Beg to Differ: Claims about Journalist Practice

The issues of objectivity, neutrality and professionalism, and the need to include perspectives of various fractions of the society, were especially important for my interviews with two journalists (MW and SG) who were the hosts of *I Beg to Differ*. How they understand these concepts, and how they see their practice will be explored in the next section, while the following chapter will test journalists’ words by analysing their acts.

One of the questions I asked all journalists was: what do you say about journalist practice here at Star Radio and the obstacles of the good practice? The answers from the host and co-host of *I Beg to Differ* were in line with what other journalists claimed:

MW: As a journalist, we always want to make sure we fall in line with ethical standards, because any attempt to go outside the ethical range, you will not just be offending the modus operandi of the station, you will also be offending the ethics of good journalism which we want to keep all of the time. I try to balance my story. If there are ethical issues, the editor will call and question me. Based on the relevance of the story and the characters involved, he will either ground it or tell me to do more investigation.....We face some challenges like moving around. We had some problem with equipment, but management has taken some steps and brought some modern equipment. Another problem is that some newsmakers try to as much as possible to conceal the information; they don’t want to come up. As a strong journalist you want your information. You know what you want. I was trained that to get your information you hit the interviewee hard, if possible aggravate him and push him a little bit to the wall so that he opens up and reveal the information to you. I try always to maintain high level of professionalism in my job.

SG: There is no practice of censorship taking place here at Star Radio. We do not have institutional limitation or measures by the institution to limit or negatively influence or impact our work. Management only urges us to be professional. The management supports us and believes in

professionalism.... We have some level of logistical problem, but it is not as worse compared with that of other institutions; this helps us not to fall into temptation as others do. We do not have ethical problems at Star Radio. In my practice, I try to be professional and do not allow myself to fall into temptation of being influenced by newsmakers.

Clearly, claims of professionalism and integrity are made both on the behalf of the station, in general, and on behalf one's own work. These claims are even stronger when hosts of *I Beg to Differ* speak about their program. Talking about the objectives of the program, the two hosts stated the following:

MW: *I Beg to Differ* was designed after our training by Robin White¹¹ to be a different kind of program where topics are generated by the evolving issues in the society. The program was designed to attack very important issues as they relate to social, political, religious or anything. Is like getting sides on controversial issues in society. Like for example, the TRC report. One party says it is genuine, while another says no, there are flaws. Based on such issues, controversial in nature, we bring the relevant guests to discuss these issues so the public will have an understanding. We do not jump into conclusion or pass judgment. We question the parties involved so they will say everything in defense of their side. After the guests lay their premise, we allow the public to phone in to raise their concerns

SG: The objective of the program is to conscientise our listeners about issues affecting their lives. Issues about development and issues that play on their lives. In so doing we bring on board people who can address those issues....We give the guests equal time. If I were to ask one guest five questions within 10 minutes, I should do same with the other guests. If you not do so, it may be termed as being biased. Our program is not intended to cause panic or inflame any issue. We entertain debate between the pros and cons and offer a balanced air time to our guests.

Several claims are made here. First where the two reporters agree, the program is supposed to engage in relevant and actual issues, as well as to educate and 'conscientise' the public. An assumption here seems to be that the public has neither understanding nor political consciousness about the crucial issues affecting their lives, and thus may say something about marginalization. Another important point is the method of achieving the objectives. The first statement stresses 'neutrality' of the program in terms of not taking sides in controversial issues. The second statement defines neutrality/lack of bias in terms of equal attention to airtime for the guests. All of these points will be easy to test in the next chapter, when the five programs hosted by the two reporters are analyzed.

To add to the analysis of creating space for voicing concerns of marginalized groups, I asked how topics and guests were selected on the program:

MW: Our topics are influenced by daily news events and those individuals that are directly linked to the news items are those that we call. We do not give one guest air time to the detriment of the other. We try to handle the issues objectively from a very balanced perspective. We try to balance the questions and to make sure we do not hit one guest hard and leave the other guest. We try to play the role of a 'devil's advocate' for the public. Our primary focus is the audience.

¹¹ Robin White is the former Editor of the British Broadcasting Corporation Focus on. He was in Liberia in 2005 to conduct training in interviewing techniques and news reporting skills for journalists recruited Star Radio.

SG: We bring people from government, civil society, religious and various communities. But management is consulted and once the go ahead is given, I scout for guests on the particular issues.

The answers indicate first, that guests are seen as linked to, or knowledgeable about the events, and second, that the guest list requires approval by the management. The first point may indicate the balance between the guests who are the 'experts' and those who represent 'ordinary' people from all walks of life (as manager and editors stressed). The second point may indicate the proximity of station managers to key power brokers in Liberian society. Both of these points will be tested in the analysis of the five selected programs of *I Beg to Differ*.

3.7 Conclusion

From the interviews with the Star Radio Board, Station Management, Editors and Reporters, above, what seems evident is that all of them claim that the station maintains a very high standard of objectivity and professionalism. They all claim to follow practices of accuracy balance and fairness. Moreover, it was made clear by the Station Manager, Editor-in-Chief, and Deputy Editor-in-Chief that Star Radio promotes public interest in its news and current affairs programs. Thus the dominant frame that seems prevalent from the level of the station Manager, Board and Editors, to journalists is that Star Radio serves the interests of the public regardless of class, status in the society. The hosts of *I Beg to Differ* furthermore claimed that guests are selected and treated fairly, while the journalists try as much as possible to be balanced, avoid making judgment or take sides in the discussions. These claims will be revisited and tested in the next chapter when I discuss the five programs of *I Beg to Differ*.

