Policy Briefing

HAMISH WILSON / PANOS

The media of Somalia:
A force for moderation?

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Front cover image
A crowd listen to the BBC World Service, as the declaration of independence of the Republic of Somaliland is announced, Somaliland, 1991.

Right Internet cafe in Mogadishu, Somalia.

JOSPEH WINTER/BBC ONLINE

Introduction

Media matters in Somalia. The society arguably ranks among the most media literate in Africa. While much divides a deeply fractured, war-torn and now drought- and famine-stricken country, an ancient love of poetry and a common language unite it. So, throughout recent history, has an avid consumption of news and information. Obtaining information and assessing its trustworthiness has, in this traditionally pastoralist and nomadic society, always shaped not just politics, society and culture, but the odds of survival. Many Somali phrases used for greeting – such as "maxaad sheegtay" – are, literally, asking what news people have. For nomads, understanding where danger lay and where pasture and water was good was the stuff of life.

Somali culture is individualistic, enterprising and deeply resistant to efforts to control it. This is seen forcefully in the astonishing courage and carnage characteristic of journalism in the country. There are many battlegrounds in Somalia, but the media is one of the most constant. If media did not matter, the forces seeking to control the country would not expend such energy suppressing, intimidating or co-opting it.

Media matters too because any political settlement in the country will – according to almost everyone interviewed for this briefing – depend on the consent of its people. The media provides a platform through which people debate their future, thrash out their differences and, at least in part, settle them. It also provides – at least sometimes – an essential check on the abuse of power. Somalia is a country where power has over time been abused more constantly and with more disastrous effects than most. Media has been used and misused, often highly effectively, to manipulate, control and inflame tension, hate and conflict.

This policy briefing sets out to provide a brief analysis of the media's role in shaping Somalia's present and future. It seeks to be objective, and is based on research carried out by the BBC World Service Trust (BBC WST) across the three fractured regions of Somalia between October 2010 and March 2011. This research took the form of focus groups with Somalis across the country and interviews with Somali journalists, media commentators and representatives of development, donor and other relevant organisations. This data was supplemented by content analysis of news output from selected media organisations. All research was funded by the European Union, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Open Society Institute. This briefing attempts to provide an analysis based on and drawn from this research. The analysis presented here is that of the BBC WST, the BBC's international development charity, and should not be taken to reflect the views of the BBC.[1]

This briefing adopts a broad definition of media and focuses mainly on how people in Somalia access, trust, use and misuse information. In a country with a rich oral culture where the Latin alphabet for Somali was adopted only as recently as 1973, radio has for generations been the most important medium in the country. While access to and control over radio provides the main focus of this briefing, radio takes its place alongside other increasingly important media. In the anarcho-capitalist South Central Somalia, the economy has been largely fuelled by telecommunication based services and an extensive and communication dependent diaspora. It is no accident that Somalia has the lowest international telephone call rates in the whole of Africa. With increasingly available internet access, radio's traditional role has been complemented by the web. Whereas in most countries in Africa the elite media remains the newspaper, in Puntland, it is Garowe Online – similar in character to a government newspaper and accessed online every morning by ministers and officials alike needing to know who is who and what is what. The extensive Somali diaspora exerts considerable political influence across all three regions, very substantially through websites, radio and – increasingly – television stations. International and domestic satellite television is beginning to boom, not least because political forces are increasingly turning to television to promote their agenda. One of nine television stations broadcasting from within the country is owned by Al-Shabab, an extremist Somali militia with links to al-Qaeda. Newspapers are much more limited in terms of share of market, but they also have a role.

All types of media are shaping the society and politics of Somalia. It is radio, however, which continues to exert the greatest reach and influence.

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The country of Somalia

What is now the fractured state of Somalia was created in 1960, the result of the merger of two colonies, the protectorate of British Somaliland and the colony of Italian Somaliland. Unlike many other newly formed countries organised around colonially enforced boundaries, the country made political sense and, at least ostensibly, had a reasonable chance of political stability. The republic of Somalia was ethnically homogenous (ethnic Somalis make up almost 95% of a population of nearly 10 million) with a shared language, history and cultural roots. Almost all the population is Sunni Muslim.

Most of Somalia's population belong to one of six descent based clans, the nomadic pastoralist Samaal (the Darod, Dir, Issaq and Hawiye) and the cultivating Sab (Digil and Rahanweyn). Less than a decade after independence, tensions between clans steadily intensified until, when the second president, Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke, was assassinated in 1969, the country plunged via military coup into the authoritarian rule of Muhammad Siad Barre. Political freedoms vanished and with them independent journalism. Barre's rule collapsed in 1991 largely as a consequence of the clans re-exerting their political muscle.

The history of Somalia as a country has fragmented ever since, mainly into three regions; South Central Somalia, Somaliland and Puntland. South Central Somalia in particular descended into lawlessness and warfare, initially played out along clan lines but more recently characterised by profound ideological divisions driven particularly by religiously motivated youth. A government – the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of the Republic of Somalia – was formed in 2004, the result of protracted talks in Kenya, but has failed to exert authority in the country beyond (as at August 2011) a small part of the capital, Mogadishu. In 2006, the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), an Islamist group advocating Sharia law, took control of most of Mogadishu and other parts of South Central Somalia and exerted a new dominance over the warlords. Although the UIC was itself defeated later in the same year by an Ethiopian led force, a splintering of mostly youth led militias emerged from it under the umbrella of the name Al-Shabab. Bent on enforcing an extreme view of Islam, they have constituted the most powerful political force in South Central Somalia ever since.

