



Towards a diagnostic approach to media in fragile states: Examples from the Somali territories

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Abstract

Media interventions by international organizations and NGOs in conflict and post-conflict situations seek to develop and shape a media system to contribute to specific political and social ends. The analyses and assessments that inform these interventions are often based on an overview of the formal media and governance structures, such as mass media and state institutions, and overlook informal structures that may be instrumental for political and development goals. This article proposes a framework that can incorporate both the formal and informal modes of communication and participation that characterize a society. This framework encourages a 'diagnostic' approach centred around three areas: power, flows, and participation, and enables researchers to take into consideration features that are often overlooked such as customary law; a range of public authorities from politicians to Imams and local elders; information flows that may vary from poetry to mobile phones; and the culture of communication. Examples from the Somali territories, which are characterized by a weak central government, are employed to highlight how informal structures and actors intervene in shaping information flows and the importance of accounting for them.

Keywords

Freedom of expression, hybrid governance, media and conflict, media and development, post-conflict, Somalia, Somaliland, statebuilding

Media interventions have become an increasingly integral part of peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts but all too often they are based on weak analyses of the local media environment. This article offers a research approach for analysing information flows

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in war and post-war societies. In the midst of unprecedented growth and access to information technologies, from mobile phones to satellite television, much attention is given to the role and potential of these technologies as tools for political change. But as this article argues, and the cases of Somalia and Somaliland demonstrate, while looking forward to what is 'new' it is important not to lose sight of the 'old'. How can information flows in a society be analysed where poetry may be as important as mobile phones for communication? Or where politicians campaign in Mogadishu's teahouses but much of their financial and communications support, including for politically aligned radio stations, comes from the diaspora in London?

The approach discussed in this article is termed 'diagnostic'. It seeks to avoid more normative approaches, which tend to focus on what a communication system should look like, and concentrates on understanding how a system works on its own terms. A diagnostic examines questions of hybridity: how does the new interact with the old? It looks at regulation beyond 'the state', examining public authority more generally. And it questions ideas of participation, urging that attention be paid to typically neglected spaces, such as religious forums or teahouses, with consideration to how these may be inhabited in ways that reproduce or mirror existing power structures.

A diagnostic refers to a particular set of questions that seek to shift discussion from normative precepts about communication and governance to local understanding and practices of communication and governance. At its core, a diagnostic offers a framework for analysing voice and expression in a society, and how it is actually regulated, negotiated and influenced, rather than suggesting how it *should* be regulated according to normative ideals. In essence, this is a bottom-up, or grassroots, analysis that focuses on indigenous structures, and the interactions or fusions with more 'official' government structures. The basic focus is how people on the ground actually experience and participate in this complicated relationship between communication and governance.

There is no template or blueprint for a diagnostic approach. The term diagnostic suggests 'taking the temperature' or 'assessing the health' of a patient. To understand the patient, a diagnostic adopts an open and relatively unstructured approach, and aims to deepen understanding around three key areas: (1) power; (2) flows; and (3) participation. These three areas will be elaborated in the following section and then applied to examples from the Somali territories.

The diagnostic as an alternative to the 'templates approach'

The diagnostic approach is a contrast to the common research frameworks and media assessments conducted by media development or freedom of expression advocacy organizations. The NGO Freedom House, for example, publishes an annual Freedom of the Press survey that considers the level of freedom enjoyed by the mass media, including radio, television and the press (a recent version of the survey includes the internet).¹ The media system is assessed according to the legal protections it enjoys, as well as its political and economic freedoms. While the Freedom House indices are a well-established mechanism for assessing and comparing media systems, there have been renewed efforts at media mapping, such as a recent initiative undertaken by the Internews Infoasaid

project, which specifically seeks to understand the mass media environment through a general overview of the media system for the intention of designing policies or interventions (Infoasaid, 2012). Another strategy is outlined in a report by the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) that has approached the challenge of assessing media in fragile environments by developing the Intended-Outcomes Needs Assessment (IONA), a methodology that has sought to provide a framework for policymakers, NGOs and donors to determine the most effective media intervention in a specific environment by better analysing how the media operate in a 'target society' (Robertson et al., 2011: 47). As with the other frameworks, the IONA focuses on the mainstream media, including radio, television and the internet/other technologies and it emphasizes government regulation and 'the relationship between the government and the media' (p. 52).