4. *I Beg to Differ*. Peace, Justice and Impunity

4.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with Five programs of *I Beg to Differ* on Star Radio held on July 2, 7, 28 and August 12 and 17 2009. The editions held on July 7 and 28 were hosted by SG, whilst the editions on July 2, August 12 and 17 were hosted by MW. Employing the lens of Framing, Focalization and Categorization under the rubric of strategies of media representation, the programs were analyzed to establish which perspective the hosts bring in the debate of peace, justice and impunity following the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report in June 2009. I asked where does the perspective taken in the program position Star Radio in the overarching theoretical framework of strong objectivity. In other words, I examine journalistic practice of the hosts of *I Beg to Differ* from the perspective of the marginalized sections of the public.

4.2 *I Beg to Differ* (IBTD)

I Beg to Differ is a 50- minute phone-in program held from Monday to Thursday each week. It is one of Star Radio's most listened programs¹². As the name suggests, the program broadcasts on-air the views of different actors: from ordinary individuals who phone the program, to government, opposition parties, civil society, religious leaders, academicians, and business people who may be the guests of the program. It often constructs its debates around the burning issues featured in the local media, or public opinion circles, ranging from good governance to the rule of law, civil society, protests, and gender equality issues. Most of the issues discussed on the program are about the government policies, post-war reconstruction and development, peace and justice. As was mentioned, *I Beg to Differ* was chosen principally because it has been an award winning-talk show for two consecutive years (2006 and 2007), recognized by the National Media Awards Committee¹³ as the best radio phone-in program. Another reason for choosing this program was that its formula remained consistent since 2006, as opposed to talk shows hosted by other stations which tend to come and go.

The specific five editions were chosen because of their relevance to the question of peace and reconciliation in post-war Liberia. As already indicated, this study explores how the radio station is positioned on the issues of peace and reconciliation viewed from the words and practices of its staff. The interviews with the hosts of *I Beg to Differ* indicate that they try to produce a 'balanced show' and to give chance to those who want to talk to be heard on the issues that concern them. The hosts also claimed that they provide a mix of social, political and religious discussions, covering controversial and relevant issues and getting topics from daily news events. These issues determine how guests for the talk show are selected. That is,

¹² *I Beg to Differ* was also rated as one of the most listened to phone-in programs by the (Liberia Media Centre Survey 2008)

¹³ The National Media Awards Committee is set by the Press Union of Liberia and composed up of professionals from civil society who evaluate works of journalists and media institutions and gives awards on an annual basis (PUL, 2008).

the guests are individuals believed to having knowledge or an authority on a given issue and the issue is looked at from the angle of generating a debate.

However, if the guest is considered an expert in the field, it will more often than not mean that the claim of the station being for 'people of all walks of life' and not for 'specific classes' cannot be sustained. In the five programs on TRC Report, there was no 'ordinary citizen' as a guest, and most of the guests were having high political or other functions. The fact that street vendors were not the guests, however, does not have to mean that their perspectives were absent. Civil society representatives, for example could represent the voices of the marginalized. Whether this happened or not, who were the guests of the programs and what perspectives on the Report, as well as the issues of peace and reconciliation were offered in the program will be discussed in the following section.

Given that the five analyzed programs are about the TRC Report, a reminder: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its findings on June 30, 2009 and recommended prosecution of 91 former warlords for egregious war crimes and a 30-year ban from political office of 52 key financiers, including current President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (TRC Report 2009 239-245). The government in principle has employed a subterfuge of killing the report. Its first move was to pass the Report to the Legislature, which by the dictate of the Constitution represents the people. Since June Lawmakers have been locked on the argument that they need further consultations with constituents. Opposition parties supporting the implementation appear not to have the legislative quorum to effect an endorsement of the Report.

The arguments of pro and against the implementation of recommendations in the Report were pursued by different sections of the society, some of whom have been invited to present their views at *I Beg to Differ*.

4.2.1 Episode 1: July 2, 2009

On July 2, 2009, the first of five programs on Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report was hosted. The main focus of the discussions was the reaction of a group called the Coalition for Peace and Tranquillity in Liberia on the Report. Guests included the spokesperson of the Coalition for Peace and Tranquility, Mr. Tiko Yonlay and Mr. Mohamed Kaiwu, Strategist and Board Chairman of the Coalition. The Coalition is a new civil society group which came in the limelight after the release of the TRC Report. They claim their mission is to engage relevant stakeholders to find ways of consolidating the peace. In relation to the Report, the Coalition was of the view that some individuals indicted in the TRC were not given the opportunity to tell their side of the story. The other guest was the Media Officer of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Mr. James Kpargoi. The representatives of the Coalition were against the Report's recommendations (to prosecute perpetrators) while the TRC Media Officer was defending the recommendations.

Yonlay and Kaiwu argued that the Report did not follow even elementary logic of the law, since many of those who had been condemned were not given a chance to be heard. According to them, the perpetrators and victims need to face each other as contained in the TRC Act. In his counter argument, Kpargoi, the Media Officer of the TRC said: 'The Coalition is a bogus group and Yonlay and Kiawu were paid agents hired to engage in ill-perceived propaganda.' He cautioned his opponents to carefully read the Report. Kpargoi claimed it was sad for Yonlay and Kaiwu to advocate for perpetrators and war mongers to go free. "No one should harbour fear that the arrest of ex-warlords would lead to chaos,"

Kpargoi exclaimed. There were only two callers on the program. The first caller said while he hails the TRC Report, selective punishment of perpetrators is not the way to go, arguing that the commission needs to go back to the drawing board. The second caller argued that the TRC Report should not be condemned. The caller said blanket amnesty should not be granted to perpetrators, but that perpetrators should be categorized based on the gravity of crime committed during the war.