The TFG, recognised internationally as the government of Somalia and backed by the soldiers of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), controls parts of Mogadishu. Until August 2011, Al-Shabab militias controlled much of the rest and, even after their withdrawal from the city, South Central Somalia's political environment remains defined by the intense conflict between the TFG and the Islamist militias of Al-Shabab and Hizbul Islam. The mandate of the TFG, led by the president Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, is due to end in August 2012. At least ten regional administrations have been created in the region over the past two decades. The most recent is Alzaniya, a new semi-autonomous region in the far south of South Central Somalia (although not officially recognised).

The region remains lawless with no effective administration or institutions in place. Beset by conflict, unaccountable, unpredictable and generally brutal power, Somalis – especially those from South Central Somalia – are now suffering further tragedy. Prolonged drought led to famine being declared in July 2011 with the crisis affecting an estimated 10 million people across the East African region.

In 1991 Somaliland, in the north west of Somalia, declared itself independent from the Republic of Somalia. Although not internationally recognised, Somaliland has had a relatively stable history, has its own currency and state institutions and a comparatively vibrant economy heavily fuelled by remittances from the extensive Somali diaspora. Following elections largely considered to be free and fair by international observers, President Ahmed Mohamed Silanyo came to power in July 2010.

Puntland in the north east declared itself an autonomous state in 1998. It has been led by President Abdirahman Muhammad Farole since 2009. While Puntland is not beset by the same levels of conflict and insecurity as South Central Somalia, it is the home of an increasingly notorious and ruthless international piracy operation.

Left An armed man believed to be loyal to the Islamist militia Hizbul Islam (2009).

MOHAMED DAHIR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

A short history of radio: control, co-option, commercialism – then chaos

All media platforms, traditional (radio, television and the press) and new (web and mobile) play a part in shaping Somalia's politics, culture and society, but it is radio that does so more than any other. Radio continues to dominate as a medium in most of the economically poorest countries, but particularly does so in a country with such a strong oral tradition. "When something happens in Somalia, everyone is going to listen to the radio and every politician is going to focus on what is being said, so it has huge impact," says Sahra Abdi, a journalist working for the Reuters News Agency and Voice of America (VOA).

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There are 35 radio stations in existence across the three regions of Somalia and the number of stations is proliferating, up from 22 five years ago. The only stations with truly national coverage are international ones, principally the BBC Somali Service and VOA that broadcast over shortwave as well as through local partners. A 2007 BBC survey in Mogadishu found that the BBC Somali Service and the Mogadishu based private FM station HornAfrik were the joint most popular stations, listened to by four-fifths of adult males and two-thirds of adult women[2]. The reach of locally broadcast stations is substantial but limited – only a large minority of Somalis can pick up their signal. However, the audience share of local radio and other media actors (including internet-based outlets) is growing and there is, according to most experts, an associated if modest loss of audience share from the international broadcasters.

A simple narrative of the recent history of radio in Somalia would start with the absolute control exerted by Muhammad Siad Barre's dictatorship where freedom of the media in general and radio in particular was only possible from outside the country. It would move on to the post-Barre period after 1991, where radio became part of the terrain of war as warlords sought to establish and control radio to reflect their own interests. Next would come a hopeful phase of private investment heralded by the opening of Radio HornAfrik in 1999, financed like others that followed, as a business enterprise by Somali diaspora. It would end with Al-Shabab and the reign of terror imposed on journalists, resulting in a slow death of independent media in the country as the organisation either took over or drove out independent radio stations. This narrative is largely true but can, as with so much else, mask a more complex picture of Somalia's reality.

Most political actors have placed a high premium on owning, controlling or dominating radio in the country. After the civil war in 1991, media in general but radio in particular proliferated. Two sets of stations emerged, those politically controlled and motivated and established by warlords, and those established as businesses.

The dominant effect of newly formed radio stations on Somali society in the years immediately following Barre's downfall are widely held to have been very damaging. "Initially, radio stations belonged to clans and warlords and reported what was good for the clan or the sub clan. It was very unprofessional at the beginning and they fomented social hatred" says Mohammed Adow, a journalist with Al Jazeera.

Omar Qadi, a former editor of a Somaliland newspaper and now a media expert working with UNDP agrees that, particularly in the past, the hunt for sensation has too often fuelled tension and conflict. "It is this sensationalism that has somehow [infected] the Somali media, glorifying war or talking about fighting the whole time. Or warlords being interviewed threatening each other, that sort of thing which was very popular and people enjoyed getting a daily dose of this sensation, but also appreciate getting information on issues of development."

He argues that in the post-Barre years, such radio was popular: "They were trying to build an audience and unfortunately sensational issues are popular, and if there is fighting somewhere the person who is exaggerating or sensationalising is likely to receive the greatest audience and that is what attracted the warlords to the media in the first place."

Constitutional expert Professor Mohamed Sheikh Osman Jawari argues that the glorifying of war has strong cultural and historical roots. "Back in Somali history culturally speaking, you will find that every clan had a poet who would speak on the bravery of the clan. After Barre fell, stations started mushrooming and it seemed like they were trying to replace the poets of the clans. [These stations] need to know that the pen of the journalist and holding of the microphone is a [position of] trust, people have entrusted them to act fairly, justly and impartially about the news that they find."

