

MEDIA & TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

INTRODUCTION

Using lessons learned from the work of the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation (GIJTR), this policy brief gives an overview of the opportunities and challenges that arise around media coverage of transitional justice processes, and recommendations for activists who wish to engage with journalists and less traditional media figures around issues of memory, truth, and justice.

SUMMARY

Discussions of the media's role in covering both formal and informal transitional justice processes have understandably focused on the myriad of outcomes that can result from this amalgamation (Berastegi; Hodzic, and Tolbert). There are unfortunately all too many examples of media outlets not only undermining transitional justice proceedings, as in the case of Peru, but exacerbating the violence that preceded it. In Rwanda, for instance, the local media was a major instigator of violence, often encouraging everyday Hutus to injure or kill their Tutsi neighbors, while international media largely turned the other way. Alongside these examples, however, are case studies from South Africa and Guatemala, where the media can be rightly credited with having made complicated processes more accessible to large audiences and amplifying survivors' stories.

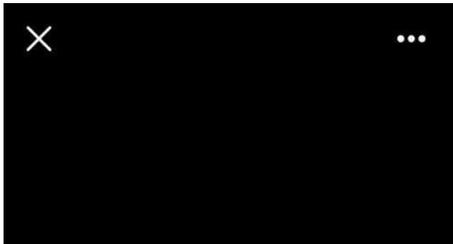
These varying outcomes speak to an important tenet of GIJTR: that every community must be met where they are. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to ensuring that media will necessarily offer an inclusive portrait of victims or even an impartial one. Much depends on a range of factors in any particular context, including social customs, whether media is state-controlled, and if there is a general acceptance of free speech. Journalists themselves are often victims of the state, reporting despite risks to their safety when political



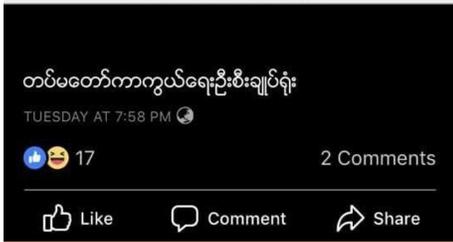
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leaders make it difficult or dangerous to uncover injustice and promote accountability. Nearly two-thirds of female journalist respondents in a recent survey 64% said they had experienced acts of “intimidation, threats, and abuse” in relation to their work (International Women’s Media Foundation).

The rise – if not takeover – of social media also presents challenges that were unheard of even a decade ago. Politicians and repressive governments have undermined



Members of Mujahidin muslim group holding arms left by British Army who retreated due to the offensive attacks on Japan



Screen shots published in 2018 in the *New York Times* from the official Facebook account of Myanmar military’s commander in chief. He claimed the photos showed evidence of abuse in Myanmar’s Rahkine State in the 1940s, when in fact the photos were from the 1971 Liberation War in Bangladesh.

legitimate news sources with accusations of “fake news,” while using these very channels to create just that. One of the more memorable examples is the Myanmar military’s systematic campaign on Facebook that targeted the country’s mostly Muslim Rohingya minority. The military exploited Facebook’s wide reach in Myanmar, where it is so broadly used that many of the country’s 18 million internet users confuse the social media outlet with the internet. Human rights groups blamed the anti-Rohingya propaganda for inciting murders, rapes, and the largest forced human migration in recent history (Mozur).

While these challenges are indicative of a broad polarization in many societies, where individuals or groups are frequently siloed into their own media realms and distrusting of media that is not “on their side,” the following are key findings and recommendations drawn from case studies of GIJTR’s work in Guinea, Gambia, and Sri Lanka that offer tangible recommendations for activists who want to engage with media effectively.

KEY FINDINGS

To date, transitional justice processes have typically been “top-down” processes, and presented to the world as such. Even when victims’ testimonies play a central role in a trial, for instance, the public’s focus directed often by the press has traditionally been centered on high-level perpetrators and trials. To give one example, the trial of Slobodan Milošević in the Hague could be described by some as akin to a courtroom drama movie, with the former dictator acting as his own lawyer and doing so in a bombastic and attention-getting style. There are many downsides, of course, to such a circumstance, but for practitioners interested in ensuring that all those affected

THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE FOR JUSTICE, TRUTH, AND RECONCILIATION

In 2014, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) launched the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation (GIJTR), a consortium of nine international organizations focused on offering holistic, integrative, and multidisciplinary approaches to issues of truth, justice, and reconciliation. GIJTR works primarily with local populations, civil society organizations, survivors, and governments to develop transitional justice approaches that are victim centered and collaborative and support dignity, respect, inclusion, and transparency in societies emerging from conflict or periods of authoritarian rule. Since its founding, GIJTR has engaged with people from 72 countries, worked with 681 CSOs, and has conducted 323 community-driven projects, and supported 5,040 initiatives dealing with human rights violations.

For more information, please visit gijtr.org.



