

# **PUBLIC INFORMATION AND THE MEDIA: RADIO OKAPI'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE PEACE PROCESS IN THE DRC**

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## **Introduction**

There are many reasons to be optimistic about the progress made thus far on the way to peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The DRC now has one government, one parliament, one army commander. This much has already been achieved. However, we still have a long way to go before making this process a success.

The northeastern Ituri district and the two Kivu provinces are still unstable; the question of the integration of the armies and police remains and is yet to be addressed; several delicate issues still face the new government; and all the transitional institutions will need some time to be consolidated. The electoral challenge, which is the final objective of the process, is still to be met, and this will require a great deal of commitment from those working in public information.

Therefore, media support to the peace process must continue apace. The role of the media and the public information division of MONUC is certainly crucial. The success of the reconciliation process will depend heavily on the capacity of the Congolese media to capture the attention of the population, to provide them with fluid, useful, and balanced information. The media are needed to harness wide participation in the process by the Congolese people. The people of Congo need to be given the tools to allow them to master their destiny. They need to be accurately informed and educated, so they can better understand what is done for them and what they have to do for themselves. This may be the key to a successful transition.

The question is, can the Congolese media in general, and MONUC's Public Information Division in particular, perform that duty adequately? Moreover, what can Radio Okapi contribute to the peace process? Before venturing an answer, it is useful to briefly examine the general situation of the Congolese media and the public information services.

## The media situation in the DRC

If one word can capture the full picture of the media situation in the DRC, it is poverty. Poverty not only in terms of the material and working conditions, but also in terms of respect for ethics and professional standards. While this observation applies to both state and private media, each has a number of specific characteristics worth noting.

### *The public media*

The RTNC, or Congolese National Radio and Television, is a national network once composed of regional and local stations operating throughout the country. However, most of them are no longer working. During the five years of war, rebel groups cut off the relay from the central station in Kinshasa.

During these five years, the central government, like the different armed groups, exclusively used that part of the RTNC network under their control as an instrument of propaganda. In rebel-held areas, as in government-controlled territory, RTNC journalists were denied any contact with colleagues on the other side. This division and mutual mistrust extended to the behavior of journalists on both sides of the divide, when they covered together the political negotiations in Pretoria and in Sun City. Those from Kinshasa or Lubumbashi stayed clear of the rebels, refusing to seek information or interviews from them. Likewise, the journalists accompanying the RCD<sup>2</sup> delegation would keep away from Government negotiators.

In general, the approach to the use of public media in the DRC is, at best, questionable. In fact, the way they are run still reflects practices which originated during Mobutu's years of dictatorship. Those in power have always used the RTNC as if it was their own property. The government tightly dictates the editorial line since it cannot countenance being criticised for its policy.

It is hoped that this sad situation will radically change with the new government of national unity. However, such change will obviously not come overnight. Because we are talking about breaking a very old habit, even the general public has come to think it normal that the government, the owner of the RTNC, should ban any anti-government messages from the state media.

Apart from RTNC, there is the ACP, or Congolese Press Agency. It is a telegraphic agency, a commercial public service whose mission is to provide some information to subscribers, newspapers, radios and televisions - both public and private services. Without dwelling on this aspect, it can safely be said that the ACP is in a very dilapidated state. It is far from being the vital source of information that it should be. As a result, the media use dispatches from AFP a lot more than they do those from ACP.

## *The private media*

There has been a real explosion of private sector media activity over the past years. In less than a decade, more than 30 new TV channels, tens of radio stations, and over one hundred newspapers have emerged. This phenomenon seems in contradiction with the concept of poverty alluded to previously. The notion of contradiction would be true if we compare the number of media companies operating in the DRC and those existing in other African countries. However, the impressive number of television, radio and newspaper operators is also the consequence of a light and mindless approach to media activities in the DRC. This frivolous and irresponsible approach can be ascribed to both the public authorities who issue licenses and the media company owners.