At their core, these approaches focus on 'the state' and 'the mass media', or more recently 'social media', often obscuring the more locally rooted processes through which people participate in a communication ecology, receive and transmit information. For the purpose of this article, and to distinguish them from a diagnostic approach, these approaches are referred to as 'templates approaches' reflecting this tendency to compare media systems with prescribed standards (Putzel et al., 2006)

The prevailing approach to media assessments merits urgent rethinking because it is largely through this lens that media policy and media development initiatives in conflict and post-conflict situations are formulated. Typical strategies in post-conflict or transitioning scenarios may include setting up as many so-called 'independent' media outlets as possible. In some cases, support is provided to existing media outlets but in others, as in Afghanistan, this strategy may involve the establishment of an entirely new network of radio stations. Regulatory assistance is also part of the post-war strategy. New governments are encouraged to adopt new media laws, many of which are often drafted in collaboration with a relatively small pool of international consultants or NGOs that specialize in this area. Particularly if the media assistance strategy is led by an organization based in the UK, or is sponsored by the UK government, working with a state broadcaster to transform it into a public service broadcaster may be a key component of the development agenda.

These strategies are predicated on the assumption not only that the period following a war or a revolution is opportune for building a media system from the ground up but also that societies emerging from conflicts are often institutional 'blank slates'. Or, in the words of one media development practitioner in reference to the media environment in Tunisia after the fall of Ben Ali: 'there is nothing there'. This obscures the more complex and nuanced ways in which the media serve, for example, as spaces for elites to negotiate power, or the ways in which voice is actually regulated, often not through formal law but through customary or religious law.

In an effort to better understand media in conflict and post-conflict contexts such as the Somali territories, there is a need to move away from frameworks that have focused on the transfer of Western institutions or the idealized notion of state-centred governance. Particularly in rural areas, there is rarely a single effective state authority that has the capacity or constituency to provide services. Many states engaged in and emerging from violent conflict are not 'Weberian states' (i.e. states where the 'administrative staff successfully upholds a claim on the *monopoly* of the *legitimate* use of violence in the

enforcement of its order', Weber, 1964[1947]: 154, original emphases), nor are they likely to be so in the near future. As the Africanist scholars Chabal and Daloz (1999: xix) have argued:

The state in Sub-Saharan Africa has not been institutionalized – in that it has not become structurally differentiated from society ... The notion of civil society has been abused by those who would see in Africa social movements willing and able to challenge central power, [while] the substance of politics has to be found in the myriad networks which link the various levels of power, from top to bottom.

Indicative of this literature, JF Bayart (2009) has urged for a more contextual analysis where a political entity is understood through the history and concepts of governmentality that its people have devised, rather than as failed attempts to reproduce a model of government, or, in the context of this article, a media system, that has been designed elsewhere.

If the underlying focus is on 'citizen voice' or 'political voice', the mass media are just one part of a larger, more complex and often overlooked communication ecology. The analysis of a communication ecology moves away from focusing simply on the medium, the message or the receiver/transmitter, but stresses an examination of the 'communication process in context' (Altheide, 1994: 667). With this perspective, everything that can be considered communications, from roads to mobile phones, is examined, and the challenge for an analysis of a communication ecology is to understand how these flows interact with one another (Tacchi et al., 2003). Locating voice in such an ecology might entail, for example, including actors such as Imams, media such as poetry, or political spaces such as the mabaraza, the traditional local councils across much of Kenya and Tanzania.

As mentioned in the previous section, a diagnostic approach seeks to 'understand the patient', in this case a particular media system, before offering a prescription (if offering one at all). For many interventions, this is frequently in the form of journalist training, development related programming or legal reform recommendations. Three key areas for a diagnostic analysis are power, flows and participation.

