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# ELECTION REPORTING IN SIERRA LEONE

A case study on **jhr**'s efforts to build the capacity of local journalists to cover elections

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**jhr** (Journalists for Human Rights) provides the training, resources and incentives necessary for local Sierra Leonean media to report on human rights and democracy issues more effectively.

This case study assesses jhr's work in training reporters to cover elections with a specific focus on Sierra Leone's 2007 Presidential and Parliamentary elections and 2008's local council elections.

## SIERRA LEONE'S MEDIA LANDSCAPE

In the wake of a devastating 11-year civil war, an energetic media sector has developed in Sierra Leone. Discussing politics and current events is a popular pastime; a mix of private, community and state-owned media feed the country's insatiable appetite for information. When UNICEF and the Hironnelle Foundation carried out the 2008 Media Use Survey<sup>1</sup>, 56 per cent of the respondents said news was their favorite type of radio programming.

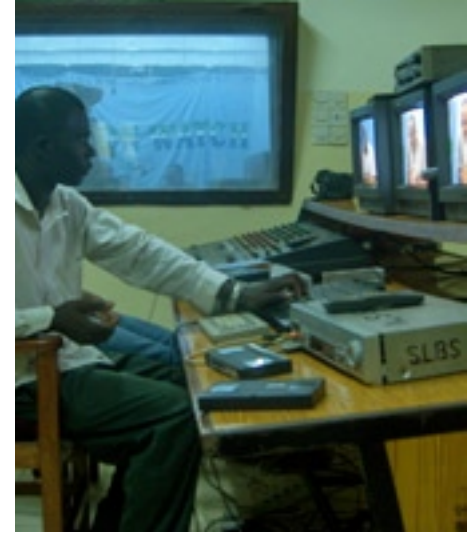
While Sierra Leoneans hunger for news, the recent explosion of content hasn't necessarily served them well. In general, the emphasis has been on quantity, not quality. With some notable exceptions, much of the news media are hampered by a lack of resources and poor professional standards; the result being many stories lack adequate and reliable sources, are not fact-checked and/or are based on rumor and half-truths.

Radio is by far the most important medium in Sierra Leone. More than three quarters of respondents to the Media Use Survey said they had a radio in their home. Private radio stations are based largely out of Freetown, while the rest of the country is covered by community radio stations and those run by the state-owned Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service (SLBS).

A literacy rate of 35 per cent prevents much of the population from receiving information through the printed word, especially in rural areas. Only 11 per cent of survey respondents read newspapers. While upwards of 15 papers publish on any given day, these are all based in Freetown and are not widely available outside the capital.

Many newspapers are overtly political, representing the views of one of the two main political parties.

The vast majority of Sierra Leone's population lacks access to regular electricity, turning television into a rare luxury. The medium is in its nascent stages in Sierra Leone and faces serious barriers to development. It is comparatively expensive to produce and the industry requires substantial investment. Producing television content also requires a technical expertise that is rarely found in Sierra Leone. While 16 per cent of those surveyed said they watch televisions "sometimes", the news programming that is available is sporadic and of low quality.



Photograph by Jennifer Hollett

Despite its vast popularity, most radio newsrooms face the same struggle as all media outlets; a lack of capacity and resources. Community radio stations in particular are often staffed by volunteers and journalists making meager, if any, salaries and who have little, if any, formal training. While the stations are meant to be non-partisan, programming often reflects the political biases of the journalists or management.

In a July 2008 interview, Bernadette Cole, head of the country's Independent Media Commission (IMC), pointed to a few problems that undermine reporting in Sierra Leone. "Accuracy is a big problem because they do not have the entire story," she said. "The story is not balanced or comprehensive."

Ms. Cole added that particular training is needed on media law and investigative journalism. "They do not go the extra mile to investigate a story or idea to its logical conclusion," she said, but noted that most media organizations are running on scant budgets, which make it hard to finance investigative reporting.

## THE MEDIA, ELECTIONS AND JHR

Sierra Leone held presidential elections in August 2007, with a run-off vote following in September. These elections were hotly contested and saw a very high turnout of 76 percent in the first round of voting.

In July 2008, the country held nationwide local elections. These elections garnered less interest among the public and saw a relatively low turnout of 39 percent.

In the modern age, the media are one of the most important influences on how an election runs inside a country<sup>2</sup>. During the lead-up to the Sierra Leonean elections, jhr worked with local journalists and media outlets to build their capacity to produce coverage that was free, fair, unbiased and inclusive of all political parties and viewpoints.

## National Approach

jhr sent trainers across Sierra Leone to facilitate workshops for journalists working for radio, print and television outlets. Amongst other topics, workshops included discussions and activities on the following:

- The importance of a free press to democracy
- Three elements of elections: political parties/candidates, issues, voting process
- Accuracy: exercise (mock press conference), strategies to reduce errors
- Achieving balance in stories
- Reporting on campaigns, polls, speeches
- Journalists' code of conduct
- The role of media in elections
- The role and duties of individual reporters
- Presentation by representative from the National Elections Commission (NEC)
- Story meetings to discuss information provided by NEC representative



Photograph by Kim Barry Brunhuber

## Focused Training

In addition to the country-wide workshops, jhr had trainers embedded in different media houses, providing daily on-the-job training to local journalists in the lead up to all of the elections.

## Print

During the 2008 presidential elections a jhr trainer was placed at the Concord Times newspaper. This focused approach resulted in the creation of a special elections page, which ran three times a week until three weeks before the election, at which point it ran daily.

During the 2007 nationwide local elections a jhr print trainer, amongst other activities, traveled with a local reporter to the Kono and Tongo Fields – historical flashpoints of election violence. The stories they produced focused on election security issues and led the front page on election day.