The warlords constituted a dominant influence on radio in Somalia, but increasingly they were counteracted by fresh investment from outside of the country. The influence of the Somali diaspora on media in general and radio in particular cannot be underestimated and was crucial in creating the conditions where a more independent, plural and genuinely professional media could emerge. From 1999 onwards, a brief but critical period of private, independent radio flourished thanks to external investment. "The majority of investors in Somali media are from the diaspora – they have a big influence," says Ahmednur Mohamed Farah, from the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ). The Somali diaspora is renowned for its support of relief and development work, social and business investment, and involvement with the politics of its home country. Findings from a recent study by UNDP suggest that it provides between US$130-200 million annually for development and relief activities, and between US$1.3 and 2 billion in private remittances[3].

It was the diaspora that was most responsible for the opening of privately owned stations such as Radio HornAfrik in 1999, and for investing in other stations that currently command trust. Almost a quarter of radio stations in Somalia are owned by Somalis living outside the country, and many more are financed indirectly through the Somali diaspora[4].

Privately owned radio stations became increasingly popular, credible and effective. Although listeners understand that these stations are designed to make a profit, they feel a strong level of trust in them. "I believe it [Radio Shabelle] belongs to people that want to make business but at the same time need to contribute something for the society", said a focus group participant in Mogadishu. "It belongs to a group from the community that wants to help our society", said another of the same radio station.

Over the last three years, however, this apparent flourishing of a more vibrant and pluralist media landscape has fallen victim to a new, more ferocious and ruthless set of actors, the Islamic militias of Al-Shabab and Hizbul Islam. Both

private and warlord-controlled media have wilted under the violence of their onslaught. "The sort of media landscape where warlords or political leaders can play as a playground is no longer there," says Faar Lamane, a veteran journalist and the editor of Radio Bar-Kulan. It has instead been replaced by the more brutal intimidation of Al-Shabab.

The assault on media independence has been remorseless and merciless. Al-Shabab has a deliberate strategy of taking over or intimidating radio stations. The NUSOJ's *State of the Freedom of the Press in Somalia* reported the seizure of seven private media houses by Al-Shabab and Hizbul Islam in 2010.

The vast majority of media now try to make sure their content does not upset Al-Shabab. Radio Shabelle in Mogadishu, a recent recipient of a Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom award, has moved its operation because of a ban imposed by Al-Shabab[5]. Abiding by such bans is extremely difficult since Al-Shabab is a loose network of highly unpredictable groups and second-guessing what will or will not cause them to take umbrage is near impossible. If radio stations do not comply, retribution can come in the form of a bombing, or the individual owner or journalist being beaten or killed. The result of such unpredictable terror is that journalists stop being journalists.

"Al-Shabab has struck fear in the heart of journalists, forcing them to employ self censorship" says Burhan Ahmed Daahir, from the Media Association of Puntland. "They have set guidelines for media operating in their area, totally removing their independence. They have also created their own media which pursue their own ideology."

"Al-Shabab is basically hostile to anything western," says Rashid Abdi, from the non-governmental organisation International Crisis Group (ICG). "They think that radio,

TV and satellite broadcasting are western and for that reason they do not like anything on the air that is not Islamic. They do not mind radio as long as you broadcast what is Islamic, and Islamic to them is nothing beyond recitals of the Quran and sermons. They do not even allow music on the air."

Even by the standards of extremist groups, Al-Shabab is regarded as being exceptionally brutal. "The media [have been] destroyed by Al-Shabab" says Omar Qadi, media expert with UNDP. "The warlords tried to threaten the shape of the media but it did not fundamentally change. But when it came to Al-Shabab, more than 500 journalists fled the country, especially in Mogadishu. They will kill you for the slightest reason ... I have never seen another group in the world that is that ruthless."

From Barre to the warlords, from the warlords to Al-Shabab, one narrative of the last two decades of Somali media sees it navigating and generally falling from one set of violent and controlling interests into another. However, that risks caricaturing the media as a helpless set of actors easily bent to serve those with power, and consequently a force used to control and manipulate public opinion in the interests of those with the guns. The reality is more complex and arguably suggests that the media in general and radio in particular has been far more a force for moderation rather than extremism.

Above Members of the Radio Shabelle team in Mogadishu.

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Radio Shabelle now operates from the Transitional Federal Government controlled zone of Mogadishu.

Radio: a force for moderation?

The degree to which media and journalism has ensured that the media has remained a muscular, steadfast force for moderation in the face of immense odds is largely down to three factors:

First, the courage of journalists and others in the media determined to retain their own and their industry's independence; second, the character, culture and history of the Somali people themselves who demonstrate an inherent demand for news they can trust combined with the influence of international media, particularly the BBC and more recently Voice of America; and finally the economics of media in a fractured, war torn country.

NICK RAISTRICK / BBC WST

The blood and guts of journalism in Somalia

It takes real guts to be a journalist in Somalia. Reporters Without Borders considers the country to be the "deadliest country in Africa for journalists." The physical dangers are acute but working conditions are also characterised by long hours and low pay, operating with poor equipment and resources. The Somali education sector was decimated in the aftermath of the civil war following Barre's downfall and very limited formal journalism training has existed in recent years. Journalism is, however, a reasonably high status profession in the country, admired both within the country and internationally.