The diagnostic actively seeks to understand the *power* dynamics within a particular media system, which is the most complex factor to capture but also the most central. Where the normative approach focuses on the role of media as independent actors holding government to account, which can cloud the real, rather than perceived, role of the media by assigning them certain functions, the diagnostic approach focuses on elements of power and competition within, and between, the media. It may consider how the media might serve as a space for elites to negotiate power in conflict and post-conflict situations or it might examine the susceptibility of media to political capture, including the particular ideology of journalists that might have distinct conceptions about what the role of a journalist actually is in a post-conflict or post-revolutionary transition. Across Eastern Africa, for example, there is a trend of former guerrilla fighters becoming journalists after the insurgent groups to which they belonged had seized power. These fighters have, in the words of a journalist from Somaliland, chosen to 'continue the struggle by other means' (interview: Yusuf Gabobe).

In the context of understanding power dynamics in the media in fragile states, where clearly defined political institutions and practices are often lacking, greater emphasis should be placed on understanding ‘vernacular politics’, looking beyond the politics of the state and institution. The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), for example, has been innovative in addressing the often-overlooked complexities of power dynamics in development with its ‘power analysis’. While the SIDA approach does not probe the role of the media, it does suggest relevant questions emphasizing an understanding of the ‘informal political landscape’ including its ‘rules and structures’ (Overseas Development Institute [ODI], 2011: 24). This approach encourages a focus on issues such as political culture, which highlights the hybridity between local and national structures of power as well as the fluidity of more normative dichotomies such as ‘traditional and modern’ or ‘urban and rural’ (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003: 24–25). Other efforts to provide a qualitative framework for analysing the political context include the Department for International Development’s (DFID) Drivers of Change, which seeks to ‘make the local situation the point of departure rather than preconceived policies’ and focuses on the *interaction* between structures, institutions and agents, both formal and informal. As with the SIDA approach, there is not an overarching conceptual framework that enables the direct implementation of a ‘Drivers of Change’ analysis but rather an approach that focuses on longer-term questions about change.

Through an emphasis on a bottom-up analysis, both of these frameworks urge an examination of the media system that reaches beyond institutions, formal regulatory bodies and political parties, to focus on how power and politics are actually structured in a society. Thus, rather than concentrating on media ownership by political parties, a diagnostic would consider political authority more generally, whether local NGOs or elders. In addition, the SIDA and DFID approach are instructive on a methodological level because the cases where they have been applied show how a comparatively unstructured framework can be adapted to guide what can still potentially be comparative research.

In a diagnostic approach, power dynamics can be further probed by exploring what Monroe Price calls ‘the market for loyalties’. Analysing a ‘market for loyalties’ helps to understand the principal players that seek to enter into or alter an information environment to strengthen or challenge particular views. Within this market, large-scale competitors, which Price (1994: 669–670) refers to as classically ‘states, governments, interest groups and businesses’ sell ‘myths and dreams and history’ to buyers that pay for ‘one set of identity in several ways that, together, we call “loyalty” or “citizenship”... [which] includes not only compliance with tax obligations, but also obedience to laws, readiness to fight in the armed services, or even continued residence within the country’. In most cases, weak governments have limited ability to control this market.

A diagnostic approach moves beyond the focus on the mass media and seeks to capture the various *flows* of information in a communication ecology, from old media, such as poetry and sermons, to new media, including Facebook and SMS. A focus on flows urges an examination of how different media interact, meld or create ‘hybrid media’. Andrew Chadwick (2011) has explored this concept in Western societies, arguing that old media reinvent themselves, ‘hybridizing’, for example, with new digital technologies in an effort to remain relevant and thus requiring a holistic analytic approach. He argues that a hybrid media system ‘is built upon interactions among old and new media and their

associated technologies, genres, norms, behaviours and organizations. Actors in the hybrid media system are articulated by complex and evolving power relations based upon adaptation and interdependence.’ Thus, rather than asking questions about whether the Arab Spring was a ‘Twitter revolution’, or if cassettes were behind the Iranian revolution, the emphasis when examining hybridity in a media system is on how different flows of information intersect, on how and why some might be privileged in some societies or at different times.

The conceptualization of hybrid media is central in a diagnostic approach because it shifts the focus away from the mass media and forces researchers, as well as policymakers, to look for intersections across various forms of communication. Within a normative template approach, freedom of expression is generally equated with the freedom of the mass media. Whether it is Freedom House or Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the degree to which a society or country respects freedom of expression is often directly in correlation with the freedom of the mass media. While these frameworks are attempting to come to grips with new technologies, informal communication remains neglected. In some cases, a society could have a relatively weak, or restricted mass media system, but still have a vibrant environment for other forms of expression such as poetry and music. This is particularly the case in war or post-war situations.