GIJTR

Global Initiative for Justice
Truth & Reconciliation

by conflict are heard, it is particularly troublesome. For one, GIJTR staff have found that there is a general lack of understanding of transitional justice processes among the public, and among journalists themselves. If they do have a general sense of what these mechanisms are, they are usually colored by images of Milošević and other “high-profile” figures, which can make transitional justice generally seem abstract and distant from everyday life.

There are many reasons to offer alternative, more-holistic perspectives of transitional justice – the most important being to center and amplify the voices of victims and survivors. In order to do so, as practitioners, it can be effective to approach journalists more like collaborators. Of course, the ability to do this depends hugely on the context. If a country’s media is state controlled, for instance, accessing traditional journalists may be counterproductive, and reaching out to citizen journalists may present real security risks. Reporters Without Borders is a useful site for journalists, but also for practitioners who are seeking to understand both the overall media climate in a particular setting and strategies for ensuring their safety as well as those of others. Once a connection is made with journalists, offering them concrete opportunities to learn more about transitional justice and its role in various contexts can ensure greater, more meaningful impact.

When journalists are engaged in this way – when they are made aware of the opportunities and challenges posed by these processes – it not only enables them to communicate more effectively to general audiences, but it can also encourage them to shift the focus of media attention so that it is more inclusive of victims, survivors, and their families. Additionally, with the rise of social media, it is increasingly productive to think “out of the box” in terms of media coverage. GIJTR’s work in multiple contexts shows that practitioners can support survivors by creating networks of journalists, activists, and victims’ groups, providing introductions, training on transitional justice, advocacy tools, and, when possible, funds to support related projects.

CASE STUDIES

GUINEA

Since its independence in 1958, Guinea has experienced cycles of violence characterized by massive human rights violations, destructive transitions of power, and ethnic and political tensions that have been exacerbated by authoritarian rulers who’ve failed to hold perpetrators accountable. More recently, on September 28, 2009, military officials opened fire at a pro-democracy protest at the country’s main stadium in Conakry, killing 156 civilians and also raping at least 109 women and girls. The “stadium massacre,” as it has come to be known, has renewed efforts by victims’ organizations seeking accountability and justice in the country.

To bolster these efforts, since 2017, GIJTR has provided technical, programmatic, and financial support to civil society organizations (CSOs) in the country. In May 2017, together with local partners and consultants, GIJTR carried out a four-day violence-prevention workshop in Conakry with 12 journalists and 14 CSO representatives. During the workshop, journalists and CSOs received a thorough overview of transitional justice mechanisms, with detailed sessions on the role of the media in specific contexts,



Journalists and members of CSOs come together for a session on supporting survivors during a GIJTR violence-prevention workshop in Guinea in May 2017.

including Liberia and Tunisia. The gathering was beneficial in many ways, perhaps most because not only did it help inform these groups about transitional justice, but, over the course of four days, the participants became acquainted and began to see one another as collaborators, working together for a common good. Sessions devoted to discussing challenges they had encountered while working in or with the media allowed participants to troubleshoot together. In addition, GIJTR facilitators provided specific training to journalists about proper methods for interviewing victims and survivors with sensitivity. Because there were CSO representatives there, as well as journalists, the two groups could listen firsthand to each other's experiences with GIJTR facilitators present to guide and support.

Additionally, the workshop provided participants with training and small grants to collaborate and launch professional and non-professional media projects that would form the basis of a national media strategy. In July 2018, after continued technical support from GIJTR, participants returned for another four-day workshop in Conakry in which they shared the results of their projects, which included, among others, a short film highlighting the stories of victims of the 2009 massacre and a traveling exhibition of paintings illustrating young people's experiences of violence during political protests. The gathering also included a press conference during which journalists, victims' groups, and government officials were able to present their work, coordinate their efforts, and share resources to amplify their voices and broaden the reach of their advocacy.

THE GAMBIA

From 1994–2016, the Yahya Jammeh regime in Gambia was characterized by gross human rights violations, including torture, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and sexual violence. The regime also fueled a division among different ethnic groups that continues today. In 2017, the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC) Act was enacted in Gambia with the support of President Adama Barrow, who has pledged to break with the Jammeh regime and create opportunities for Gambians to come to terms with the past so that peace and social cohesion can take hold.

In 2019, the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth, and Reconciliation began training local and civil society organizations in Gambia to ensure that victims and survivors were adequately represented in this process. Amplifying the voices of women was a top priority given that a 2019 GIJTR needs assessment finds that the official consultations that informed the TRRC largely excluded women, as they were conducted around midday when most women needed to be at home to fulfill domestic duties. In addition, while well intentioned, TRRC did not sufficiently represent the experiences of women under Jammeh; halfway through the TRRC's mandate, only 51 of the 188 witnesses who testified before the commission were women. The reasons for this are many, but a significant deterrent was a misogynist culture of silence perpetuated in large part by the media, which regularly shamed women who testified, leaving others too



Image from an exhibition of survivors' experiences of the Jammeh regime in Gambia, hosted by local GIJTR partner ANEKED. Photo credit: Jason Florio, ANEKED

intimidated or frightened to testify publicly. In addition, the experiences of LGBTQ+ persons, who were regularly and openly persecuted under Jammeh, were absent from the hearings altogether.

