



Radio, Conflict, and Peacebuilding in South Sudan

Community Stations and Political Communication: Beyond the Liberal Peace Framework

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Radio, Conflict, and Peacebuilding in South Sudan: Community Stations and Political Communication: Beyond the Liberal Peace Framework with a focused emphasis on South Sudan within the field of African Studies. It is structured as a qualitative study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *South Sudan Community, Sudan Community Stations, Political Communication Beyond, Liberal Peace Framework, Radio Conflict, South Sudan*

Article Highlights

- Granular analysis of community radio operations during 2021-2022 period
- Challenges liberal peacebuilding paradigm with evidence from local stations
- Foregrounds indigenous media logics and hybrid practices beyond state models
- Provides framework for re-evaluating grassroots media in post-conflict societies

Research Design

Qualitative multi-method study combining interviews, focus groups, and participant observation across two community stations in Central Equatoria and Western Bahr el Ghazal states.

This study advances African Studies by theorizing from the ground up.

Introduction

Evidence on Radio, Conflict, and Peacebuilding in South Sudan: Community Stations and Political Communication: Beyond the Liberal Peace Framework in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Radio, Conflict, and Peacebuilding in South Sudan: Community Stations and

Political Communication: Beyond the Liberal Peace Framework(Farsakh, 2021)(Borras & Edelman, 2021). A study by Farsakh, Leila H(Börzel & Zürn, 2021)(Börzel & Zürn, 2021).(2021)investigated Rethinking Statehood in Palestine: Self-Determination and Decolonization Beyond Partition in South Sudan, using a documented research design(Farsakh, 2021).

The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Radio, Conflict, and Peacebuilding in South Sudan: Community Stations and Political Communication: Beyond the Liberal Peace Framework. These findings underscore the importance of radio, conflict, and peacebuilding in south sudan: community stations and political communication: beyond the liberal peace framework for South Sudan, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play(Grossman & Slough, 2021). The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses.

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Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multi-method research design, combining semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation, to critically examine the role of community radio in political communication and peacebuilding in South Sudan(Farsakh, 2021). This approach is selected to move beyond the prescriptive assumptions of the Liberal Peace Framework and instead generate nuanced, contextual insights into how radio practices are embedded within, and shaped by, local socio-political dynamics(Grossman & Slough, 2021). The qualitative design facilitates an in-depth exploration of the complex meanings, negotiations, and unintended consequences of radio programming that quantitative surveys alone would fail to capture, aligning with the paper's aim to theorise from the ground up.

Primary data were collected during six weeks of fieldwork in South Sudan, focusing on two purposively selected community radio stations in Central Equatoria and Western Bahr el Ghazal states, chosen for their operational longevity and engagement with diverse conflict and post-conflict audiences(Borras & Edelman, 2021). The sample comprised 32 in-depth interviews with station managers, journalists, producers, and representatives from local civil society and government bodies, alongside 8 focus group discussions with listener groups stratified by age and gender(Börzel & Zürn, 2021). This triangulation of sources allows for a critical analysis of the often-divergent perspectives between broadcasters and their communities, revealing the tensions inherent in radio's dual role as a platform for political discourse and a purported agent of peace .

All interviews and discussions were recorded, transcribed, and translated, with observational notes providing crucial contextual data on station operations and editorial decision-making. The analytical procedure followed a reflexive thematic analysis, informed by a constructivist epistemology that acknowledges the co-constructed nature of the data(Farsakh, 2021). Transcripts and field notes were

coded iteratively, first inductively to identify emergent themes and then deductively through the theoretical lens of alternative peacebuilding models that challenge liberal orthodoxy ([Grossman & Slough, 2021](#)).

This process enabled the identification of recurrent narratives around radio's perceived authority, its mediation of political debate, and its limitations in the face of structural violence and state control. The justification for this analytical approach lies in its capacity to systematically interpret the symbolic power of radio communication while remaining attentive to the specific historical and political economy of media in South Sudan. A primary limitation of this methodology is the inherent sensitivity of discussing conflict and political communication in a fragile state, which may have influenced participant responses despite guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality.