On this program, the host tended to be more tolerant of the Coalition representatives than the TRC Media Officer. This was shown by the frequency of questions posed to Coalition representatives. Questions such as: 'Is the TRC Report a borrowed idea; so no credence should be given to the Report; should we condemn the Report?' These questions implicitly show a bias toward the Coalition. The host also asked the TRC Media Officer four questions whilst he posed seven questions to the Coalition. In terms of time allocation, there was discrepancy: 21 minutes was used by the Coalition, while TRC Media Officer used only 12 minutes. Regarding callers, with just 6 minutes of participation, confined to brevity and clarity of the caller. These observations of time discrepancy and uneven questioning contrast the claims of balance and neutrality made earlier by host.

4.2.2 Episode 2: July 7, 2009

The edition of the program held on July 7, 2009 dwelled on reports of threats on the lives of some Commissioners. In the opening sentences, the host revisited the TRC's recommendations calling for the prosecution of warlords and a ban on President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and others for 30 years. The central question the host prefaced the discussion with was whether the threats on the TRC Commissioners were genuine or were mere fabrications to raise false alarm. He also asked whether the internal wrangle that embroiled the TRC should be a reason to question the credibility of its Report. Guests included Mr. Wilmot Paye, an Assistant Minister of Transport and a stalwart of the ruling Unity Party, Mr. Acarius Gray of the opposition party Congress for Democratic Change and Mr. Maxwell Teahjay, introduced only as a political activist.

Wilmot Paye argued that caution should be exercised with the implementation of the TRC report and that the security, political, social and cultural implications for the country should be taken into consideration. Paye claimed that there are three basic schools of thought in the debate on the TRC Report. He said: 'There are those who believe the report is infallible and should be accepted and implemented. There is also another group which thinks there is some degree of discrimination and a semblance of selective application of rules. Still there is a third group that calls for patience and a study of all the issues that have come out.' It is hard to argue with the position that opinion is divided over the Report and its recommendations. But here opponents of the Report are implicitly being presented as 'reasonable' considering 'patience' and supporters are being viewed as lacking knowledge of and sensitivity for the fragile situation of the country.

In a counter claim, Mawell Teahjay argued that in as much as people benefitted from the spoils of their actions during the war, they should equally be prepared to face the consequences of such actions. He said that while the TRC Report is not perfect, it must be read and analyzed so that those who perpetrated heinous crimes are punished. He further claimed that the TRC was to address three basic issues, i.e. the question of amnesty to those who genuinely demonstrate remorse for their part in the war; reparation to victims and the question of how to break the cycle of impunity. 'If breaking the cycle of impunity is so

paramount, what else could have been done to address impunity than to prosecute those accused of war crimes; the law must take its course', he maintained. For his part, Acarius Gray argued that the TRC Act is clear and that there should not be a debate about its implementation, citing Article 10, Section 48 which mandates the President to report to the National Legislature within three months of the receipt of the TRC recommendations and to give a report on the progress of implementation and thereafter on a quarterly basis. 'I had earlier called on President Sirleaf to resign on moral grounds. The President is already indicted, and cannot be expected to appear before the Legislature to explain why the Report that indicts her is not implemented,' Gray noted.

There were only three callers on the program. The first caller argued that while he does not support impunity, the TRC process should not be a selective justice process, which is held outside the terms of the constitution of Liberia. The caller said all sides must be given chance to give their side of the story. The second caller claimed the TRC Report was intended to create chaos. This caller said that the report should not be politicized but should be debated from the perspective of sustaining durable peace. The third caller argued that President Sirleaf should not be made to resign for crimes committed while she was yet not President of Liberia.

In this episode, the host showed a bias toward Wilmot Paye. For every question posed to the discussants, he allowed Paye to comment first and more exhaustively, which left the other discussants with limited time to make their point. 14 minutes was used by Paye as opposed to 17 used by the two others - evidence of bias in terms of airtime. My critique of bias on the program was affirmed at the end of the program when Acarius and Teahjay complained of unfair airtime given them. One of them remarked: 'You brought us to make fun of us.' Three callers were allowed only five minutes which limited public participation. This positioning of the host is at odds with earlier claims of neutrality he made.

4.2.3 Episode 3: July 28, 2009

The July 28 episode focused on the positions of guests regarding President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's open admittance of support to the NPFL of former President Charles Taylor to overthrow the brutal regime of Samuel Doe in a statement she made at programs in observance of the 162nd Independence Anniversary of Liberia. The central question of the program was whether the confession by the President should save her from being banned from public office for 30 years, as recommended by the TRC Report. Guests were Mr. Sam Wulue, one time Minister of Commerce. Wulue is a private businessman in Monrovia. The other guests were Assistant Minister Wilmot Paye (appearing for the second time) and Mr. Darius Dillon, a member of the opposition Liberty Party.

Sam Wulue stated that the country has made a lot of progress and there was a need to keep the reconstruction and peace process on this track. He added that whether the President made a reiteration of her role in the conflict or not, Liberia was at a crossroads and needed to forge ahead. When asked what he thought about the issue of prosecuting perpetrators? Wulue added that punishing wrongdoers as called for by the TRC Report was not the way to go. He said: 'Liberia is bigger than prosecution of warlords,' implying a choice between peace and justice, a common theme in much of the post-conflict literature.

Wilmot Paye, a junior minister of the Sirleaf government and member of the ruling Unity Party argued that the President's statement was not a confession. She made this admission, he argued, in response to suspicions of her apparent lack of interest in the TRC Report. He contended that the President was not justifying the wrongs that were associated with the

conflict, or Charles Taylor, but was only acknowledging tensions which had mounted for decades made it impossible for anyone to prevent the historical setback the country experienced. He debated further that the President was only demonstrating honesty by stating her shortcomings and admitting that she too was not perfect.