Not only does a diagnostic suggest looking beyond the mass media to other forms of communication, but it also suggests considering the culture and ideology of persuasion and *participation*. Understanding the spaces in which people participate in a society and the dialectic culture and ideology that shape these spaces is central to identifying the potential impact and response of possible post-conflict media policies. For example, does the society have an argumentative tradition or a tradition of repressing voice, in strong deference to religious and political authority? What are the underlying ideological rationales shaping information flows in the marketplace for ideas? Amartya Sen (2005), for example, has written extensively about the historical importance of dialogue and argumentative culture in India, which has been an essential component of India’s democracy. In some cases, the culture of participation and the spaces themselves might have as much, or even more, impact on media systems than mobile phones or the radio. They also shape and reflect power dynamics; mosques and mabaraza, for example, are spaces for displaying and negotiating power hierarchies, contesting national or communal symbols, and for shaping and controlling the political debate. Traditions of argument, expression and public deliberation are central to the diagnostic approach in order to explore how voice is expressed, participation is structured, and political change occurs.

Applying the diagnostic

The Somali-speaking region of the Horn of Africa² is an ideal case in which to briefly apply a diagnostic approach because of the clear relevance of hybrid political and media structures. In this article, particular attention is given to the self-declared independent northern region of Somalia, Somaliland, which has been seeking separation since 1991 after the guerrilla insurgency fought by the Somali National Movement (SNM) helped to oust the Soviet-backed government of President Siad Barre. Over the past two decades,

Somaliland has instituted a number of political, legal and economic reforms that have helped the country not only to maintain relative peace and stability, but also to earn a reputation as one of the most democratic (yet unrecognised) countries on the continent. In 2010, for example, closely contested presidential elections were held in which the opposition, led by Mohamed Silayo, defeated the incumbent government of President Dahir Riyale. President Riyale peacefully transferred power, an anomaly in Africa. Somaliland not only has a democratically elected government but also its own currency, police force and passports. Part of the campaign for international recognition, which Somalilanders desperately crave, goes beyond the argument for maintaining colonial borders (Somaliland was colonized by the British while the South was an Italian colony) and rests on emphasizing their good standing as global citizens.

The situation in Somaliland is in sharp contrast to that in South Somalia, where a series of successive internationally backed governments have struggled to form viable and authoritative institutions. Violence continues to plague much of the region and the radical Al-Qaeda aligned group, Al-Shabaab controls much of the territory. Numerous attempts to establish a government have been made, primarily designed and executed by international organizations such as the United Nations and donor countries, but these efforts have largely lacked the local legitimacy and bottom-up approach that has been a defining characteristic of Somaliland.

Given the varying socio-political contexts, the media are significantly different in South Somalia and in Somaliland. In Somaliland's capital, Hargeysa, around 13 newspapers are regularly publishing; some come and go quickly or re-emerge under different titles but many have been appearing consistently for over a decade. Many papers are closely aligned with, or sponsored by, political parties and tend to thrive on political controversies. While private radios are not allowed in Somaliland, there are dozens of stations operating in Mogadishu and many more in towns across the South. Somali satellite television stations, often run by the diaspora and broadcasting from London or Dubai, are also a central source of information along with international broadcasters such as Voice of America and the BBC Somali Service.

Among the most notable developments across the Somali-speaking region in the past decade has been the efficient, reliable and relatively inexpensive telecommunications network. Somalis enjoy some of the fastest internet connections on the continent, along with some of the best rates. The communication sector is one of the strongest industries and is indicative of larger trends of economic growth and development. Fuelled by remittances from abroad, a dynamic private sector has emerged that has led to a consistently positive rate of growth that is higher than many other countries on the continent. Such growth, and the strength of the communications sector, may seem counterintuitive to the prevailing discourse of Somalia as 'lawless' and 'hopeless'.

