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Good morning, Liberian media

International efforts are transforming the media from servant of warlords to independent estate.

By Bill Glucroft | Contributor to *The Christian Science Monitor*

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MONROVIA, Liberia - It's 10:30 a.m. T.max Jlateh takes his seat in a bunkerlike, carpet-insulated room harshly lit by a single bulb. He slips on a pair of oversized headphones. "OK," Mr. Jlateh says. "Let's go." So begins another edition of 50-50, a weekday political talk show that combines questions, commentary, and audience call-ins, on Monrovia's Sky 107 FM.

"Our people want to be heard," says Jlateh, a former banker who was once imprisoned for defending his listeners' right to speak. He says his show, and the station he cofounded four years ago, can help promote Liberia's transition from failed state to democratic government.

It's a significant challenge: across Africa, other local news organizations have been both victims and victimizers while operating under unstable regimes. In Rwanda, for example, Hutu-dominated media instigated some of the continent's worst bloodletting, stirring up hatred against the Tutsi minority and even organizing some of the death squads that carried out the 1994 genocide. But partly due to the experiences of Rwandan and other media, Liberian journalists are getting some help from international aid groups and media outlets. Through intensive workshops on basic journalism skills and ethics, funding for adequate staffing, and even by establishing news organizations, the plan is to transform a largely untrained and unchecked industry into an independent, responsible media able to promote social cohesion, not anarchy.

"They're going to have an impact," says Joseph Roberts-Mensah, executive producer of UNMIL Radio, a UN-sponsored effort. "More and more, journalists are questioning their own practices. Journalists are critiquing each other and themselves, and pointing out errors in the ways they are performing."

During the 14-year civil war that ended in 2003 after taking some 300,000 lives, Liberia's infrastructure, including the media, was shattered. Journalists were harassed, jailed and killed, and news outlets were used to promote the causes of warlords. The result was a country – with

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its dozens of tribes, clans and factions – even more fragmented than Rwanda was during much of the violence there.

Liberia's press enjoys far greater freedom now that it operates under a democratic system. But freedom is a blessing and a curse, says Oscar Bloh, director of Monrovia's Talking Drum Studio, a group started by the Washington-based Search for Common Ground. Mr. Bloh says the media still needs a comprehensive strategy to transform themselves from a business that will publish anything to make money, to one that sees itself as a public service that promotes stability.

"The media focuses on identity issues that create division," Bloh says, explaining that after decades of legitimate mistrust of government there is a hesitation to credit the government with progress, and focus instead on scandal and incompetency.

Scandal also sells, and the media are strapped for cash. Jlateh's Sky Radio, for example, costs some \$100,000 a year to operate. In a country where more than half of the population makes less than a dollar per day, some news outlets will take money from anywhere, even if it costs them their objectivity.

Enter the international organizations with their multifaceted strategy: Train journalists in basic reporting skills and ethics. Provide funding to ensure independence and enough staff to report the news. Expand programming to grow a base of listeners interested in substantive news. In that vein, USAID has helped establish rural community radio stations. The BBC has been involved in training. Toronto-based Journalists for Human Rights recently launched a five-year training program for radio and print journalists here, the 17th African country they are assisting. UNMIL, with 15,000 peacekeepers, monitors the news and will open a radio training school in February.

Monrovia-based Star Radio is demonstrating some of the effects of assistance. Set up in 1997 as a nonprofit supported by USAID and Swiss-based Fondation Hirondelle, its \$500,000 budget pays for a staff of 70, including stringers throughout Liberia and partnerships with rural stations. The Vernacular Department provides information to Liberia's non-English speakers, and 4x4 vehicles carry reporters to places other news outlets can't reach.

The money keeping Star afloat is dwindling. But Star's most valuable asset – credibility – makes it a station Liberians increasingly turn to.

"Many believe if it is not Star Radio, it is not true. If it is on Star Radio then at least the reliability is there," says James Morlu, the station manager. His reporters have received the BBC training, fortifying them against the temptation of bribes, he says.

"Star Radio has done a great thing. It's got regional reporters. It's put people out there," says UNMIL's Mr. Mensah.

On one outing, Star reporters visited Monrovia's outskirts to investigate an alleged armed robbery. They asked person after person if they knew anything, and didn't stop until they found someone who did: only to discover that the armed robbery was really an unsuccessful break-in. It wasn't a story, and Deputy News Editor Matthais Daffah didn't try to make it one. "If you report a story and the other side is not heard, especially when there are allegations, management gets very cross with you," Mr. Daffah says.

UNMIL Radio, which went live from a van in 2003, now has eight transmitter sites and broadcasts 24 hours a day, the only station in the country able to do so. Mensah describes his station as having "a bias for peace," by offering some 48 programs, including one on electoral politics.

It's a timely series: Presidential elections are three years away. Radio host Jlateh says Liberian media must remain independent during this crucial time.

"If the Liberian media doesn't have the assistance it needs, it could easily be bought," he says.

"When the media is bought, you can't be the conscience of society."

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