For Darius Dillon, a member of the opposition Liberty Party, truthfulness is critical for healing. Dillon argued that from December 1989 to May 2000, when Taylor had taken over a large portion of the country, President Sirleaf visited Taylor, and thereafter called for the levelling of the Executive Mansion (home of the Presidency). Dillon further admitted that whatever were the principles of the NPFL, there was no justification for taking up arms against the state by President Sirleaf and others. Regarding the TRC Report, Dillon maintained that rather than prosecution, the peace and stability interest of the country was paramount.

There were six callers on this program. Five of them claimed the president's admittance was to justify her linkage to the death and mayhem which took away 250,000 lives. These callers claimed it was unfortunate for the President to declare support for the war, after previous denials. Only one caller however said that it was appropriate for the President to admit the truth and said the confession of guilt should be embraced. Like the previous, all the callers on this program made statements and did not raise questions.

This program reveals an interesting episode in which the three discussants were in one boat: stop TRC Report. What is interesting is the appearance of Wilmot Paye for the second time with the same host, raising more doubts as to the host's motive for inviting the same guest for the second time to comment on same the issue, considering that he had given the government's position on the TRC Report. The host's knowledge of the predisposition of Paye and yet providing another airspace implies the privileging of the government's view. Callers had used 6 minutes to talk, a time inadequate to make any serious input. This contradicts previous assertions that the host provides space for all voices to be heard. Composition of guest shows consistent pattern of less opportunity for marginalized groups to air their views on the TRC Report.

4.2.4 Episode 4: August 12 2009

This program started with the host declaring that the National Consciousness Movement (NCM) of Liberia organized recently a peaceful demonstration in Monrovia arguing that the TRC Report is not reconciliatory and has the propensity to create chaos in the country. The host then mentioned that another group, the Forum for the Establishment of a War Crimes Court, has been campaigning for the full implementation of the TRC Report. The former group was established after the release of the Report, while the latter has existed since 2006 and has been advocating for warlords to be tried. Guests included representatives of these groups: Mr. Paul Thomas, Chairman of the National Consciousness Movement and Mr. Sampson Tweh, and Mr. Richard Kieh, Acting Chairman and Public Relations Officer, of the Forum for the Establishment of a War Crimes Court.

Paul Thomas of the NCM argued that his group put forward an agenda for sustaining the fragile peace. He said the three key recommendations put forward by the group were: a general amnesty; a national conference to derive a national consensus on a way forward and inviting the National Traditional Council to chair the reconciliation process.

Host: Are you advocating for blanket amnesty?

Thomas: We are calling for amnesty, because it will help to maintain peace in the country, our peace is still fragile.

Host: People who committed war crimes should go scot-free?

Thomas: We are calling for general amnesty. We believe the country will be plunged into chaos if the TRC recommendations were implemented.

Thomas argued that Liberia's situation was different from Sierra Leone and that the intent and spirit of the TRC was to reconcile, to follow more the South African model.

Sampson Tweh and Richard Kieh on the other hand argued unrelentingly that insincerity is a problem in Liberia. They said the TRC Act is not patterned after the South African Truth Commission at all as claimed by Thomas.

Host: What do you make of Thomas' claims for blanket amnesty for perpetrators; does it augur well for justice in this country?

Tweh: The TRC had a mandate to investigate and recommend punishment for those who committed war crimes. Blanket amnesty being called for by Thomas is a deceit. There will be no resurgence of violence if perpetrators are tried.

Host: Is the NCM a sponsored group?

Kieh: Thomas Fallah's group is a sponsored group. This Report will not be swept under the rug by any surrogate group. Justice is a reconciling factor and a war crimes court is a deterrent for alleged war criminals that cause confusion and shoot their way to power.

The FEWCC officials claimed further that there cannot be democracy without proper justice mechanism and observed that NCM was a sponsored group.

This time there were seven callers on the program. Five expressed support for the TRC Report, saying those who killed in cold blood should not get away with impunity and that the TRC Report constituted the best roadmap towards durable peace. One caller claimed the National Consciousness Movement was a sponsored by the government. On the other hand, two other callers described the TRC recommendations as problematic and suggested that its implementation could have serious security implications for the country as a whole.

In this episode, the questions by the host tended to ridicule the guest from the NCM. The tone was mocking. For example host asked: 'Is your group a sponsored group; did you receive cups of rice to demonstrate?' The host did not exhibit similar caricaturing of FEWCC. The questions tended to weaken NCM's position while invariably strengthening FEWCC's position in terms of elaboration. Airtime was disproportionately allocated; as 15 minutes used by the NCM and 18 minutes by the FEWCC. 8 minutes of the programs was used by callers, but considering that there were seven callers, it also shows a continued minimal space for the public. These differences point out the inconsistency with the claim of fairness and balance.

4.2.5 Episode 5: August 17, 2009

The episode of August 17, 2009 focused on reaction of pro-government and civil society actors on the visit to Liberia of US Secretary of State of Hilary Clinton, on 13 August 2009. The debate revolved around Clinton's open praise of President Sirleaf while throwing the fate of the TRC Report back into the lap of the government. Clinton said: 'The US will support any decision the government takes on the Report'. The host questioned this position of the US Secretary of State, stating it came as a total disappointment to civil society organizations

campaigning for the Report's acceptance and implementation. The program featured Mr. Philip Sandi, Secretary General of the Press Union of Liberia, Assistant Minister for Planning of the Ministry of Gender & Development, Mr. Jeremlimick Piah and Mr. Isaac Jackson, Assistant Minister for Culture, of the Ministry of Information.