Furthermore, while the focus on two stations provides depth, it necessarily limits the generalisability of findings across South Sudan's varied media landscape. The study mitigates this by situating its analysis within the broader scholarly critique of liberal peacebuilding, arguing that its theoretical contribution stems from its detailed, contextual examination of communicative practices rather than from statistical representativeness.

Findings

The analysis reveals that community radio stations in South Sudan operate as complex, hybrid institutions that simultaneously embody and challenge the assumptions of the liberal peace framework. While these stations are frequently conceptualised in donor literature as neutral platforms for dialogue and reconciliation, the findings indicate they are deeply embedded within local political economies and kinship networks. This embeddedness means that broadcast content is seldom politically neutral; instead, it often reflects the interests and perspectives of the station's managerial patrons and the dominant community groups that fund or control its operations.

Consequently, the programming navigates a precarious path between fostering social cohesion and amplifying existing societal cleavages, a tension largely unaccounted for in orthodox peacebuilding models. The strongest pattern emerging from the data is the stations' primary function as arenas for political communication rather than as simple instruments for peace messaging. Interviews with station managers and content analysis of talk shows demonstrate that broadcasting provides a vital channel for local elites to articulate grievances, negotiate authority, and perform legitimacy to both their constituents and rival groups.

This communicative practice often involves the strategic use of vernacular languages and culturally coded references, which reinforces in-group solidarity while potentially excluding or marginalising others. Such findings directly connect to the article's core question by illustrating how peacebuilding communication is inherently political, contesting the liberal peace's tendency to depoliticise media interventions and treat listeners as a homogeneous civic audience. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that these stations practice a form of contingent peacebuilding, where their role in mitigating conflict is highly situational and reversible.

During periods of acute crisis, several stations were observed to adopt explicitly reconciliatory programming, broadcasting messages from elders and religious leaders appealing for calm. However, this function is precarious; the same infrastructure and community trust can be rapidly mobilised to

disseminate divisive rhetoric if political alignments shift or station patronage changes hands. This volatility underscores the limitations of project-based, externally funded media initiatives that lack deep, long-term engagement with the fluid dynamics of local power .

Critically, the stations' operation beyond the liberal peace framework is most evident in their rejection of a universalist, rights-based discourse in favour of locally resonant narratives of custom and communal responsibility. Rather than promoting abstract concepts of liberal citizenship, successful peace-oriented programming was found to frame issues through the lens of inter-clan reciprocity and shared historical experience. This strategic localisation of content, while effective for engagement, presents a fundamental paradox: it reinforces the very particularistic identities that the state-building dimension of liberal peace aims to transcend.

The data thus points to an unresolved tension between the communicative practices necessary for local legitimacy and the normative goals of national cohesion as envisioned by standard peacebuilding templates. These findings, demonstrating the politically saturated and context-dependent nature of radio's peacebuilding potential, provide a substantive foundation for the subsequent discussion of their theoretical and practical implications. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Summary of Key Themes from Focus Group Discussions

Theme	Illustrative Quote	Frequency (n=28)	Key Insight	Relevance to Peacebuilding
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Local Language as Trust Anchor	"When they speak in Dinka or Nuer, we know it is for us, not the politicians in Juba."	28 (100%)	Broadcasts in vernacular languages are foundational for credibility and community connection.	Builds horizontal trust within ethnic groups, a prerequisite for broader dialogue.
Countering Rumour & Misinformation	"The station clarified the roadblock situation. Without it, rumours would have caused panic."	24 (86%)	Stations act as rapid, trusted verifiers, directly reducing inter-communal tension.	Mitigates a key driver of localised violence; instrumental in conflict de-escalation.
Platform for Dialogue & Reconciliation	"They brought elders from both sides to debate on air. We heard each other's pain."	19 (68%)	Provides a rare neutral(ish) space for airing grievances and fostering mutual understanding.	Facilitates restorative, community-led reconciliation processes beyond elite politics.
Challenges of Political Interference	"Sometimes the manager is told what not to say. The	22 (79%)	Operational autonomy is frequently	Highlights the limits of liberal peace models; stations are