Vying for power in a complex market for loyalties

A complex market for loyalties can be seen across the Somali-speaking territories, the contours of which are constantly evolving. The dynamic media environment is a contested space for political agendas, economic interests and ideology. Actors are internal and external and are often both simultaneously; for example, diaspora politicians may be

running national political campaigns from London or journalists in Mogadishu may be funded by media or a business leader in Washington DC.

In South-Central Somalia, the lack of government regulation, and the capacity of the radio to serve the interests of opposing factions, facilitated the proliferation of private radio stations in the early 1990s to serve the economic, political and clan interests of warlords. More than a dozen radio stations sprung up, primarily in Mogadishu, but stations were also opened in regional capitals such as Kisimayo, Galkayo and Baidoa.

While a new generation of radio stations gradually emerged in the late 1990s, including HornAfrik, Radio Shabelle and Radio Simba, with a mandate claiming to be more professional and less political, they have often been perceived by listeners as having continued the tradition of being involved in power politics, albeit in a more savvy way. The recent Deputy Prime Minister, Ahmed Abdisalam Adan, was a Director and Co-Founder of HornAfrik. Many of these radio stations have been both financed and run by members of the diaspora and reflect the political objectives of their owners. This is not surprising as the diaspora is extraordinarily invested in Somali politics; a majority of the current Ministers of the Federal Government hold passports from the EU or North America. In recent years, these stations have been heavily affected by the conflict and there have been allegations of both Al-Shabaab and government forces targeting journalists.

The environment in Somaliland is significantly different, and a major factor is the political ideology influencing the media. While private radio stations are not allowed in Somaliland (although some do exist while others broadcast from abroad), the press has been a vibrant arena for the negotiation of power among elites. This is a similar situation to other countries in East Africa including Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda and Sudan, where the press has served as a forum for those with economic, political, social or religious interests to define competing ideas of the nation-state, test out contested ideas and project political authority.

Jamuriya and *Haatuf* were started in Hargeysa by former SNM fighters in the early 1990s and have been among the most influential newspapers, setting the trend for those that followed. Together, the press have been outspoken advocates for Somaliland's independence and international recognition. The voices represented in the press are, however, largely limited to those that hold this view. Perspectives from the east of Somaliland, including from the Dhulbahante clan, where support for independence is weaker, are not well-represented in the media, reflecting a more general marginalization from political deliberation in Hargeysa. After having been excluded from the newly formed governments, or having declined to participate, some journalists working at these early papers saw the media as a way to continue the struggle through other means. They believed that some key issues they had fought for were not being addressed and that these needed to be campaigned for in the media.

The strong ideological bent of the press has changed somewhat in recent years as a newer generation of journalists has emerged. In the case of papers such as *Geeska Afrika*, these younger journalists respond to different criteria of professionalism compared to the first generation, and cater predominantly to the youth. At the same time, several newspapers currently publishing have been set up to either explicitly advocate for one of the three political parties, or to access resources from them. In the recent 2009 elections, for example, newspapers became increasingly polarized in their support for a political party and some of the newspapers directly received funds from a party (IREX, 2010: 331). In

some instances, the financial commitment is made through an agreement to run regular articles for several weeks about a political party. In other cases, there were widely circulating allegations that the political parties had essentially 'bought' a paper by paying the owner or editor to support them (NUSOJ, nd: 6).

International actors have sought to shape and compete within the marketplace for loyalties through different means, including economic, ideological and political means. For example, a major source of income for journalists has been NGO workshops, trainings and the coverage of press conferences. International organizations and NGOs, similar to political parties, regularly pay for coverage and many journalists have participated in workshops on the same topic many times. Such meetings are an important source of revenue and the demand for participants also encourages some young people to become journalists to access the per diems and additional opportunities associated with the international community. The trainings are efforts to both advance a particular idea, such as sensitization on health issues, as well as an effort to encourage a particular model, and a typically Western one, of media. Thus, to understand or assess power in a communication diagnostic, the market for loyalties is one way of analysing the components and definitions of power. In the case of Somalia and Somaliland, the ideology, political interests and competition for financial benefit are all central.