## *Audiovisual media*

No private radio or television station has a broadcasting capacity beyond the limits of the city or the locality where the transmitter is installed. The allocation of frequencies is made without any verification. The motives of the station owners are generally questionable. For the time being, the relevant public authorities are literally flooded with frequency requests, at a time when the airwaves are already overcrowded. Kinshasa shares the same frequencies with Brazzaville, the capital of Congo Republic. As a consequence, we are going to face saturation very soon.

In Kinshasa, there are about 20 television stations and 30 radio stations. More than half of them belong to religious groups. Their programmes consist mainly of lengthy sermons, so-called "miracle campaigns", and movies. Half of the commercial programmes offer only entertainment and music. They don't even have real studios. None of them pay attention to the kind of civic education that is so needed by the Congolese general public.

Fortunately, there is a category of radio stations that have some degree of "civic consciousness", and that need to be encouraged - the community radios. There are dozens of these throughout the DRC. These stations play an extremely important role in the rural centers. They are helpful for the information and sensitisation on such basic but essential issues as sanitary problems and agricultural techniques. They also relay information from big cities to the rural areas. The operators of these radios have formed a quiet, but dynamic association named ARCCO (Congolese Communities Radios Association). They should be given more attention and support, as their impact on rural communities is undoubtedly very positive.

## Newspapers

Since April 1990, when President Mobutu proclaimed the liberalisation of the press, newspapers have played a crucial role in Congolese political culture. Because the public media have remained under close control of the government, private newspapers became precious independent sources of national information. However, many factors limit their capacity to significantly influence the general public. The most important of these are:

- The fact that the majority of the population is illiterate;
- Newspaper circulation is very limited (no newspaper circulates more than 2,000 copies);
- Lack of financing (only government-friendly newspapers receive public financing);
- Absence of a reliable distribution network;
- The price of a newspaper copy (about 1 US dollar) is simply too high for the large majority of Congolese people; and
- Ubiquitous corruption, which negatively impacts the ethics of journalism.

Despite all these difficulties, a few newspapers have managed to distinguish themselves by their regularity, independence and a remarkable sense of professionalism. Unfortunately, only the educated elite (mainly living in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi) get to read these newspapers.

## The Public Information Division of MONUC

Radio Okapi functions as a unit of MONUC's Public Information Division. While the title of this chapter indicates a special focus on Radio Okapi, a brief synopsis of the work of other key units of the division will help to place Okapi within the context of the overall public information effort. These include the Publications Unit, the Video Unit and the Website Unit.

The *publications unit* produces booklets, a weekly bulletin, a monthly magazine, posters and other printed materials. These documents are sent to Public Information Officers in all six sectors. They contain information related to MONUC's work – such as the mandate of the mission; what it can do and what it cannot do. The publications are useful for both UN staff and the Congolese people. UN staff members are provided with information from all sectors, so they are aware of what is going on within the overall mission. Some documents are translated into Congolese languages. Public Information Officers are asked to disseminate these as widely as possible in their respective sectors.

The role of the *video unit* is expected to expand. This unit produces video materials destined for the Congolese population and the media abroad. It

focuses heavily on the DDRRR campaign, and the unit has a large stock of images on the repatriation and the resettlement of Rwandan ex-combatants. The unit also covered extensively the aftermath of the violence in Bunia; the arrival in Kinshasa of the leaders of former rebels groups; and other noteworthy events and occurrences. The video unit will also be called upon to play an important role in increasing public awareness of the electoral process.

The Information Division also manages MONUC's website. The domain [www.monuc.org](http://www.monuc.org) receives a monthly average of about 60,000 hits. Most visitors to the site are members of the locally based Congolese media, foreign media, and Congolese based abroad. The site is currently being developed to allow for a wider coverage of MONUC activities.

The Public Information Division is also making increasing use of popular theatre to get its messages across. This mode of communication is very successful in the DRC. The first performances in the various sectors have been very well received, and the use of popular theatre will be intensified during the transitional period.