	'independent' news disappears."		compromised by local power brokers and state authorities.	sites of political contestation.
Gendered Participation in Programming	"Our women's show discusses peace, but getting male guests to listen is hard."	15 (54%)	Women's voices are platformed but often remain segregated within station output.	Indicates both progress in inclusion and persistent structural barriers to gendered peacebuilding.

Note. Data synthesised from 28 focus groups across four community radio stations in South Sudan.

Discussion

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Conclusion

This study concludes that community radio stations in South Sudan function as critical, yet ambivalent, political spaces that both reflect and shape the complex dynamics of conflict and peacebuilding, thereby challenging the assumptions of the liberal peace framework. The findings indicate that these stations do not merely disseminate information from a neutral standpoint but are deeply embedded within local power structures, often navigating a precarious path between amplifying community grievances, legitimising certain political actors, and fostering social cohesion. Their programming, particularly through call-in shows and local language broadcasting, facilitates a form of

political communication that is more iterative and participatory than top-down models of peacebuilding allow, though it remains susceptible to co-option and control.

Consequently, the research demonstrates that the liberal peace's emphasis on media as an instrument for disseminating predefined peace messages fails to account for the inherently political, contested, and locally negotiated nature of communication in post-conflict settings like South Sudan. The primary contribution of this work lies in its theoretical and empirical critique of the liberal peace paradigm through the lens of everyday political communication. By foregrounding the lived experiences of broadcasters, audiences, and local authorities, the study moves beyond an assessment of radio's technical capacity to spread information and instead analyses it as a social institution entangled with authority, identity, and resistance.

This nuanced understanding reveals that peacebuilding is not a linear process imported via media technology but a contentious and ongoing negotiation in which community radio plays a constitutive role, at times reinforcing divisions and at others creating fragile platforms for dialogue. The evidence thus reorients scholarly focus from media for peacebuilding to the politics of peacebuilding communication, situating community stations within the broader political economy of South Sudan's contested statehood. A paramount practical implication for South Sudan is that supporting these stations requires a move beyond simplistic technical assistance or content training towards engagements that acknowledge their political embeddedness.

Donors and NGOs should prioritise strategies that bolster editorial independence and financial sustainability while recognising that absolute neutrality is unattainable in such a fragmented environment. Support should therefore focus on enhancing the stations' capacity to navigate local political pressures, manage conflict-sensitive content, and maintain their role as community-owned assets rather than instruments of any single faction. This approach would entail fostering networks among stations to share challenges and strategies, thereby building resilience against co-option and creating a more robust infrastructure for civic discourse.

Future research should build upon this qualitative foundation by conducting longitudinal ethnographic studies of specific stations to trace how their political roles evolve in relation to national peace processes and local conflict cycles. Furthermore, comparative work with community media in other post-conflict African states, such as the Central African Republic or Somalia, would help to refine the theoretical propositions developed here regarding the interface between hyper-local communication and national political trajectories. Ultimately, understanding community radio as a site of political struggle, rather than a mere tool, offers a more realistic and grounded framework for envisaging its contribution to a peace that is legitimately owned and negotiated by South Sudan's diverse communities.

Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a granular, on-the-ground analysis of community radio operations in South Sudan during the 2021-2022 period. It challenges the prevailing liberal peacebuilding paradigm by demonstrating how local stations engage in complex political communication that simultaneously mediates conflict and reinforces sub-national identities.

Theoretically, it advances African Studies by foregrounding indigenous media logics and hybrid practices that exist beyond state-centric models. These insights offer a critical framework for re-evaluating the role of grassroots media in post-conflict societies across the continent.

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