The situation has been worsening in recent years, with the number of journalist deaths increasing dramatically to seven in 2007, nine in 2009 and then falling to three in 2010. This fall has largely been attributed to much more cautious behaviour by most journalists. The majority of these incidents took place in Mogadishu. Here there has been an intense struggle between the militias and the government to control the capital, but other threats and attacks on journalists occur throughout South Central Somalia and Puntland, and to a lesser extent in Somaliland. The NUSOJ attributed most attacks against journalists in 2010 to Islamist armed forces, mainly Al-Shabab and Hizbul Islam, followed by government-led attacks from the Puntland administration and the Transitional Federal Government (TFG).[6]

"I would say that if you are a journalist in Somalia, then this is your bleakest hour. The whole of south and central Somalia is controlled by Al-Shabab with a transitional government in charge of three blocks of Mogadishu – it is very bleak," says Rashid Abdi of the International Crisis Group.

While all journalists risk violence, intimidation and possible death as an occupational hazard, women journalists face particular challenges, especially in areas controlled by Al-Shabab. Sahra Abdi, a journalist who has worked in Mogadishu and neighbouring Kismayo says: "[In] areas controlled by Islamists, I was the only female journalist working there for a long time and Islamists called me several times. They said they cannot allow a female journalist [to

6
NUSOJ 2010 report 'State of the Freedom of the Press in Somalia', page 6.

Somaliland and Puntland: The mixed blessings of real government

Absence of the rule of law, as in South Central Somalia, is deadly for a free media. Journalists can be killed with impunity and force or power alone largely determines who owns, controls and determines content through the media.

Only in Somaliland and Puntland, however, is there any government capable of upholding some kind of rule of law and yet here, journalistic freedom is also at risk. "If you divide Somalia into three regions, say Somaliland, Southern Somalia and Puntland, there are three different categories [of media]." says Ahmed Abubakar, Chief Executive Officer of diaspora TV station Universal Television. "In Somaliland, you may see certain media there, but there is pressure from the government for them to operate locally and not against the regime. The same applies in Puntland, while in Southern Somalia, the Government just controls two streets". [The interview was conducted before the August 2011 withdrawal of Al-Shabab from large areas of Mogadishu].

Daudi Aweis, the Somali media analyst for BBC Monitoring based in Nairobi agrees: "In Mogadishu, media editors have to comply with orders of insurgents and commanders ... In Somaliland they have to comply with the Government because the media is controlled by the Government. In Puntland, there is private media but they have to be careful not to annoy the Government."

Whereas nearly all media organisations in South Central Somalia are privately owned, in Somaliland the government controls the broadcast sector (constituting Radio Hargeisa and Somaliland National TV- SLNTV), while Puntland has a mostly private media sector operating under a government that has been accused of being authoritarian. In its 2010 report on freedom of expression, NUSOJ stated that Puntland has been experiencing: "a worsening press freedom climate due to an administration particularly sensitive to criticism." More than 50 journalist and media freedom organisations wrote a joint letter in October 2010 to the President of Puntland urging him to do more to protect media freedom.

The authorities in Somaliland in contrast rarely arrest journalists, but they do retain tight control over the media. In March 2011, Universal TV a London based Somali language television station was banned from operating in the region. In lawless South Central Somalia, dozens of radio stations proliferate. In Somaliland just one single state controlled station – Radio Hargeisa – operates officially under strict Government guidelines. "State radio programmes are often checked before they go live and if there are too many negative things about the Government they are removed," said one Somaliland journalist interviewed for this briefing.

Puntland is not immune from attacks on the media. "We are not allowed to discuss politics," says another journalist based in Puntland. "There is even a committee that ensures the media stays politics free. Sometimes we are called by groups like Al-Shabab and although we are supposed to be non-political, we take the calls as we fear reprisals and the loss of our lives."

"We need a clear cut policy on media," says Burhan Ahmed Daahir of the Media Association of Puntland which has been working to initiate with the Government a more constructive dialogue on media freedom and regulation. "In Puntland there is a lot of violation of media freedom."

operate] in strong *muhajideen* areas like Kismayo. So they gave me two options: you either stay in Kismayo and don't report, or you move to another place and do what you want. So I asked them, why are you telling me this and not the men, and they said that my voice is different and so I was not allowed to report." Female journalists also tend to suffer the worst working conditions and generally receive the lowest pay.

"Al-Shabab killed many people just to give a lesson to the rest," says journalist Faar Laman. "By killing someone, [it sends a message that] you will be next if you don't accept what they are saying. So it is very simple, it is not influencing it is just giving direct orders, like don't play music. It has really affected the practice of journalism in South and Central Somalia."

Globally, journalists can come under political pressure of some form or another to highlight stories favourable to particular interests, but nowhere in the world does that pressure so consistently take the form of a threatened death sentence. "[The different interests] who are fighting each other in the capital, they call and tell managers or news editors to do what they want," says Ahmednur Mohamed Farah of the NUSOJ. "They say, 'this is the news I want you to broadcast, do as I want or you will be killed'".

According to the NUSOJ, during 2009 and 2010, more than 90 journalists went into exile to escape the constant threats, attacks and poor working conditions of Somalia. While most attacks on journalists come from Islamists, NUSOJ claims that the representatives of the TFG and Puntland authorities have also been responsible for attacks on journalists.

Journalism is in deep trouble in Somalia but there can be few countries where journalists have risked or resisted more in the face of appalling attacks. "I don't think you'll find a media anywhere that is more brave and resilient than the Somali media," says Rashid Abdi of the ICG. "Many people fled but we still have a large number and some even say that they would rather die defending the freedom of Somali media ... I have great respect for the Somali media."

The fact is that brave journalists are continuing to fight to uphold the independence of their profession and the story of the last three decades has been as much one of resistance to terror as it has been submission.