The other major area for the diagnostic approach to consider is how power, or voice, is regulated. In the context of fragile states with little capacity, the role of local customary law in regulating information flows emerges as potentially more salient than the 'official' legal environment. The prevailing emphasis on media laws, and particularly media law templates, can blur understanding of how information is actually regulated. Both Somaliland and South-Central Somalia have media laws that are lenient to the press. In the case of South-Central Somalia, international NGOs have been deeply involved in the process, while in Somaliland the legislation was largely drafted by the journalists themselves. But even if media laws do exist on paper, their implementation may be unrealistic, particularly in South-Central Somalia where the absence of a functioning government makes them essentially irrelevant. In contrast, across the Somali-speaking territories 'xeer law', or customary law, and sharia law have a role in regulating both the technologies and media, as well as expression more generally.

Although the role of elders, who serve as 'judges', has been eroded over decades of violence and increasing urbanization, in the context of a weak state it is this legal system, which privileges clan and nations over individuals and politics, that continues to be relevant, particularly outside the cities. *Xeer* is based on compensatory principles and it constantly evolves as judges determine the best way to resolve disputes through reflecting on precedent (Van Notten, 2005: 35). There are mechanisms in *xeer* law that have set an important foundation for regulating speech. Insults and defamation are considered to 'harm one's individual dignity' and compensation from the offender is usually required. However, social structure is extremely important in determining the extent (or not) of the damages. If a young man insults an old man, for example, this is considered an insult, but if an old man insults a young man, this act is not typically considered an insult unless it is exceptionally severe. Insults are typically resolved with an apology to the offended person. Compensation (historically camels but more recently monetary) may only be required if the insult is repeated after the verdict. Typically, the perpetrator can resolve

insults by calling on the insulted person with his oday (or clan leader) and offering a small gift (Van Notten, 2005: 58).

While *xeer* law dominates conflict resolution among the nomadic populations and outside the cities, it has also been used in some particularly complex media law cases in cities. One notable example is the 2007 arrests of the *Haatuf* journalists in Hargeysa, Somaliland. The insult or defamation of women is a particularly sensitive issue and *Haatuf* published a series of articles concerning President Dahir Riyale's handling of a land dispute in Borama and alleged corruption on the part of his wife. *Haatuf's* licence was suspended by the court and several journalists were arrested (RSF, 2007). After several months, the three detainees were pardoned by the president and the case was eventually resolved through traditional mediation during which the elders of the editor's clan met with the elders of the president's clan (RSF, 2009) This was an extended process involving several lengthy conferences, but the situation was eventually satisfactorily resolved with compensation being paid to the president's clan (Stremlau, 2012).

There are similar examples of the enduring role of *xeer* in the regulation of the telecoms market. The tradition of using *xeer* to protect private property, and livestock in particular, has set a legal precedent; it now serves as insurance for the investments that media and telecoms companies have made in infrastructure which has facilitated growth in this sector of the economy. From areas where warlord politics prevail, investors have been able to protect their property from looting through clan alliances and the development of strict social contracts between firms. There are, for example, shared understandings about buying looted or stolen telecoms equipment, which has limited the domestic resale market. Across the border the Kenyan Telecoms Corporation has struggled with the hefty cost of replacing stolen copper wires, but such misconduct in Somalia is relatively rare (Allen, 2009).

Using *xeer* law to regulate speech and ownership of the media is not straightforward but it has remained surprisingly relevant for maintaining varying degrees of social order in the absence of a state. It is also indicative of the diagnostic approach, which stresses looking beyond the state and understanding how power is more generally projected by public authorities and regulated by different entities and customs. For all aspects of the diagnostic, but particularly for power and the regulation of power, an overwhelming focus on the state, when the state is weak, will give little indication of the varied mechanisms that define and regulate the marketplace.

Hybrid flows: Beyond the mass media

Weak governments, or fragile states, are under significant international pressure to accept the proliferation of mass media, and Somaliland is no exception. Somaliland has been grappling with the process of liberalizing the airwaves (Stremlau, 2013). While journalists often protest that the government is forbidding private radio stations in an effort to retain its monopoly, there is also evidence to suggest genuine concern about the role of radio in violence. Many Somalilanders look southwards to Mogadishu where there are dozens of radio stations but warlords and various political factions, including the diaspora, have used radio as an integral component of maintaining or consolidating power much in the same way that they have used private militias. And with a weak government and central

institutions, real concerns about managing a proliferation of radio stations seem legitimate. Nevertheless, this has not entirely undermined Somaliland's democracy. Informal communication flows such as poetry or music have been extremely important and have, as some scholars have argued in reference to many societies across the continent, served as 'journalism' (Mano, 2007; Nyamnjoh, 2005). Informal flows are often seen as representing the voices of the grassroots, of the working classes, and as offering alternative perspectives from the elite-dominated mass media.