## Television

During the 2007 presidential election campaign jhr placed a trainer at the SLBS. As a state run broadcaster, SLBS has a tendency to favour the governing party. The jhr trainer worked with local journalists to shift coverage away from press conferences to stories that featured a multiplicity of voices including an interview with the leader of the opposition. While the News Director initially refused to air the interview during the campaign, it aired it after the opposition leader was voted into office.

During the 2008 nationwide local elections, jhr placed a trainer at the privately run ABC Television. Amongst other stories, on election day the jhr trainer accompanied a local reporter to polling stations and together they produced a well-rounded report that aired on the evening newscast.



Photograph by Jennifer Hollett

## Radio

jhr had trainers placed at two radio stations in Makeni during the 2008 elections. One at Radio Mankneh, a community station, and the other at Radio Maria, a station run out of the Fatima Institute, a post-secondary institution run by the Catholic Church. The trainers often held joint workshops, bringing reporters from both stations together.

For the five weeks prior to the 2007 elections, the trainers facilitated meetings with local journalists to help plan election coverage. They led discussions about key issues, such as voter registration and election-related violence, and how to report on them. In the week leading up to the campaign, the trainers held a two day workshop on technical aspects of election coverage, including how to file live reports from the field. On election day, the trainers accompanied reporters into the field and helped them produce reports.

# ASSESSING JHR'S WORK

## Daily on-the-job training

jhr was given widespread credit by local journalists for their efforts in elections training with many feeling that it led to improved coverage.

Ms. Cole cited improved coverage as well, specifically in the 2008 elections. She pointed to jhr, The BBC World Trust, and Talking Drum Studios as key organizations that held elections reporting training sessions. jhr was the only organization to provide daily, on-the-job training.

Tanu Jalloh, editor of Concord Times, praised his colleagues for their balanced election coverage of the 2008 elections. “That was primarily because media practitioners – reporters, editors and so on – were engaged in serious pre-election training in how to cover the elections,” he explained.



Photograph by Kim Barry Brunhuber

Amara Bangura, the station manager at Makeni’s Radio Mankneh, said his community radio station did its best to inform voters about the election. He said that, although his and other community stations are supposed to be non-partisan, many reporters have trouble keeping their political biases out of their reports. This issue was addressed by the jhr trainer stationed at Radio Mankneh. “I think it was a success because we were able to sit together and discuss,” he said. “Thanks to the presence of the jhr trainer we were able to overcome most of it.”

Mr. Bangura also praised jhr’s model of placing trainers in media houses for significant periods of time rather than conducting only short workshops. By working day to day with local reporters and living in the community, jhr trainers become familiar with the social and political issues particular to the region. This helps the trainer better understand the issues at stake when covering elections.

“If there are people based on the ground there is going to be a better job done. It’s not just training for training’s sake,” Mr. Bangura said. “For any media organization that wants to send trainers there, this is a good example that jhr has set.”

Mr. Jalloh said he has seen his newspaper improve as a result of jhr’s presence. Trainers encouraged Concord Times reporters to bring the voices of regular people into the stories. “With the advent of jhr, we were able to concentrate on human rights and human-centered stories in terms of elections,” he said.

## Outside Freetown

During the run-up to both the 2007 and 2008 elections, jhr reached out to media houses in communities where no trainer was permanently stationed.

In May 2008 jhr facilitated an elections reporting workshop for local journalists in Kabala, a remote community in Eastern Sierra Leone. The workshop included a representative from the National Elections Commission (NEC). During his presentation, the representative mentioned that the region had not been assigned enough police officers to provide security on election day.

A jhr trainer offered to stay in the community to work on the story with local reporter, Abbas Sesay of Radio Bintumani. Together they produced a balanced news item that was broadcast on community stations across the country through the Independent Radio Network.

In an interview two months later, Sesay said the experience had left lasting benefits. “It improved my skill. It affects the work I am doing now,” he said.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- Media development in Sierra Leone, like all development-oriented projects, cannot operate in a vacuum. Poverty and corruption, amongst other issues, have direct and indirect daily impacts on the media and individual journalists. Media development projects need to be aware of and in communication with projects that address these key areas.
- While the Sierra Leonean media is largely based in Freetown, resources need to be made available to train those journalists, editors and owners working in smaller towns and villages.
- Business management training needs to be made available to media owners. Media outlets, specifically television and print, are for the most part currently unsustainable. Training journalists will not yield long-term results if the outlets they work for go under and if the media sector as a whole is not sustainable in the long-term.
- Local journalists are seriously underpaid, if they are paid at all. This can directly feed into corruption and a lack of journalistic ethics. If the Sierra Leonean media is going to continue to grow and develop, a minimum salary for journalists needs to be established and enforced.



Photograph by Kim Barry Brunhuber

## CONCLUSION

As is evidence above, training provided by media development organizations, including jhr, significantly improved election coverage.

The media in Sierra Leone have made great strides since the civil war officially ended in 2002. Responsible election coverage is one way to measure that progress, and there is evidence that elections reporting has indeed improved. However, media houses in Sierra Leone still suffer from significant challenges. *(See Lessons Learned)*

jhr's model of placing trainers in media houses for significant periods of time is effective and appreciated by local journalists. Trainers are able to gain an in depth knowledge of the political landscape and the issues facing specific communities. jhr cannot, of course, provide trainers to all media houses. In the absence of an embedded trainer, mobile workshops provide reporters, particularly in remote areas, access to much-needed journalism training.

# ENDNOTES

1. 2008 Media Use Survey: Sierra Leone. Hironnelle Foundation and UNICEF
2. Media and Elections: An Elections Reporting Handbook. IMPACS and IMS 2004



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