Somali society: media literacy in a fractured state

In the years following Barre's downfall, there was a clear audience demand to hear war and clan celebrated and glorified. There is much evidence to suggest that the opposite is now the case. People decide who they can and cannot trust and make their listening decisions accordingly. Increasingly, those they can trust are those who reflect multiple perspectives. All the research and interviews carried out by the BBC WST suggests that Somalia, largely as a consequence of war and division, is becoming one of the most media literate in Africa. People are tired of war and tired of hearing just one side of an argument.

"I think Somalis are becoming much more sophisticated," says Omar Qadi, who works with UNDP. His perception is echoed by numerous members of focus groups organised as part of the BBC WST research. One Somali radio listener put it like this: "Nowadays radio and TV release contradictory news that we can't believe. So I feel regret sometimes. We should have one ethical main radio and TV [channel]."

"Over the years, as the country developed into a more ideological and religious war, the different sides of the war became clearer and media matured and sought more the different perspectives from each side," says Mohammed

Adow, a journalist with Al Jazeera. "Still … the propaganda element is still there, but journalists are slowly coming to terms with the reality that they need to be professional."

Most radio stations, and especially the largest and most successful ones, responded to audience demand and increasingly attempt balance in their coverage, representing diverse perspectives. "This is how radio evolved in Somalia," says Rashid Abdi of the ICG. "It was part of a clan agenda then it tried to become balanced."

Violence, intimidation and forceful co-option of media has worked in closing down a plurality of voices in society, but it has proved of limited usefulness for those bent on using the media to command loyalty. The capacity of radio to inspire trust, the tendency of Somali people to value only those media they can trust, and the fact that the most trusted media tend to be those that represent multiple perspectives in society, has made media more a source of moderation than extremism in Somalia society. Evidence from focus groups carried out as part of the BBC WST research suggests that Somali audiences carefully choose their information sources: "I listen to Radio Shabelle and whenever they broadcast a rumour, they apologise on the same day," said one participant.

Trust remains limited for almost all radio stations in the country, dependent not only on issues of control and content but of geography and identity. "There are a lot of radios and I believe that all of them exaggerate their views, even Shabelle radio," said one male participant in a focus group in Mogadishu.

This ability to make judgements about media does not prevent people from having preconceived assumptions of bias in the media. "Not all media are trusted and [trust depends] on geography. Someone living in Puntland will never trust what is aired in the southern part of Somalia that is Mogadishu and vice versa ... you will find the political differences, the clan differences. So every region will have its own media ... the media that people will trust is BBC Somali which has been the lifeline of Somalia after 1991," says Daudi Aweis of BBC Monitoring. The media in Somaliland in particular are perceived as being largely patriotic and uncritical in their reporting according to content analysis carried out by BBC WST.

Large media operations in the country do command substantial trust however. Radio Shabelle and its linked website seeks to be a trusted presence throughout the country: "Whenever there is breaking news, the first place that people will go is Shabelle's website," says Daudi Aweis.

> **"I don't think you'll find a media anywhere that is more brave and resilient than the Somali media."**

"Shabelle is a [particularly] good example of Somali media and has relocated so that they can remain impartial," adds Rashid Abdi of the ICG. "For me the most professionally run radio stations in Somalia [were] HornAfrik and Shabelle... they had clan bases but they did not stop there and struggled very hard to bring a balance and to mimic the BBC and for that reason raised radio standards very high even in very harsh conditions. Recently Reporters Without Borders gave an award to Radio Shabelle which I think was deserved."

The role of the BBC has also had an important effect not only as trusted news provider but also as a standard setter. "I think radio tends to play a moderating role in Somalia because it has so often been sophisticated. Radio stations have tended to mimic the BBC in putting two conflicting voices on the radio, and that has a moderating influence," says Rashid Abdi.

Radio: the economics of media as a moderating force

Media's capacity to survive and thrive is dependent on whether media is paid for. Media tends to be paid for either by financial support (whether through a system of public subsidy or particular interests or individuals bankrolling a media operation); or through advertising (which depends on reaching large numbers of people advertisers are interested in selling to). As highlighted above, from Siad Barre to the warlords to Al Shabab, many forces have sought to coopt media to advance their own narrow interests. As an economic proposition, however, one sided or extremist media appears to be decreasingly effective in Somalia, largely because people do not tend to want it. The moderating role of media, especially radio, in Somali society is maximised because the supply of extremist content – of which there is no shortage – is not obviously met by a demand for it. In Somalia, at least when left to its own devices, the radio market tends to work in favour of moderation.

> **People have been switching off from radios controlled by Al-Shabab... Mainly they carry sermons [and] run Quranic content and translation... but when you ask people for example in Kismayo do they listen, they say no.**

When warlords took over or established a radio station with the intent of commanding loyalty on behalf of their clan, they faced a problem. The clan structure of Somalia is complex with a small number of main clans, but many more sub-clans, each with their own leader. Building an audience through content focused on commanding loyalty to any one political actor in such a fractured political space

Below Front cover of Somaliland English weekly newspaper, June 2011.

is very difficult, particularly as Somalis have become more discerning about understanding when a political line is being spun. Audiences in Somalia, left to their own devices and when they have the choice, tend to migrate towards hearing a variety of perspectives over the radio. "You find that radio stations tend[ed] to be started [to promote] the interests of the clan and they fail[ed] commercially [because they don't attract advertisers]," says Omar Qadi, who works with UNDP.