While sweeping cultural change does not usually come quickly, there are lessons from the Gambian context that can offset the effects of a particularly volatile public, or counter or blunt blatantly biased media. In this case, GIJTR worked closely with local partners in the region to lead small-scale Listening Circles throughout rural Gambia. These enabled marginalized and stigmatized groups such as women and LGBTQ+ persons safe spaces in which to share their stories. Further, GIJTR's local partner interviewed and documented these experiences, and relayed them to TRRC to ensure anonymity and successfully advocate for the removal of obstacles that prevented women in particular from testifying. For instance, in one case, TRRC offered to provide free transportation and food for the survivors' travel to and from the nearest TRRC hearings in order for them to be able to take part.

In other instances, GIJTR worked to support CSOs as citizen journalists. In the photo above, a member of the African Network against Extrajudicial Killings and Enforced Disappearances (ANEKED), a GIJTR partner, created a mobile exhibit entitled "The Duty to Remember" that shared the stories of victims through photos, personal items lent by victims' families, and quotes from ANEKED's summary digests that analyzed the truth commission hearings. Press, as well as victims, community members, international embassy representatives, TRRC representatives, and members of civil society attended the exhibit's opening, offering another effective example of how CSOs and journalists can work hand in hand to raise awareness of human rights abuses.

SRI LANKA

Nearly 40,000 Tamil civilians were disappeared or killed and another 300,000 were internally displaced during Sri Lanka's civil war (1983–2009). GIJTR has been working in the country since 2014 to help address the reconciliation and accountability needs of the country – with a particular focus on missing persons – through local and high-level consultations, capacity building workshops, and funding to provide targeted technical assistance to CSOs in transitional justice policy and practice. In addition to including journalists in training on transitional justice, in Sri Lanka, GIJTR once again supported CSOs in their outreach to journalists, organizing a launch event and exhibition of body maps created by female survivors of violence in November 2017 that was attended by the press and government officials. Also, GIJTR provided training in media and social advocacy to a range of stakeholders, including journalists, victims, and CSOs, to bolster their advocacy efforts. The training covered traditional media but also more "grassroots" advocacy, which proved particularly helpful in this context, where political acceptance toward truth and justice initiatives abruptly declined with the election of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2020. In such cases, smaller, art-based advocacy initiatives can often continue to spark dialogue and awareness about human rights without attracting the political scrutiny they might in more mass media markets.



A government official listens as a survivor of the war in Sri Lanka shares her body map at a GIJTR-sponsored exhibit in Colombo in November 2017. Several members of the media attended the event.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Create opportunities for journalists to learn more about transitional justice and civil society organizations to learn more about media.** Both transitional justice and media advocacy can feel abstract to those outside the fields, but even relatively basic training in these areas can yield significant results.
- **Facilitate collaboration between journalists and civil society organizations.** While some contexts may not lend themselves to this – for instance, in a country with little freedom of expression, or primarily state-controlled media – it is important, when possible, to think holistically or outside the box about how to bring these two groups together. Networking and connections are vital to both media personnel and CSOs; the more each knows about the other, the more trust and empathy is built, and the more they can support one another's efforts.
- **Let survivors lead.** Not only is it important to offer training to journalists that facilitates effective and compassionate engagement with survivors, it is almost always more powerful (especially from a public advocacy standpoint) when survivors own their own narratives – and through public exhibitions or publication share their stories with the press and public.
- **Always ask, “Who’s missing?”** Inclusivity matters. If peace is to be had, the experiences of all people, especially those who have been historically marginalized, must be heard. NGOs have an important role in facilitating communication between women and other marginalized groups and truth commissions and the media that cover them. Whether through direct connections, international pressure, or private reports, NGOs should prioritize this goal.
- **Never overlook safety.** Journalists and civil society organizations often share significant risks in doing their work. Whether protesting or covering a protest, providing or recording a survivor's statement, it is imperative to prepare and implement concrete plans to protect the safety of those involved. Some resources for both groups are listed ahead.
- **Don't be afraid of small-scale media campaigns.** Not every awareness-raising initiative has to be on the cover of the *New York Times* to be successful. Often, smaller-scale, survivor-focused “art” advocacy projects or social media campaigns with even minimal public presence can be an effective way to sustainably create dialogue about past conflict, particularly in cultures where silence on the subject prevails. GIJTR's work in Colombia and many other contexts shows that civil society organizations can absolutely be the author of their own media and make a substantial impact through it.

FURTHER READING

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