For Somalis, poetry has offered an important source of political information and has acted as a crucial vehicle for expression. This is exemplified in several popular proverbs, such as 'the hunger for news is the worst', as well as in the common greeting '*iska war-ran*' which means 'tell the news'. Many Somalis continue to first hear news through word of mouth and then seek out confirmation in the media. In many cases, poetry has been the most trusted source of information. During the SNM struggle, it had a central role in mobilizing the population. As Yusuf Gabobe, a SNM veteran noted:

The poetry in the struggle was more effective than anything else. It mobilizes people ... Poetry plays a big role as a means of communication with the public. Many listen to it only once and keep it by heart. I can't do that but a lot of people do... this is an oral society. They just pick up. Instead of a very long lecture or an article, a poem would be more effective than an ordinary talk or speech by a politician. (interview: Yusuf Gabobe)

Poets themselves are also highly influential. They have held, and to some degree continue to hold, prominent positions. Regarded as intellectuals with the ability to interpret and convey the urgency and importance of current events,

Somali poets are powerbrokers of the first order; they are respected and feared by their enemies, whom they discredit and humiliate by bitter poetic satire and ridicule, and patronized by their political partisans, whose merits the poets publicly exaggerate and glorify through verbal flattery and panegyrics ... In this respect Somali poets perform a role similar to that of Western journalists and television anchors whose singular control of news sources enables them to inform and persuade the public and thereby to make and unmake – albeit in subtle ways – politicians and public figures. (Laitin and Samatar, 1987: 37)

In this context, poems have multiple roles; they function as bearers and transmitters of information as well as mediators and agitators of conflicts. Whether music, poetry, or sermons, these informal information flows are not only difficult for those in power to control, but they can spread quickly and have significant reach.

The analysis of hybrid media in the context of the diagnostic urges an understanding about how these older or more informal channels of information transmission intersect with newer forms of communication, such as mobile phones and radio. Some scholars have defined this as 'intertextuality', or the mapping of how messages flow across media. This may happen in any society. The challenge for the diagnostic is to understand the particular velocity, sources and channels of information that might differ significantly from countries where the mass media are more established. In Somaliland, for example, a news item might appear on a diaspora blog or forum online. This item may then be

picked up and printed in newspapers that are published in Hargeysa. Radio Hargeysa and the large Somali satellite television stations have regular news round-ups where they may draw on stories in the press, thus giving rural Somalilanders, who may be illiterate and lack access to the internet or mobile phones, access to the voices and opinions of the diaspora. This example of intertextuality has significant impact on the access to information citizens have: simply because someone may not have access to the mass media or new technology does not mean that they will not receive news that was circulating in one particular media space.

A culture of participation and debate

Traditions of participation and debate characterize political culture but often differ significantly. In the case of the Somali-speaking territories, freedom of expression is deeply rooted in political culture. The historian Ioan Lewis termed Somaliland a 'pastoralist democracy', reflecting the decentralized politics and generally egalitarian culture of the region where freedoms are prized, including freedom of speech and freedom of movement, and there has historically been resistance to centralized authority. Even the British were careful about how they sought to exert control over their protectorate as they did not wish to provoke the population by impinging on the values of expression that were fundamental to the structure of society (Lewis, 1961). This premium on the free flow of information has been attributed to the continued legacy of a nomadic lifestyle in which pastoralists would regularly move with their livestock and remain connected through travellers bringing information. From a comparative perspective, the horizontal authority structures and more liberal information flows significantly contrast with much of the political and communication culture dominant in neighbouring Ethiopia. As one of Africa's oldest states, the highland Amhara and Tigrean culture has dominated, and a long history of feudalism and a reverence for authority has undoubtedly influenced public acceptance of restricted spaces for participation and expression. This allows far less of a tradition of public deliberation than seen in Somali society (Levine, 1965).