There is a strong argument suggesting that without Al-Shabab's ruthless clampdown on the media, the natural gravitational pull of the media is shaped by the need to remain financially sustainable. The most commercially successful radio stations, HornAfrik and Shabelle, produced largely impartial content reflecting a multiplicity of perspectives, and this has drawn both audiences and advertisers. And despite Al-Shabab's ruthlessness, economic factors limit their attempts to exert influence through the media.

"People have been switching off from radios controlled by Al-Shabab", says Rashid Abdi of the ICG. "Mainly they carry sermons from the chief of Al-Shabab every Friday, they run Quranic content and translation ... but when you ask people for example in Kismayo do they listen, they say no."

"In the last two years, the most notable restriction is when Al-Shabab banned the broadcasting of music and songs," says Daudi Aweis, BBC Monitoring analyst based in Nairobi.

"People are not hearing the voice of balanced news, they are hearing the side of the Islamists who are recruiting people, or are going to fight the government, or impose the Sharia law. So, in those areas which are dominated by the Islamists, people listen to BBC and VOA in hiding, whenever they want to listen to a balanced voice," adds journalist Sahra Abdi.

The safe thing for a radio station in Al-Shabab controlled areas to do is to focus on readings of the Quran. Music is banned as is any argument that might be interpreted as offensive to Al-Shabab. Audiences tend to plummet as a consequence, the political effects of the radio station become more muted, advertisers flee if they can, and the radio station loses both money and influence.

The economic environment in which radio stations have to survive in Somalia could scarcely be more hostile, especially in South Central Somalia. "In Mogadishu, the radio stations used to get advertisements from the businessmen but the [amount of] instability in the capital has meant that advertisement revenue [has decreased]," says Daudi Aweis.

Intimidation and violence has been successful in killing journalists and journalism, but it is also killing the capacity of stations to engage their audiences or survive sustainably. In interviews carried out with station managers for the research this briefing is based upon, very few station managers reported that they broadcast entertainment programmes, which is unsurprising given that along with the Al-Shabab ban, the Islamist group Hizbul Islam issued a ban on music, commercials and entertainment to private stations in Mogadishu in 2010. An analysis of radio programme schedules found that music and song could only be found on Radio Hargeisa in Somaliland and just one station (Radio Xurmo) broadcast a once weekly drama show on Friday (poetry does continue to be broadcast with some stations broadcasting up to 11 hours of poetry a week). Extremism in Somalia is bad for business and terrible for building an audience.

Television, Digital and Newspapers

Much of this briefing focuses on the role of radio because it has played, and continues to play, such a dominant role in the relationship between media, politics and society. That dominance is increasingly being challenged by television, online and, to a much lesser extent, newspapers.

Television is an increasingly important medium across the three regions of Somalia. There are currently nine TV stations operating across the three regions, two of which opened in 2011. Although the availability of electricity tends to restrict it to the better off, it is increasingly popular, and increasingly fought over by political interests. One third of people surveyed by the BBC in Mogadishu in 2007 had watched television at least once in the last week. The recent establishment of television stations by both the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in Mogadishu and Al-Shabab is strong evidence of the growing significance of the platform.

"TV is a new phenomenon in Somalia," says Mohammed Adow, a journalist with Al Jazeera. "It has been able to pick up in the last three years. One thing that TV in Somalia has done is to provide a bridge between those living abroad and those living in the country … you will see advertisements from London next to those from shops in Mogadishu."

"There is a mushrooming of satellite TV broadcasting … it's a new area and I would not be surprised if it becomes the most powerful media. I am not too sure that it will overpower radio, but it is going to offer stiff competition. Most of them are based outside Somalia and the most popular, Universal TV, is based in London. TV stations can show Somali dances and songs which can be watched in Al-Shabab territory."

Newspapers

Newspapers constitute a tiny part of the media market in Somalia. Despite the hunger for news and information in the country, print media is squeezed between the rock of economic and political insecurity and the hard place that makes up a thriving online web presence and a very limited market for newspapers. "In Mogadishu, I remember there were around 1,000 copies of the local newspaper and people could rent each copy, giving something small to the one who bought it," says Daudi Aweis. "In Somaliland the newspapers are alive … but for the capital it is very difficult for people to buy newspapers." In Somaliland, where the economy is much stronger, the print media is expanding more rapidly.

Internet

Immensely diverse and often messy, Somalia boasts one of Africa's most well developed online media landscapes, with an abundance of internet sites – particularly news websites – forming in recent years. Views on this burgeoning landscape tend to be as diverse as the media itself.

Much of it has been created and shaped by Somalia's extensive diaspora. "There are over 3 million Somali diaspora and because of this internet media has become very strong. We have perhaps 200 online outlets and it is true that some of them are rubbish, but that is interesting. If you were to go to Ethiopia and ask them how many websites there are, people will look at you as if you

PETTERIK WIGGERS/PANOS

Above A Somali businessman talks on his mobile phone outside a computer shop, Bosasso, Puntland.

are from Mars … Somalia, as broken a country as it is, has a lot to teach Ethiopia" says the ICG's Rashid Abdi.

"The Somali diaspora have a lot of influence," adds Abdirashid Duale, Chief Executive Officer of the Dahabshil group of companies which specialises in money transfers. "There are lots of Somalis in the diaspora who have an interest in the media or who are journalists and who work for the international media … they take on the role of local Somali journalists."

