



Best mien to CTN



In my view three media institutions that have changed the landscape of modern day independent journalism in Sierra Leone are easy to find. At different times and in different ways Concord Times newspaper, Talking Drum Studio and Cotton Tree News (CTN) have proved a watershed in media development and transformation. Interesting that TDS and CTN are NOT radio stations by themselves but rather production houses for radio. If you are surprised at the absence of the UN Radio I will talk about it in a moment.

Despite being the first country in West Africa to publish a newspaper, print journalism in Sierra Leone was a cut-and-paste cut-throat affair that left the country way behind those it had been far ahead of. That is, until Concord Times was brought to the country in August 1992 by Nigeria's Kingsley Lington Ighobor who introduced computerised journalism here.

The advent of the civil war in 1991 led to all forms of conflict-healing mechanisms that brought about the Search for Common Ground by an extraordinarily energetic hardworking Canadian lady, Frances Fortune, who established Talking Drum Studio in 2000. TDS, as it is commonly known gave radio features journalism as well as radio soap a new meaning. They assembled a crop of people who were to constitute some of the finest producers in radio features, which bagged them several awards. Their well produced magazine and features programmes in my view were not only independent and impartial but also had peace, democracy and people interest at their core.

Despite their huge success, TDS did not do news and current affairs programmes, a vacuum that was neatly filled in February 2007 with the advent of CTN. Even though it was established just a few months before the historic elections of 2007, Cotton Tree News left an impact that is still felt in elections reporting in the country. With their partners that included radio Mount Aureol and the local UN Radio, among others, CTN became a household name for more reasons than one.

Their news was well balanced, impeccably independent, accurately objective, well and concisely written and people-centred. They took away the dominance of pro-government stories on air in a way that reflected real professional journalism. With their core staff made up mostly if not entirely of graduates and students of the Mass Communications Department of Fourah Bay College, their news and current affairs programmes were a breath of fresh air.

Now to hear that CTN will almost certainly close shop this week due to funding difficulty is a bad taste which if allowed to be swallowed, will seriously impact on radio journalism in the country especially with next year's presidential, legislative and local council elections. There will be a vacuum almost impossible to fill. While it is good to know that the formerly state-owned broadcaster is now an independent Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation, it is far away from being independent in and impartial. While a good number of those working there feel hounded by some government officials and their invisible presence, some others feel obliged to them. But this is not a piece in SLBC so I will keep that for a later piece after mentioning the unnecessary long and rambling double digit minutes long report on a single activity by the president last week.

The Swiss organisation, Fondation Hironnelle, has been the key funder for CTN in the last three years or so of their operations here. Whatever the reason funding has not come forth. It behoves international donors such as the UN who have invested so much in the democratisation process in the country, and other democracy and media pluralism developers in the country to intervene to save CTN from closure. SLBC, if that's their interest, cannot be trusted to bring trusted and balanced news reporting especially ahead, during and after the elections. This is not necessarily because they do not have good journalists, but because they have a board whose Chairman has come out clearly in his writings in the papers, as a government apologist. Not only that, his reported interference professional and administrative in the running of the corporation smacks of problems as we approach the elections.

I understand why the UN and all of us Sierra Leoneans would want to see SLBC stand tall. In the case of the UN they were the midwives and in our case we are the beneficiaries. However, the independence and professionalism we all so yearn for from them are a long way off. And it requires not just fig-leafy nuances to it but a tangible and real manifestation of such where the reporter has a free hand to do what is right, and those attached to government departments are either withdrawn or do not laud it over their news editors who themselves must have the character to stand for what is right.

I am in trepidation even at the thought of the closure of CTN...And if I had money I would do just what brought about Aljazeera. The pan-Arab television channel came into being after the BBC trained a group of Arab-speaking journalists for the establishment of the BBC Arabic service on TV. It so happened that funding at the time, or the lack of it, would not allow it to happen. So the project did not take off. Then some Middle Eastern interests came in and employed them to set up Aljazeera Arabic which later led to the Aljazeera English.

Now the reason I didn't include UN Radio as the revolutionaries of the independent media landscape in Sierra Leone is the obvious and the not too obvious. UN Radio was not independent. The UN itself needed to be checked which the radio could not or would not do. I remember the killing of a commercial sex worker allegedly by a Ukrainian UN peacekeeper at Lungi. I was stopped from treating the issue when I worked at Radio UNAMSIL as it was called then.

Additionally, whereas UN Radio had the reach a wider section of the country, their radio did not venture into real high quality news reporting. It basically nibbled around telephone interviews which sometimes were warped and patronising. Except that DJ Base and his brilliant all night company-keeping on Night Line was such a phenomenon. The UN almost always ensured that news items that were deemed to have the proclivity of being disliked by the government or ruffling feathers should not be aired. I suffered that on a number of occasions while I worked there. So yes they may have come along with their wider coverage area, but their niche was nowhere compared to CTN. And that again was not to say they didn't have some good journalists, but because they were made to not feel independent and real training was for the foreign staff.

CTN stands out in radio news journalism in the country far ahead of any other. And anyone who can help, must help save it from going off air because clearly and certainly there is no alternative to their quality news journalism on radio.

By Umaru Fofana

24 janvier 2011