Jackson and Piah argued that Mrs. Clinton described the progress of President Sirleaf's government as unprecedented for a post war country. They further quoted her as saying that Liberia is a model for successful transition from a post conflict situation; from lawlessness to democratic politics, from despair to a 'politics of hope', in just three years. The ministers claimed Mrs. Clinton's statement on the TRC Report was alluding to an earlier statement of President Obama during his visit to Ghana when he stressed that the future of Africa is something for Africans to decide. 'Similarly, Clinton was re-echoing that the future of Liberia is up to Liberians to decide. She neither condemned nor rejected the 'TRC Report', Piah contended.

Host: Do you expect the public take you serious?

Piah; What do you mean?

Host: Will they not think you are on a public relations spree?

Piah: If saying the fact is public relations, so be it. This is what the public needs to know.

Host: Why do you think the government left the civil society out of the itinerary of Mrs. Clinton?

Sandi: Well maybe they figured then that we will press hard for the TRC Report. We insist the issue of the TRC Report is at the core of the survival of Liberia...The US position on issues relating to Liberia has a serious influence on the country. You know when President Bush asked Mr. Taylor to leave Liberia, Taylor had to leave.

Sandi also said that many Liberians expected that during her visit, Mrs. Clinton would have put forward a US position on the TRC Report. He said there is a struggle between the government and civil society, and Clinton did not 'take sides'. Sandi further argued that no matter how much money was devoted to reconstruction, unless impunity was tackled, it is a waste of resources.

There were only three callers during the program, two of whom argued that Liberians were disappointed that Mrs. Clinton did not comment on TRC Report in the way she was expected. Despite having condemned human rights abuses in the Democratic Republic of Congo, she remained silent in Liberia. One caller said the comment of Mrs. Clinton left Liberians with the full responsibility for deciding their own destiny.

I found the host opening sentences as influencing the way he positioned himself on the program. He seemed predisposed to leveraging the civil society representative above the ministers: Sandi used 11 minutes as opposed to 21 used by Piah and Jackson. Without restating the previous position of disparity in airtime, the imbalance in the number of questions posed to guests was also evident in this episode: six to Sandi and four to the ministers. Callers used eight minutes to air their views, which was far more than the time on the previous four episodes. But again the bias toward the civil society representative negates any claim of balance and neutrality.

4.3 Analysis

There were two main frames which appeared in relation to the issues of TRC Report in the five programs. One frame was about the peace and stability of Liberia being counter-posed to the chaos and return to violence if prosecution of perpetrators as recommended by the TRC

goes ahead. The other frame centred on addressing questions of impunity by prosecuting warlords and others accused of war crimes. Here too, within a single frame the alternatives of impunity for war criminals and justice for victims were counter-posed.

The study found that of the five programs analyzed, three (July 7, 28 and August 12) were framed around the position of the future peace versus the future stability of Liberia, and the other two (July 2 and August 17) were framed around the problem of impunity counter-posed to the solution of justice. As to the categories created in the programs, it was very clear that the hosts utilized the 'us' 'them' distinctions, creating oppositional stance and forcing guests in very explicit term to declare are they 'for' or 'against' specific position. The categories are, thus, related to the framing of the program in clear-cut black and white, simplified oppositions which may not be the most useful way of addressing the issues of peace and reconciliation. At the same time, these categories do correspond to the statements of the journalists in the interviews where they see themselves as following controversial issues in a relentless manner.

Looking at focalization, the questions whose perspectives were present in the programs, and especially if the perspectives of marginalized groups have been given space, it is interesting to see that there were three types of guests on the five editions of *I Beg to Differ*. The first type were government officials. Two of them were members of the ruling Unity Party (Jerelimick Piah and Wilmot Paye). The second type were four civil society organizations, two of which (National Consciousness Movement of Liberia and Coalition for Peace and Tranquillity) called for amnesty for perpetrators and two others (Forum for the Establishment of War Crimes Court and the Press Union of Liberia) argued the prosecution of perpetrators. Third type were independent individuals, and only one of them appeared (Maxwell Teahjay, introduced only as a political activist). Thus, the program gave prominence to the government and the elites of the society and tended to drive the argument around sort of 'cost benefit analysis' of prosecution of warlords.

Moreover the discrepancies in time allocation for guests were significant. It is interesting that of the five programs, the peace versus stability frame was allotted 111 talking minutes (around half of all the time), while the position on justice and impunity received a cumulative airtime of just 58 minutes. The host themselves had 49 minutes and callers had 32 minutes, in total, making up 250 minutes in all for the five episodes that were analyzed.

Furthermore, Assistant Minister Wilmot Paye talked the most than any guest- for 27 minutes (in two programs), while Assistant Ministers Piah and Jackson talked for 21minutes, making 48 minutes for government officials, compared with 63 minutes for other groups and individuals. In terms of focalization, this clearly gives an advantage to the government's view on the TRC Report, and contradicts the previous claims of the hosts about the proportionate distribution of airtime and questions for the guests, as well as having guests from all walks of life.

This disproportionate distribution of airtime and discrepancies in the types of questions on the program also sharply negate their previous claims of objectivity and balance, and their support for specific positions on the Report contradicts their statements about neutrality. It was clear, for instance, that in the three programs hosts supported the idea that perpetrators should not be prosecuted for fear of the possible negative security implications for the country. In two of the programs, however, hosts supported the TRC Report (August 12 and August 17).