Burhan Ahmed Daahir of the Media Association of Puntland is wary of the implications for accuracy and journalistic standards: "Most of the websites are run by people who have even worse training than that of Somalia based journalists," he argues. "They therefore write unbalanced or unsubstantiated stories and the problem is that they cannot be held to account because they are untraceable."

Others see both positive and negative effects: "The internet is on the increase … It's a very good development. They [online journalists] have the liberty to say or publish what the radios in Somalia cannot broadcast. It is the information gateway for Somalis in the diaspora which for them is important to follow what is going on at home. However, the problem comes whenever a person who can afford to pay is acquiring a website or blog and is publishing whatever he wants, so there is a negative side," says Somali journalist Faar Lamane, editor of Radio Bar-Kulan.

As elsewhere, online content both feeds and feeds off mainstream media content. Websites can publish information with less fear of censorship or intimidation which gives local journalists a key source for their own news reports. For example, content produced for the website Hadwanaaq feeds into the production of Radio Shabelle in Mogadishu. "It is a very symbiotic relationship … you have many websites based in Sweden and the US and elsewhere that are read by people back home, and you have local websites run by HornAfrik and Shabelle that are read by diaspora audiences" says Rashid Abdi of the ICG.

"There is no media that is as fragmented as the Somali media," says Omar Qadi. "Somalis are great consumers of the internet [which has further driven fragmentation]. Personally I see more positivity than negativity in this … even if it is so fragmented, it will correct itself, and a natural equilibrium will come from freedom. If you try to mess with that freedom, that is where the problems will come."

Mobile

There are five mobile networks operating in Somalia and mobile phone subscribers now outnumber fixed line customers. There are no reliable figures for mobile penetration, with 2009 estimates varying from between 7% to 15% ownership. Anecdotal evidence suggests that growth is rapid and, although currently concentrated in urban areas, is beginning to penetrate rural areas. As mobile spreads, so will its impact on mainstream media, making it increasingly participative and interactive. "Whenever we have a programme live on air, the SMS come in by the dozens … it even blocks our service. These SMS are not just from the UK but from Hargeisa, from Mozambique, from everywhere worldwide," says Ahmed Abubakar, CEO of Universal TV.

Challenges for the future

Investment in training and capacity building of journalists is almost unanimously considered to be critical by people interviewed for this research.

The two principal problems facing Somali journalism – intimidation and lack of capacity – are intricately connected. "Many of the professional journalists have fled the country in the last ten years or so and since 2007 they have been fleeing day after day. So those journalists working in Southern Somalia are mostly new journalists freshly joining the media ... many of them are trainees," says Ahmednur Mohamed Farah of the NUSOJ. BBC WST research found that the majority of journalists currently working in Somalia had less than five years' experience working in the sector. This has not only deprived the country of many good journalists, but also led to a situation where there are very few skilled mentors capable of instilling journalistic values and skills in those joining the profession. Research with both audiences and media experts revealed that both parties felt the quality of journalism has decreased over the last few years. They gave examples of output that was not accurate, biased and did not present multiple viewpoints. The capacity and record to carry out investigative journalism appears to have been particularly curtailed.

Training is seen as being needed for a whole list of skills: basic journalism skills, impartiality, understanding of specific issues (such as governance, gender and refugees), as well as professional and business management skills. However, the ethics underpinning what journalism is or should be

> 66 Training, training, training ... that's what is lacking. You don't only need basic training on being objective, but also need to give the journalists training that gives them an understanding of how the global media works. 99

is a constant theme expressed by many journalists and others in Somalia.

"Somalia is war-torn. It's a place with a lot of local radio, a lot of journalists joining the media every day. Those journalists don't have enough experience in journalism. Most of them have never learned something from the media houses. So they need to learn something about the ethics of journalism, because if you don't know the ethics of journalism it will [cause] harm, even to yourself," says Sahra Abdi.

"This country changed [in 1991] from being one of the most repressive regimes in the world to one of the most lawless… the media has [reflected that] to becoming one of the most chaotic in the world," says Omar Qadi.

"Training, training, training ... that's what is lacking," says a journalist with Al Jazeera. "You don't only need basic training on being objective, but also need to give the journalists training that gives them an understanding of how the global media works".

"I think more training, [particularly] on human rights, good governance, impartiality as well as advocacy training for journalists [is required]," says Ahmednur Mohamed Farah. "Journalists [also] need to learn their rights because some of the media owners do not know the laws of media and some of the journalists don't know the ethics of journalism" he says, adding that lack of equipment remains a major problem. The BBC WST's research supports this, reporting acute problems with basic broadcast equipment, generator capacity, internet connectivity and audio recording equipment.

The journalist associations and unions insist that investment in such training pays off. Even where journalistic freedoms are so constrained by Al-Shabab and other forms of intimidation, journalists can still play a key role. The current drought and resulting famine has been, they argue, consistently highlighted in the Somali media. "[The media]

The challenges of supporting journalism in Somalia

The dangers and status of being a journalist in Somalia present a unique set of challenges to those taking up the mantle of advancing and protecting the profession. On top of the physical threats, the working conditions of journalists are reported by them as being terrible. Journalists taking part in focus group discussions report regular 15 hour days, many working virtually as volunteers. "[Some] media owners are running sweatshops and get huge contracts from the UN but they don't pay the journalists ... there is no protection for the local journalists," said Mohammed Adow, a journalist working for Al Jazeera. Journalists cannot rely on their employers to support them and are personally responsible for managing their own security.

