



Executive Director of the Liberia Media Center, Mr. Lawrence Randall, at the launching program.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

The results of this study are not intended to stimulate undue competition between media houses but to rather help them improve their performance. Overall, the media should be commended for generally staying above the fray in the coverage of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Most of the language used in the various news papers and on radios reflects the language of the TRC. Generally speaking, the media succeeded in keeping with terms to the TRC code of conduct for journalists.

On the average, the radio sector dominated the print media by ensuring that the news and information were thoroughly balanced in a 2-1 ratio. In some instances listed the report, most of the covered news items from both the print and broadcast media violated Article 23 of the Press Union of Liberia Code of Conduct “journalists should not publish or broadcast any report or write up affecting the reputation of an individual ion or an organization without a chance to reply. That should be avoided”. Most of those accused during public hearings were not contacted for reaction, while some of those accused voluntarily reacted but their responses to the allegations received little prominence compared to when the story was first told. Journalists in very rare instances utilized information regarding the mandate, structure, functions and general legal framework of the commission in providing context to testimony, emerging developments and stories.

There were very minimum follow-ups, and where they made, 'big names' were the subject. A repeated example in this research is the story regarding the involvement of the famed musician and current Executive Mansion Aide, Sundaygar Dearboy extensively followed-up by the media.

For Newspapers, the New Democrat should be congratulated for devoting the most space and conducting follow-ups on a number of their reports and the quality of their newspaper. However, the paper should try to clearly delineate its news from its opinion pages. In covering the Charles Taylor trial and TRC, it is hard to tell when a story is news or opinion. News stories are often linked to future pages and do sometimes takes the form of opinions, with a visible slant seen in some of its coverage.

The paper published more gruesome pictures than all the newspapers combined. While this might not constitute a clear violation of the Press Union Code of Conduct, "publications of these pictures are trauma striking and could revive wounds" says the Press Union of Liberia (PUL) Secretary General, Peter Quaqua¹. The Daily Observer, the News and the Inquirer and Heritage, made commendable strides to flag TRC stories but once the hearings took to rural Liberia, most of these papers though with correspondents in the field, devoted very minimum attention to the TRC hearings.

The commission should share part of the blame for what seems an uncoordinated rural media campaign. The commission told the LMC, it invited several papers, but most of the newspapers said they did not receive invitations, those that did, received theirs on the eve or day of departure. It acknowledged that UNMIL Radio had agreed to cover the rural hearings and as such it only dealt with community based radio. This was flawed strategy that should addressed in subsequent coverage, as unlike the print, the broadcast media is the most viable and highly penetrating medium especially for a predominantly non-lettered population.

Overall, the print media just 4.8% of its total content space to news on the TRC process in Liberia for the two months period 2. The overall quality of stories, investigation and reports need to be enhanced.

For the broadcast media, Radio Veritas was exceptional. Overall, the broadcast sector did well compared to the print sector especially as it relates to diversity in coverage. Combined, the radio sector devoted 12.1% of the air time to TRC related news and information. Covering four radio stations, the broadcast sector produced roughly thirty-nine (39) thoroughly balanced articles against the print media's twenty-nine (29) which accounts for eight newspapers. The plus notwithstanding, the broadcast media had serious problems in meeting up with their broadcast schedule. ELBC and Truth FM failed to air seventy- five (75) and forty- five (45) of their news bulletins respectively. Radio Veritas had a clean sheet for both months, while Star Radio had faults with twenty two broadcasts.

Recommendations

The Liberia Media Center sees the truth and reconciliation process as the surest way to achieve genuine reconciliation, sustainable peace and mutual coexistence. The process should therefore receive all the required support until its ultimate fulfillment.

Broad Recommendations

The International Donor Community should provide necessary technical and financial for the TRC to continue its hearings and final report. The Liberian Government must continue its support to the commission. And most important the President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf should cease the moment as pledged in the past, to face the TRC when asked to do so. This in our view will lend further credibility to the process, provide the necessary momentum for its finalization and improve public perception of the TRC process.

Lastly, it is important for the commission itself to live by example. News of the intra is disturbing and an internal probe to establish the root causes of these squabbles should be expeditiously commissioned, if people must take the commissioners and their work seriously.

Sector-Specific Recommendations

TRC Media Unit

- The TRC Media Department must follow-up with previous work done together with local partners in defining future strategies for the TRC process in Liberia. The TRC Media Unit decision to accredit journalists to cover the process in contravention of writing opposition from partner organizations, illustrates that it was out of touch of those discussions or deliberately chose to disregard those views, which were essentially centered on promoting citizens' rights to access to information and free expression.
- The Media Unit will have to effectively factor broader independent coverage of the TRC hearings in rural Liberia and support to ensure journalists are transported and facilitated under arrangement should be explored.
- If not already being done, it was crucial for the TRC Media Unit to its own periodic review of the media coverage to inform policy decisions to be taken by the commission.
- Aside from facilitating coverage of events, the TRC Media Unit, should avoid be seen as facilitating the practice of investigative journalism. Investigative reporting should be demand driven and supported by media institutions themselves so as not to compromise the integrity of their investigation;

Media Sector

- The media should keep its focus on the TRC hearings, maintaining consistency in its coverage of the process and ensure the integrity of its investigation by avoiding a repeat of the Sundaygar Dearboy scenario where journalists were facilitated by the TRC to conduct an investigation;
- Media outlets should try to contact sources mentioned by victims in their publications. Where such attempts did not materialize, the paper should clearly indicate such;
- Broadcast media outlets, especially ELBC Radio and Truth FM should work around consistency in their news broadcast;
- Editors should seek information beyond the floors of the hearings and strive to provide multiple angles to stories;
- Publishers of newspapers should consider improving the quality of their printing (font size uniformity problems) as it poses serious problems for reading;
- Editors and reporters should familiarize themselves with all the legal and institutional frameworks governing the TRC;
- Editors should also ensure that articles are thoroughly back grounded, using other available resources on transitional justice eg. ICTJ and the BBC World Service Trust Handbook on reporting TJ, to place testimonies and stories into context;
- The media should not merely report the hearings but serve as an agenda setter by raising debates and cross examining issues as and when they arise;
- Newspapers should develop space to readers' for comments either in the form of letters or commentaries on the ongoing process;
- All media institutions should adhere to both spoken and writing rules concerning the coverage of the TRC and outlet should refrain from publishing "gruesome pictures";

Press Union of Liberia

- The press Union of Liberia should continue its oversight on media coverage of national issues including the TRC and consistently call into questions transgression of ethics and standards;
- The Press Union of Liberia should engage the TRC on the need for effective factoring of independent media coverage of the TRC hearings in rural Liberia;

ICTJ and Others

- ICTJ and other partners should ensure that the TRC Reporters Code of Conduct is made accessible for media and representative of civil society following the media's coverage of the TRC process in Liberia;
- ICTJ and other partners should assist the Press Union of Liberia and the broader media community in conducting in-process training for the media during the conduct of the TRC hearings;
- ICTJ and other relevant NGOs should support the expansion of this initiative to cover other transitional justice development in Liberia especially the ongoing trial of former president Charles Taylor so that the link with the TRC process will be explored.