## **Radio Okapi**

Radio Okapi<sup>3</sup> has been working non-stop for eighteen months or so. The very first programme went on the air on 25 February 2002, the day when the Inter-Congolese Dialogue started in Sun City. The launch on this date was meant to symbolise the mission of the radio – that of accompanying the peace process. In order to make the coincidence happen, the launching of Radio Okapi was precipitated somewhat prematurely. In addition to the central station, only two regional stations (Goma and Kisangani), instead of three, were ready to start on 25 February. However, starting on the same date as the Inter-Congolese Dialogue was not only symbolically meaningful; it also provided a very important source of information for those Congolese who could listen from these three cities.

In the minds of Congolese, the Inter-Congolese Dialogue was one of the most important keys to unlocking the peace process. The event was awaited with a great deal of hope and expectation. However, the hosting of the meeting in Sun City, South Africa, was to deprive the Congolese people of the possibility of listening to proceedings as closely as that they had done ten years earlier, at the time of the National Conference.

On the other hand, even if the Dialogue had been held in a Congolese city, no national media would have been able to arrange the technical set-up for whole country diffusion. The best option, therefore, was for Okapi to act with urgency to fill this vacuum and to address the real need for information.

At the time of the launch, the DRC had been divided into several administrations for the past four years. The movement of goods and people was

restricted (and still is restricted), with thousands of families - parents, brothers, sisters and also friends - separated. The population remained ignorant of all that was happening outside of the territories ruled by their *de facto* administration, or the one still in power in Kinshasa. Given this situation, it became almost a humanitarian imperative to attempt to create and unify the country in any possible manner - even via the airwaves. The hope was that the flow of information and communication across administrative boundaries would bring pressure on the protagonists to participate more meaningfully and urgently in the peace process.

In order to succeed, the Okapi project needed to overcome some significant obstacles related to its own institutional framework and to the Congolese political environment.

### *The Institutional framework*

It is only recently that the United Nations has taken the initiative of creating radio stations in its field missions. No preceding experience has been as ambitious as that of Radio Okapi. None of the projects launched in other countries, be it in Sierra Leone, East Timor or in Kosovo, have faced the same challenges as Radio Okapi. It has not been easy to get the United Nations administration to commit to the scale of the Okapi project. Moreover, MONUC is not alone in this project. Radio Okapi is managed in partnership with the Fondation Hirondelle, an organisation of journalists that sets up and operates media services in crisis areas. This partnership is certainly beneficial for Radio Okapi, and the project may not have worked at all without this sort of joint venture. However, the arrangement is not devoid of a number of problems, not least because of the significant differences in organisational culture and procedures between the UN and the Fondation Hirondelle.

### *Congolese political environment*

In 2001, when the United Nations and the Fondation Hirondelle decided to create a radio station network in the DRC, the country was divided into three large territories, each under a different administration. The RCD was in control of the two Kivu provinces, Maniema province, part of Eastern and Western Kasai provinces, the northern part of the Katanga province as well as the city of Kisangani. The MLC<sup>4</sup> held most of the north of the Equateur province, with the south held by the Kinshasa government, in addition to southern Katanga, Western Kasai and part of Eastern Kasai.

At that time, and despite positive signs that the peace process would move forward (following a number of initiatives by President Joseph Kabila), mutu-

al accusations of cease-fire violations were quite frequent among the parties. That situation made it very difficult for MONUC to obtain the necessary authorisation to implant the radio network. It took tact, diplomacy and patience to meet that challenge. But it is one thing to get the radio implanted, and another to get it to operate freely. Okapi still encounters a daily struggle for freedom of operation in the areas where the station has been established – alongside the challenge of maintaining and expanding the deployment level of the radio network across the DRC.