Thus the picture of hosts' strategies of focalization is mixed; on the one hand, they have given most air-space to one of the most powerful political groups of the country: the government. But they have also offered the time to civil society, and their own positions have been both for and against government's perspectives. Thus, while *I Beg to Differ* cannot be accused to follow a single line of discussion, it is clear that their claim of being a station for the people of 'all walks of life', and especially of marginalized groups, is exaggerated. Most blatantly, no representative of the many women's groups who argued for the prosecution of war crimes, especially those against women and girls has been invited as a guest. When gender issues were present, they were argued by a (male) government representative. As noted earlier, it is also apparent that all the guests, hosts and callers were male-an incredible coincidence or a systematic blindness for gender equality, for opening spaces for marginalized groups, and for strong subjectivity in journalist practice.

5. Concluding thoughts

Throughout this paper I have attempted to draw the reader's attention to the forms media representation take with the hope of linking these forms of representation with claims of objectivity and neutrality in the media context using the case study of Star Radio in Liberia. I have argued that neutrality and objectivity are contested notions and should be applied to specific contexts and therefore be understood as a perspective rather than as a given. As Foucault has argued heretofore, there is no 'absolute truth'. Neutrality, like truth, is constructed and therefore subject to interpretations. From the interviews held with the Board, Station Management, Editors and Reporters of Star Radio, the dominant frame that appeared was that the station is an 'independent' and 'objective' media institution through claims of professionalism, fairness, balance and accuracy. Star Radio was categorized as classless in its reportage, covering issues relevant to all people, from the man in street to the highest in the land. Having also reviewed the Code of Ethical Conduct and Charter, these claims of objectivity and neutrality and the 'people's radio station' resonate with the institutional framework of the station

Moreover, the study found that Star Radio's claim of objectivity- in the classical meaning of balanced and neutral position- may be sustained as much as the journalists try to practice what they preach: bringing people of differing positions to express their views. However in the reasoning of standpoint epistemology, it cannot be claimed that Star Radio is practising 'strong' objectivity, regardless of the claims of managers, editors and journalists of people-centred programming. The station staff claimed they try as much to get all sides to heard, but they subscribe to the orthodox narrative which sees objectivity as 'not taking sides', a 'sitting on the fence' approach to news reporting. But it is the alternative, an objectivity construct in which public interest is at the apex of the journalist practice, what I call here 'journalism for the masses'. And this was largely absent from the examined programs.

Therefore claims of objectivity and neutrality are ways that people convey specific dominant notions of power and truth, and these to a large extent dictate the patterns of media reportage as I have tried to show (Livingstone 4313 Essay 2009). As seen above, the *I Beg to Differ* hosts were making a case for the non-implementation of the TRC Report fearing its consequences for the country. But it is the elites and their cronies who the TRC Report seeks to bring to justice for crimes committed against ordinary people. Thus taking a position against the TRC is to perpetuate the status quo against the interest of the victims. Consequently, as revealed through the framing, focalization and categorization on the five programs, Star Radio does not make a case for strong objectivity. Relating to the central thesis of this research, it is therefore possible to argue that the journalist's material circumstances and political perspectives, including political situation, salary and equipment in the context of Liberia influence notions of objectivity and neutrality, and that words tend to contrast with practice. However, *I Beg to Differ* is just one of a dozen programs of Star Radio; therefore, conclusion about its location in the practices of strong objectivity is inadequate to make a generalization about the entire Star Radio programming. There may have to be further research on different programs and more content analysis to make a more grounded claim about Star Radio's position vis-à-vis its representation of issues from the lens of marginalized groups.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: Events leading to the establishment of the Liberian TRC

- 1999 July: fresh rebel incursion into northern region of Lofa from neighboring Guinea
- 2003 May: full scale war engulfs the country as LURD (Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, mostly Krahn and Mandingos) makes advances into Monrovia; MODEL another suit of Krahn surfaced from Ivorian border into south east of Liberia, makes advances up to 81 kilometers from Monrovia
- 2003 August 17: Taylor accepts to leave, requests vanguard ECOMIL troops be deployed before departure, swears in his vice president and is flown off by Mozambican and South African Presidents
- 2003 August 18: ceasefire is signed in Accra by LURD, MODEL and Government of Taylor, giving birth to a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Political parties and Civil Society witness signing. Parties agreed on a Truth and Reconciliation Commission
- 2003 October: power sharing National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) headed by businessman Gyude Bryant assumes leadership with a 2-year mandate
- 2005 May : TRC Act is passed by Transitional Legislative Assembly (transitional parliament)
- 2005 October 11 free, fair and transparent democratic elections are held with no absolute winner for presidency
- 2005 November 8: Run-off elections are held and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is elected president
- December 2005: Transitional Chairman Bryant names members of the TRC after public vetting process of Commissioners
- February 2006 President Sirleaf commissions members of the TRC
- May 2006 TRC begins work two-year process of statement taking, testimonies and public hearings; its mandate covers 1979-2003. Nearly 18,000 statements are taken and over 100 public hearings conducted
- June 2008 TRC releases its final report recommending prosecution of 91 warlords and the banning from public office of key financiers of the war, including President Johnson-Ellen-Sirleaf and 51 others.