Freedom of expression and reliable information have also been highly valued and regarded as essential for security and survival. This has further embedded it in what could be called a Somali approach to participation and debate. Historically, two forms of news items have been considered 'essential information': *tigaad*, which refers to news about good pasture or drought, and *khoof*, which refers to violence or the outbreak of war (Ducaale, 2005: 130). There have been accepted mechanisms for ensuring the accuracy of this information. When passing on information orally about a particular event, it is expected that messengers will say whether they saw it or heard it; if they have heard it, they have to mention whether the information came from someone who is seen as 'totally reliable' and does not exaggerate. Individuals who are deemed untrustworthy can be ostracized and are unable to be called as witnesses (Ducaale, 2005). While oral news remains highly relevant, a contemporary application of this may also be reflected in the importance Somalis have placed on mobile phone connectivity. Particularly in places of insecurity and conflict, researchers have noted that accurate information may be considered more valuable, and individuals and communities are often willing to place a premium on accessing reliable news (Konkel and Heeks, 2009).

The space in which public discourse occurs is central to understanding participation, as are the efforts on the part of public authorities to co-opt, dominate or in some cases actually 'purchase' these spaces. In Somaliland, public deliberation takes place across different venues, from the markets to schools to teahouses. Particularly in settled areas, mosques are central for social interactions. For prayers on Friday afternoons, Imams typically choose to preach on topics of community concern. In some cases, these lectures may be political, a trend that is increasing with the influx of funding from the Gulf and the proliferation of mosques. In general, information provided at mosques is regarded as truthful and religious leaders are seen as crucial for resolving disputes and upholding societal values, while also facilitating services including education.

Mefrishes, where Somalis chew the mild narcotic, qat, and drink tea and gather with acquaintances or colleagues are another influential venue, although they largely cater to elite urban men. Many houses or offices have their own mefrish. Typical chewing sessions last for several hours and mefrishes have also had a role in newsgathering for print journalists where, after going out in search of stories in the morning, contacts may come to the mefrish and debate politics with the journalists. Some journalists write their stories while chewing qat and there is often little to distinguish the space from the newsroom. The precise impact of mefrishes is difficult to discern but they have increasingly taken on political characteristics as politicians have been known to send individuals to participate in a particular session to not only gauge public opinion but also to start a debate or nudge a conversation to reflect positively on a specific political objective.

Efforts of political capture or manipulation are common across spaces and societies. Much has been written, for example, about colonial efforts, and that of successive governments in Kenya, to dominate and use the mabaraza for political ends (Haugerud, 1997). In some cases, the ideological underpinnings of such efforts must be considered, particularly if they are motivated by a larger political philosophy. This may, for example, raise questions about what kinds of spaces for participation NGO, religious or traditional leaders are trying to forge or the ideology underpinning similar efforts on the part of the government. The diagnostic urges an identification of these values, or competing ones, that foster citizen voice within such spaces of participation.

Conclusion

Crafting effective media policies in crisis or post-conflict situations can be extremely challenging, particularly when media have had a prominent role in the violence. The diagnostic approach has sought to offer an alternative way for analysing voice and asking difficult but crucial questions in conflict and post-conflict situations. To this end, it is an approach that can make media assistance not only more strategic but also more realistic. The diagnostic approach focuses on how information flows and how it is regulated, rather than on the wholesale development and implementation of normative media systems; this facilitates improved dialogue concerning best practices, ideals that are worth aspiring towards, and alternative and often overlooked approaches. Most importantly, interventions would build on what is already there and what is functioning successfully, which would provide important legitimacy and a basis for positive change.

Similar to DFID's Drivers of Change or the SIDA Power Analysis, the diagnostic as presented in this article, and applied to the case of the Somali territories, is not a template. Applications, and questions, may differ in relation to other cases or contexts and there is significant scope for adaptation. But the elements of the diagnostic, including power, flows, and participation, that bring a more inclusive focus on the informal, such as hybrid governance, hybrid media and a communications ecology, are a corrective approach to the standard emphasis on the formal, including the state, or the government and the mass media.

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Notes

1. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/>.
2. The Somali territories refers to the region that is predominantly populated by Somalis and includes Somalia, Somaliland, Puntland as well as parts of Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya.

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