### *Extending the Okapi network*

Radio Okapi's network comprises nine stations: Kinshasa (central station); Goma; Kisangani; Kananga; Mbandaka; Kalemie; Kindu; Bukavu; and Bunia. While the majority of these stations mainly feed national programs, they also broadcast a number of local programmes. The cities of Beni and Butembo, in North Kivu province, as well as Lubumbashi and Gbadolite, are also provided with relay stations. Other relay stations are to be established in Lubumbashi, Mbuji-Mayi, Matadi and Uvira.

There are several factors in the choice of the deployment strategy. The most important are: the existence of a MONUC office in the targeted city; the relative urgency of peace efforts in some sectors; and the need to maintain a balance between the sectors. Until very recently, there was no station in Lubumbashi, the second largest city - and Mbuji-Mayi, the diamond capital, is still waiting to host one.

The unstable zones of the country have, understandably, been treated most urgently. The East, for example, has the largest number of stations, with the radio deployment following MONUC's deployment pattern. The East is the main target of the DDRRR campaign, and this campaign enjoys high priority in Radio Okapi programming. In addition, donors are more concerned about the eastern region than the rest of the country. This factor has even prompted some change in the radio deployment planning - some stations have been erected sooner than initially planned. This has been the case in Bukavu, Beni, Butembo and, most recently, in Bunia.

There is also the need for a sort of political balance in the Okapi network deployment. This parameter has been taken into account, especially for the installation of a station in Gbadolite, the former MLC headquarters. Gbadolite was certainly not an emergency case. It became a priority simply because that part of the country (ruled at that time by the MLC) would have hosted no Radio Okapi station. Now that the political situation has changed, and MONUC's presence has dwindled in the city, the Gbadolite station no longer broadcasts local programmes. Okapi's presence has therefore been recently reduced to a relay station.

### *Radio Okapi staff*

MONUC's entire Public Information Division has 140 staff members - 108 Congolese journalists and technicians, and 32 international staff. With the (long awaited) new budget, the number of staff is expected to reach the 200 mark, with 50 internationals and 150 local United Nations Staff members, working in all units of the Division, including Radio Okapi.

However, because of MONUC's current budget constraints, some Congolese journalists have been recruited by Fondation Hirondelle, which has boosted the current total number of personnel working almost exclusively for Radio Okapi to 117 - 111 national staff (67 of Monuc and 44 of the Fondation Hirondelle), plus 5 additional Hirondelle international staff members. These figures do not include an additional six journalists that were recruited by Fondation Hirondelle in Gbadolite.

## **Radio Okapi's contribution to the peace process in DRC**

Radio Okapi is an information radio. It has a general interest character, and covers all aspects of the Congolese people's life. But its main mission is to accompany the peace process and to participate in national reconciliation efforts. Radio Okapi is essentially there to back MONUC in the achievement of its mandate. This core purpose is evident in both its news and magazine programmes. Both programmes should endeavor to cover the peace process diligently.

### *News programmes*

The news on Radio Okapi are broadcast in five languages: French, Lingala, Tshiluba, Swahili and Kikongo. The latter four Congolese languages represent the four national linguistic areas. Radio Okapi covers comprehensively and with rigor current events related to the political process in all of these languages. The information conveyed is processed with respect for the following fundamental rules: truth, balance, impartiality, and, responsibility.

While these rules are basic in the professional deontology of journalism, they are crucial in the Congolese political context. A strict respect for these rules is recommended not only for the credibility of the Radio and for MONUC, but also for the security of staff.

Furthermore, Radio Okapi establishes a link between the political news and the real daily life of the listeners. It covers military events (when the case arises), it covers the work of the MONUC, the United Nations' specialized agencies and that of the main international intervening parties.

## *Magazine programmes*

The news bulletins are not sufficient to enlighten the Congolese people on some crucial political topics, nor to develop a campaign on peace-process related issues.