(Sources: Researcher, TRC Report and Atkinson 1999)

Appendix 2: Star Radio Charter and Code of Ethical Conduct

Charter (verbatim)

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 28 June 2006:

1. 'Star Radio is an independent radio station for Liberia and the sub-region
2. Star Radio, Inc. Is a Liberian entity with a board of Liberians
3. Star Radio has partnership with Hironnelle Foundation, Media for peace and Human dignity
4. Star radio
 - I. Broadcasts impartial and credible information on the situation in the country and the region
 - II. Broadcasts on FM and short-wave and disseminates information through its internet service
 - III. Promotes professional journalism by training young journalists.
 - IV. Promotes freedom of speech
 - V. Its journalism is well sourced and based on sound evidence, relying on fact rather than opinion giving the audience the opportunity to decide for themselves on the issues of the day
 - VI. Does not discriminate about age, class, sex, ethnicity, religion or the lack of it or nationality.
 - VII. Broadcasts news and programmes on issues that are relevant to the daily lives of the Liberia citizens and in support of peace, activities of the civil society, development and humanitarian activities, capacity building, human rights and child protection, civic education and electoral assistance
 - VIII. Takes account on the traditional culture of Liberia in its programmes as well as reflecting contemporary trends
 - IX. Values audience feedback on its programs. Complaints are addressed properly and apologies made when necessary
 - X. Observes strict political impartiality and seeks to remain independent in its broadcasts and the choice of its collaborators
 - XI. No one, public or private, may impose the broadcasting of information, opinions Star Radio
 - XII. The station manager is responsible to the board for the broadcast contents
 - XIII. Does not broadcast material likely to arouse panic
 - XIV. The Radio's main languages are English and Liberian English. I also uses vernacular languages
2. XV. The Star radio Charter respects the relevant Liberian laws the international laws on media and the
3. Universal declaration of human rights

Sections One, Two & Three of Code of Ethical Conduct (verbatim)

18 May 2005

Section One

Introduction and purpose

The purpose of this code is to protect the impartiality and neutrality of Star *radio* and the integrity of its reporting. Our audience must be confident that the outside activities of our staff do not undermine Star radio's impartiality and that editorial decisions are not influenced by any commercial or personal interests. In many cases, common sense will point to the ethical course. Simply asking oneself whether a course of action might damage Star's reputation is often enough to gauge whether the action is appropriate.

This code of ethics applies to all members of the editorial staff whose work directly affects the content and operation of Star Radio, including those on leave of absence. News clerks, administrative assistants, secretaries and other support staff are generally not bound by the strictures, with two important exceptions:

a. No employee may exploit for personal gain any non-public information acquired at work or use his/ her association with Star Radio to gain or favour advantage.

b. No one may do anything that damages Star Radio's reputation for strict neutrality reporting on politics and government; in particular, no one may wear campaign buttons or display any other form of political partisanship while on the job.

Section Two

Our duty to the public

1. Star Radio treats its public as fairly and openly as possible. On air and online, we tell our audience the truth as best we can learn it. Our journalism is well-sourced and based on sound evidence, relying on fact rather than opinion. It is our policy to correct our errors, large and small, as soon as we become aware.
2. Star Radio serves the public interest by reporting stories of significance and by making them interesting and relevant. Our news and current affairs stories do not campaign, but pursue journalistically valid issues and stories, without giving undue influence prominence to any one agenda. Star *radio* provides a forum for public debate.
3. We report the facts first and explain their context. We give our audiences the opportunity to decide for themselves on the issues of the day.
4. Our first loyalty is to our audience, to whom we are accountable. We deal fairly and openly with our audience. Civility applies whether an exchange takes place in person, by telephone, letter or online. Simple courtesy suggests that we do not alienate our audience by ignoring letters and emails that warrant reply

Section Three

Protecting Star *radio's* neutrality

1. Relationships with sources require sound judgment and self-discipline to prevent the appearance of partiality. Cultivating sources is a skill, often practiced effectively in informal settings outside of normal business hours. Yet staff members must be sensitive that personal relationships with news sources can erode into favouritism, in fact or appearance. Staff member must be aware that sources are eager to win our good will for reasons of their own. Even though this topic defies hard and fast rules, we must preserve professional detachment, free of bias.
 2. Clearly, romantic involvement with a news source would foster an appearance of partiality. Therefore, staff members who develop close relationships with people who might figure in coverage they provide, edit and package or supervise must disclose those relationships to the News and Program Editors. In some instances, staff members may have to recuse themselves from certain coverage
 3. Staff members may not accept gifts, tickets, discounts, reimbursements or other inducements from any individuals or organization covered by Star radio or likely to be covered in the future. Gifts should be returned with a polite letter of explanation. Exceptions may be for tinkers of nominal value, such as mug, cap, with a company logo.
 4. Staff members may not accept anything that could be construed as payment for favourable coverage or as an inducement to alter or forgo unfavourable coverage
 5. The spouses, families and close personal relations of Star radio's staff members should not accept any benefits or gifts outside the normal scope of business hospitality
 6. Star Radio acknowledges that outside appearance can enhance reputation of its bylines serve Star Radio's interest. Nevertheless, no staff member may appear before an outside group if the appearance could reasonably create an actual or apparent conflict of interest or undermine public trust in the paper's impartiality
 7. Staff member should be especially sensitive to the appearance of partiality when they address groups that might figure in coverage they provide, edit, package or supervise, especially if the setting might suggest a close relationship to the sponsoring group.
 8. Staff members should check with the program or News editor if offered speaking fees, honorariums, expense reimbursement and free transportation
 9. Staff members may not enter competitions sponsored by individuals or groups who have a direct interest in the tone of Star radio's coverage. They may not act judges for these competitions or accept their awards.
-
10. Staff members who borrow equipment, vehicles or other goods for evaluation or review must return the borrowed items as soon as possible.
 11. Staff members may keep for their own collections- but may not sell or copy books, recordings, tapes, compact discs and computer programs sent to them for review.

12. Staff members may not collaborate in ventures involving individuals or organizations that figure in coverage they provide, edit, package or supervise or that are likely to figure in such coverage in the future. Among other things, this prohibition applies to collaborating in writing books, pamphlets, reports, scripts, scores or any other material and in making photographs or creating artwork of any sort.'