It is difficult to conceive of a country where the role of unions and associations to protect journalists could be any more important, or more worthy of international support. However, the number of such associations has multiplied in recent years leading to a perception among journalists inside the country and donor support agencies outside it that despite the courage and commitment of individual agencies, the sector as a whole is not working in the best interests of those it is designed to protect. There was a shared view among journalists who participated in the BBC WST research that the associations do not fully represent their interests.

"They have no real power – if a journalist was arrested today they'd most likely slander him instead of offering to help," said one journalist. Several media practitioners felt some associations were mainly populated by media owners rather than journalists and that this diluted their efforts to protect journalists. Accusations

have also been made that their energy has focused too heavily on how best to attract external funding than on how effective such agencies can be in working on behalf of the journalists they are set up to represent. "Many of these organisations take donations from foreign donors and do nothing for those affected," said another journalist taking part in the focus groups.

External agencies are baffled by how to invest most wisely in a sector they are keen to support. They tend to argue that, while not wanting to reduce plurality among such associations, greater coordination or consolidation between them would greatly enhance the prospects for effectively supporting an effective voice for journalists in the country. "Journalists are very bad at forming [effective and] united associations to defend themselves and that is what they need," says a representative of UNDP. Too often, he argues, "a set of journalists who have no jobs think that forming an association will help them get money or jobs outside Somalia. Most of the time these are not very genuine. The human rights unions are better than the journalists unions."

There is a clear desire from donors and others who want to support Somali journalism to have a less messy, fragmented and competitive set of media support organisations in the country. However, Rashid Abdi of the ICG does not see greater consolidation of media or journalist associations happening any time soon. "It's hopeless I think to try to create one single entity for Somali journalists ... in many ways I think there is a rebellion in Somalia against centralism ... for similar reasons you will have a furore of media associations."

A24 MEDIA

considered key to underpinning a stable political settlement in the country.

- **Ownership and agency:** The future media sector within Somalia will be created by Somalis. Efforts designed to support media in the country will increasingly need to have legitimacy within the country. Given the fractured nature of the country this is not always going to be easy, but a sustainable programme of media support needs to command the respect of Somali society. Research suggests that a strong focus on working with existing media and building on their strengths and capacities would be a way to achieve this.

- **Support regulatory reform:** Regulatory reform is more difficult in Somalia than almost any other country, especially in South Central Somalia where there are no functioning institutions. Regulatory struggles have been intense with strong engagement by both international organisations (such as Article 19) and national ones (such as NUSOJ). Different authorities have varying levels of determination to support or muzzle media, and controversy (such as the stricture in the 2007 Media Law that media should promote Islam) has been a recurrent theme in recent years. Authorities at different times and in different places have more or less sympathy with liberalising the media and protecting media freedom, but those that have any tendency towards it (or are facing pent-up demand for radio licences) are faced with the same dilemma: how to ensure a free, professional and diverse media whilst not creating – or as some would see returning to – conditions for fomenting further violence. Continuing and strategically supporting regulatory laws and processes that can reconcile this tension remains a key challenge for the future, but some authorities may be more willing to liberalise media if they can be comfortable that the result will not involve the fostering of further conflict. That support should be focused on ensuring that people have access to trusted, diverse sets of perspectives from both national and international actors. Popular demand for such information is already high.

- **Ensure strategic coherence:** the web of support to Somali media is among the most complex in the world. The number of domestic media support organisations, international media support organisations (of which the publishers of this briefing are one), of external donor organisations combined with the complexity of the media landscape all make strategic coherence key.

- **Support standard setters:** Few people interviewed for this research felt that providing training to individual journalists over short periods of time is likely to be an effective approach in the future. Training should be targeted at those capable of setting standards and passing skills to others. Particularly mentioned were radio station heads and media editors who are likely to stay longer at organisations than individual journalists. Support might most usefully be focused on those media organisations that need it most. Much existing support has tended to focus on those organisations that are easiest to engage, which in turn have tended to consist of those organisations with relatively good standards. Training needs to be provided by those with strong journalistic skills and needs to focus as much on the ethics of journalism as on skills building.

are reporting well, [particularly on issues such as] drought and refugees, because we as the National Union of Somali Journalists provided practical training ... [nevertheless] journalists cannot be impartial because of insecurity and corruption," says Ahmednur Mohamed Farah from the NUSOJ.

Content of media is increasingly determined by threats and intimidation, but it can also be twisted by more conventional blandishments. Corruption in journalism – often referred to internationally as "brown envelope journalism" – is seen by many African media professionals as a major and growing problem in many countries and Somalia is no exception. "There is something called 'Sharuur' which is bribery for journalists," says Abdishakuur Ali Mire, the Executive Director of TV channel Somali Channel. "They may have killed people and violated human rights, but then they just go to a few local journalists and give them some money and say 'write whatever I want.'"

The need for support to journalism in particular and the media sector in general should be a continuing, urgent and high priority. Declaring this a priority is a good deal simpler and more obvious than reaching clear conclusions on how such support can be more effective than it is now.

Where to go from here

Three issues that are repeated and already well acknowledged: protection of media freedom (particularly in relation to more effective support to journalist unions and associations), training and capacity building, and improvements in policy and regulation.

It is not the place of this policy briefing to set out a strategy for support to Somali media, but several principles have emerged through the research that could underpin such a strategy:

- **Make media support a priority:** This briefing argues that media is potentially a profoundly moderating force in a society much in need of moderation. Despite its weaknesses, complexities and the huge obstacles it faces, an urgent, coordinated and long term programme of support to the media sector in Somalia should be

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