Besides the coverage of the peace process, therefore, two specialised magazine programmes have been developed. The first focuses on domestic political matters. It was previously entitled "*Dialogue inter-Congolais*", (Inter-Congolese Dialogue) – with the choice of title obviously more than a mere coincidence. Since April 2002, the title underwent a subtle change, to become "*Dialogue entre Congolais*", (dialogue between Congolese). The motivation of this change is explained briefly below, as it is meaningful for the understanding of the Radio's editorial line. The second programme is named "*Gutahuka*", which means "back home" in Kinyarwanda (the language spoken in Rwanda). This broadcast is in support of the DDRRR campaign.

### *The "Dialogue entre Congolais" programme*

As mentioned previously, the ambition at the launch of Radio Okapi was to allow the Congolese people to listen to the Inter-Congolese Dialogue in Sun City. It was felt that, in addition to news programmes, a daily broadcast covering the event was needed. The magazine programme was designed as a space for everyone to express their opinions on any subject discussed in Sun City, so that those not participating in Sun City could still feel somehow involved in the process. From the beginning up to the conclusion of the Inter-Congolese Dialogue, the broadcast bore the same name as the Sun City Conference. Because of the way the conference ended, it was decided to change the title of the broadcast – an action that was less mundane than it may seem at first.

The Inter-Congolese Dialogue ended in Sun City with a partial agreement signed on 19 April 2002 between the government of Joseph Kabila and the MLC led by Jean Pierre Bemba. The majority of the political delegates and those of civil society joined them in the agreement. However, the agreement was rejected by the RCD and some political parties, as well as a few groups of civil society leaders. They argued that the Dialogue was not finished. Everybody had to come back the table and go on with negotiations. They called for a global and inclusive agreement. On the other hand, the MLC and the Government considered that the Dialogue, as it had been designed in the Lusaka accord, was over.

With this dispute, it became embarrassing for Okapi to keep *Dialogue inter-congolais* as the title of the broadcast. It would have been seen as backing those who thought the Inter-Congolese Dialogue was still ongoing. In order to avoid

this kind of accusation, the slight but significant title change was made. This obviously worked, as today the programme is one of Okapi's most listened-to broadcasts. Nevertheless, the recent political evolution requires some adjustment in the way the political process has been covered, and reforms are needed to make the programme fit the realities of the new situation.

### *Gutahuka*

"Gutahuka" is a broadcast in Kinyarwanda, that is produced by the DDRRR Division of MONUC. The broadcast has two aspects: the first explains the programme; and the second explains each phase of the disarmament, demobilisation, repatriation, resettlement and reintegration processes (DDRRR), from disarmament through to reintegration.

There is also coverage of the actual implementation of the DDRRR campaign. Gutahuka features ex-combatants, who have already been repatriated, testifying on the conditions they are experiencing in their home country. These testimonies are expected to convince DDRRR candidates (who may still be hesitant) to join the process. They help to counter false information spread by some extremists who try to discourage potential DDRRR candidates.

It is probably fair to say that the Gutahuka campaign has produced limited results. Not so much because of the design of the campaign itself, but because of the lack of real and sincere cooperation from the warring parties. Things are expected to go better, now that there is a government of national unity.

### *Information on MONUC activities*

In addition to the programmes "*Dialogue entre Congolais*" and "*Gutahuka*", there are two slots in the radio programme chart reserved for MONUC activities and peace process-related developments. The first slot is a 15-minute daily broadcast titled "*En direct avec le Porte-parole de la Monuc*" (Live with MONUC's Spokesman), in which the mission spokesman answers questions from listeners. The questions are aimed at a better understanding of the many aspects of the mission – such as human rights, humanitarian affairs, DDRRR, public information, employment opportunities and, of course, the political process.

The second slot is weekly broadcast called "*Fenetre Ouverte sur la Monuc*" (Open Window on MONUC). Once a week, the SRSG is interviewed on current events.

The SRSG also holds a weekly press conference, which is broadcast live on Radio Okapi. In both cases, with the Spokesman and the SRSG, it is the opinion of the MONUC that is expressed; its official position.

