

# Radio waves spread peace in Africa

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Radio is declining in America, yet in the small African country of Sierra Leone, radio takes on a much greater purpose: strengthening a fragile democracy and maintaining peace.

Ambrose James, a radio pioneer in Sierra Leone, discussed the medium's important role in his native country during "Media, Public Broadcasting and Democracy" Wednesday at Alexander Library with an audience of more than 40 members of the University and Sierra Leonean communities.

During the 1990s, the West African country Sierra Leone, about the size of South Carolina, was consumed in a bloody civil war that destroyed the infrastructure of the country, the institutions that support democracy and the trust people had in their government, said Pavi Jalloh, a native Sierra Leonean and Franklin Township resident. The war ended nearly a decade ago, and Jalloh said the country has entered an era of peace and rebuilding, with two parliamentary and presidential elections carried out peacefully.

"These successes were achieved in large part as the result of mass citizen education programs through mobile radio stations that Mr. Ambrose James and his organization have supported," Jalloh said.

James said he began his radio work in 2000 shortly after the violence of the civil war ended. At that time, there were only three radio stations in the country, but he said citizens already began to see the importance the medium might have in the country.

"You can imagine with just three radio [stations] and a war raging on in your country, people will fall back onto the radio for information about where supplies are and where attacks are taking place," James said.

After the war, James said the radio industry boomed in Sierra Leone, as the three stations turned quickly into more than 20 across the small nation with 85 percent of the population listening.

There was a desire to keep the post-war peace and a fear that the media-fueled Rwandan crisis might repeat itself in Sierra Leone without intervention, he said.

With the help of the international nonprofit Search for Common Ground, an organization that creates radio programs on peace, disarmament and reconciliation, James began to work with Sierra Leone's Independent Radio Network to provide objective news coverage and information on contemporary issues affecting citizens, he said.

"What we tried to do is provide a space where we are bringing the nation together and trying to do that locally," James said. "It's about bringing local issues into the national debate and national debates into the local issues."

James said the radio network helped to provide landmark coverage of the country's 2002 election, where stations reported directly from polling stations, announcing outbreaks of violence and the need for more balloting paper on the air.

With nearly everyone in the country listening, response to these potential problems was swift and helped to ensure the fairness of the election, James said.

He remembers a police officer after the election who told him he did not go to work on the day of the election. Rather, James said the officer sat and listened to the radio, waiting to hear reports of where violence was erupting, sending out his commanders as necessary.

The elections proved only the beginning for James and the network.

Programs like IRN’s “National News,” a weekly national newscast, and “Paliment Bol At,” an issues-based program that helps to connect members of Parliament with their constituents and challenge them to keep their election promises, have helped to create a more informed constituency, James said.

The network helped create stronger standards for ethical journalism, making IRN the most trusted source for information in the country, James said.

Sponsored by the University’s Center for African Studies and several other organizations, the lecture was part of the University’s continued outreach to the large Sierra Leonean community in the area, geography Professor Rich Schroeder said.

Last September, President of Sierra Leone Ernest Bai Koroma spoke at the University in the Rutgers Student Center on the College Avenue campus to a crowd of members of Sierra Leonean community, and Schroeder said this event is an extension of that relationship.

Some students who attended the lecture were impressed by the accomplishments of James and the IRN.

“Just thinking about how this network helps unite and is a backbone to a country that had to rebuild itself after the civil war is extraordinary,” said Travis Fedschun, a School of Arts and Sciences junior and president of the Society of Professional Journalists, who co-sponsored the lecture.