(Source: *Star Radio*)

Appendix 3: Interviews with reporters BB and VK

These reporters claimed that at Star Radio, they try to be professional because the station is an independent station that a lot of people depend on locally and internationally for dissemination factual news from Liberia.

When asked how they would describe reportorial work here, they answered:

BB: We also try to be professional, because as journalists if you want to be balanced, credible and if you want people to trust your report that you send out, it means we have to observe all the professional rules governing the practice...Management does not tamper with editorial decision, because everyone knows what he/she supposed to do and how he/she should do it...Whenever there is interference about professional handling of news, we tell them we do not go for it because the least person in the society, civil society and the international community depend on Star Radio as an independent radio station.

VK: I have learned to lift my head above the waters. There is a policy at Star Radio that we are not allowed to take money in any form or manner. This policy has helped us to work professionally that everyone in the public wants to interact with us because we have made a difference amongst our colleagues given the low economic empowerment at those media institutions. Though we are not well paid, but we are considerably better off than our colleagues in the media.

Asked about what obstacles they face in their work and how do they cope with them:

BB: It is challenging for reporters to move around at Star Radio. It is not easy coping with objectivity under these conditions. That is why you find some Liberian journalists coming into conflict with their own ethics. At Star we try to be objective, because we are strictly governed by rules... It is difficult and tempting if you are not upright.

VK: One of the challenges we face is the power supply problem at Star Radio... Sometimes the station has to switch to city power which goes off abruptly and one is left in the middle of a program and has to apologize to listeners....Conditions are not favourable for now, as Star Radio has been left on its own by partners, yet this does not affect our professional output. I know the profession has no money, yet I chose it, because it is a profession of opportunities.

Appendix 4: Interviewees at Star Radio

Table 1: Information about Interviewees

Name	Position	Education	Age	Date
MK	Reporter/Host IBTD	Senior Student University of Liberia(UL)	32	July 20, 2009
MD	Editor-in-Chief	MA Candidate	39	July 20, 2009
VG	Deputy Editor	Senior student (UL)	26	July 21, 2009
SG	Reporter/Host IBTD	Junior Student (UL)	Not Available (NA)	July 21, 2001
Station Manager		B.Sc	NA	July 22, 2009
BB	Reporter	Sophmore student, (UL)	NA	July 23, 2009
VK	Reporter/producer	Sophmore student (UL)	38	July 23, 2009
Programs Editor		Some formal education	NA	July 29, 2009
Board Chair		MA	NA	August 5, 2009
Co-chair		LLB	NA	August 18, 2009

As noted earlier, initials and titles of interviewees are being used to avoid conspicuous identity (Source: Researcher).

Appendix 5: Frames of the Five IBTD Programs

Table 2: Two frames of the five programs analyzed

Program/time allotted (in minutes)	Host	Callers	Peace = Impunity /Against TRC	Peace = Justice /For TRC	Total	Date	Name of host
(IBTD) ¹⁴ :Program 1	11	6	21	12	50	Jul 2, '09	MW
(IBTD):Program 2	8	5	28	9	50	Jul 7, '09	SG
(IBTD):Program 3	9	6	35	0	50	Jul 28,'09	SG
(IBTD):Program 4	9	8	15	18	50	Aug 12,'09	MW
(IBTD):Program 5	12	7	12	19	50	Aug 17, 09	MW
Total	49	32	111	58	250		

The table above shows the two frames of the five programs of I Beg to Differ analyzed during the study and which frame was more dominant showing a bias of program toward the frame of peace =impunity or preference for the non- implementation of the TRC report. This conclusion was arrived at using time allocation per program and the total time in minutes of five programs, (Source: Researcher).

¹⁴ *I Beg to Differ.*

Appendix 6: Description of Guests on the five episodes of *I Beg to Differ*

1. Mr. Tiko Yonlay and Mr. Mohamed Kaiwu- Spokesperson and Board Chairman of the Coalition for Peace and Tranquility (this group was accused by callers of being a sponsored government and those seeking to circumvent the TRC Report).
2. Mr. James Kpargoi- is the Media officer of the TRC a journalist with relatively few has been frantically pushing for the endorsement of the report.
3. Mr. Wilmot Paye- is an Assistant Minister of Transport and a stalwart of the ruling Unity Party, and a former student leader at the University of Liberia.
4. Mr. Acarius Gray- is the Assistant Secretary General of the Congress for Democratic Change, the party of former soccer star George Weah, who came second in the 2005 elections.
5. Mr. Maxwell Teahjay - has been an outspoken activist critical of warlords.
6. Mr. Maxwell Teahjay- introduced only as a political activist.
7. Mr. Sam Wulue- was Minister of Commerce in the last transitional government on the slot of the rebel group, Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL).
8. Mr. Darius Dillon- is a staunch member of the opposition Liberty Party and currently a Chief of Office staff of a Senator in the Legislature.
9. Mr. Sampson Tweh and Mr. Richard Kieh-Acting Chairman and Public Relations Officer of the Forum for the Establishment of a War Crimes Court. This group has been pressing for the prosecution of warlord since 2006.
10. Mr. Paul Thomas, Chairman of the National Consciousness Movement; a group formed after the release of the TRC Report has been accused of being sponsored by the Government.
11. Mr. Philip Sandi- Secretary General of the Press Union of Liberia, the umbrella organization of journalists.
12. Mr. Jerelimick Piah- Assistant Minister for Planning of the Ministry of Gender & Development, and staunch member of the ruling Unity Party.
13. Mr. Isaac Jackson- Assistant Minister for Culture of the Ministry of Information is a member of the Liberty Party, who is said to be enjoying close ties with the ruling Unity Party.

(Source: Researcher)