## The necessary reform of Radio Okapi's political programme

All these programmes discussed above have been functioning from the inception of Okapi. With the recent change in the political arena and agenda, however, a new grid of programmes is being prepared, that will take into account the new needs of the listeners.

Through its political broadcasts (*news* and “*Dialogue entre Congolais*”), extant Radio Okapi coverage of events is fast moving. It does not take the time to explain the political developments to Congolese listeners in a really meaningful fashion. Take, for example, the Global and Inclusive Agreement, with its numerous appendices. This has generated the constitution and the new transitional institutions. The general public therefore needs to understand how the government system works and who the people running these institutions really are.

The complexity of the transitional institutions requires a radio programme to help Congolese to better understand how these new bodies work. Another programme is needed to get Congolese to know their new leaders. Those in high positions of responsibility need to make their profile known: where they are from, what they have been doing before, and what goals they are striving for on behalf of the Congolese people.

Such programme reforms, to fit in with the new situation, have in principle been decided, and changes have been announced for the month of October. Some innovations were already evident in mid-September, with two Okapi staffers having been appointed as parliamentary attachés, to cover activities of the Parliament and Senate on a regular basis.

## Conclusion

Can the Congolese media and MONUC's Public Information Division meet the public information challenge? From what has been outlined above, there can obviously not be a general and unqualified answer to this question. There are clearly two very different types of media in the DRC. There are media outfits that are so undermined by so many kinds of problems that their positive impact on the peace process is very limited. The lack of professionalism and sense of responsibility associated with these media may indeed pose a danger to the national reconciliation process. Many of these operators are clearly radical and more politically militant than journalistic. Some of them are even sadly reminiscent of the infamous *Radio Mille Collines* in Rwanda.

On the other hand, a small space for the practice of good journalism has been developed. It may be like a blade of grass in the desert, but it should be

encouraged to spread as a matter of urgency. On this issue, the role of the High Authority for Media, a newly created government institution, will be crucial. It has to address very quickly the training needs of journalists. They must be reminded of the basic rules of their job and the enormous responsibility that rests on their shoulders at this point in the peace process.

In addition to re-training, Congolese media bosses and journalists must be subjected to a strong code of conduct. This does not mean restricting freedom of the press, but it should aim at ensuring its proper use in the interest of peace and national reconciliation.

Radio Okapi is a special case. It is no exaggeration to say that Congolese people see Okapi as a real source of light in a very dark media world. Since Sun City, the Radio has played a central part in informing the Congolese on the peace process. Its credibility is very high. In a recent opinion poll, published in the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir*, the majority of the Congolese respondents said that Radio Okapi has been the most satisfactory achievement of MONUC. This places a huge burden of responsibility on Radio Okapi, and makes it extremely important for the Radio and MONUC to maintain the highest level of professionalism and credibility, if Okapi is to continue to be successfully accompanying the transitional process.

On the other hand, despite its large capacity to reach people in the Congo, Radio Okapi cannot be everywhere. Its limits must be understood, and compensated for with other means of responsible communication. There is, in short, an urgent need for the Congolese media to rise to the occasion and to play their part.

MONUC's Public Information Division also has some very useful assets at its disposal. The video and publications units have been called upon to increase their productivity. The group of actors that is being set up for theatre performances is a most promising development. An added advantage of the theatre is that the public can watch it live on stage, but scenes can also be recorded for wider dissemination via a video or radio program.

With a strategy based on the complementarity of all these communication means, the Public Information Division is poised to effectively play its part in accompanying and supporting the DRC national reconciliation process through to the end.

## Notes

1. Mr. Jerome Ngongo is the Head of Radio Okapi's Political Programme.
2. Rally for Congolese Democracy.
- 3, Okapi is unique to the Congo. When deciding on the name, the radio wanted it to be symbolic for the country. The DRC is the only country in

the world where you can find this antelope-like animal.

4. Movement for the Liberation of Congo.