



Fondation Hironnelle – media in crisis zones
Lolvé Tillmanns, Fondation Hironnelle



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The Foundation's radios have millions of listeners all over the world.

Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2003

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– media in crisis zones

Fondation Hironnelle is a Swiss-based NGO (non-governmental organization) of media and development professionals. It sets up independent media in conflict or crisis zones where control of information becomes an instrument of war or propaganda in the hands of political and military actors.

The foundation's radio news and information broadcasts, debates and magazines create bonds between the citizens and their leaders, between yesterday's enemies and tomorrow's partners, between refugees and their homelands. On the technical level, Fondation Hironnelle uses up-to-date digital equipment throughout its operations. Thanks to the United Nations, Radio Okapi is a network of radio stations linked via satellite in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Nationwide, FM broadcasts are generally backed up by short-wave.

On the professional level, the foundation applies the universally-accepted basic rules of journalism: double-checking of sources, investigations in the field, the distinction between facts and commentary. Unbiased information, which lies at the heart of the Foundation's activities, does not rule out music, entertainment, interactive programmes, service programmes and

magazines. The foundation's ultimate aim is to make its media completely autonomous.

Its crews are entirely locally staffed, except for the project leader and part of the management. Hence the bases to ensure the successful continued existence of our media are being laid down.

Training has become one of the foundation's activities that is most called upon. It therefore offers its journalists initial and continuous training, which are also available to other local journalists.

The foundation's funding is exclusively project-based, with contributions from national governments, in particular those of the United Kingdom, the United States, Sweden, Norway and Switzerland, together with the United Nations and the European Union. Fondation Hironnelle is permanently looking for high-level staff, essentially multilingual journalists and managerial staff interested in working in countries facing conflict or crisis situations.

10 years of achievement

Radio Okapi: first went on the air in Kinshasa in February 2002. It is a United Nations radio network, run jointly with

the Foundation, and the only nationwide broadcast medium. It consist of a network of nine stations broadcasting to the whole of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The main aims of the project are to work hand-in-hand with the peace process by instituting a dialogue between Congolese, provide scrupu-lously accurate information, and explain the work of the United Nations. Radio Okapi is today regarded as one of the most powerful instruments of peace in the DRC.

“Radio Okapi is one of the most precious gifts that my country has received for several decades. For my country, the Fondation Hironnelle is salutary both in the line of its activities and as a useful voice,” Walter Mbayirindi, journalist and producer at Radio Okapi.

New public service in East Timor: from September 2001 to July 2002, the United Nations and Fondation Hironnelle jointly produced a one-hour programme for Timor refugees. This programme is broadcast on the frequencies of United Nations Radio. In August 2002 when UN Transitional Administrator Sergio Vieira de Mello left East Timor at the end of the UN mandate, the new government approved his proposal to have the foundation support the broadcasting system in order to turn it gradually into the country’s new public service.

Radio Ndeke Luka: in February 2000, the United Nations’ mission to the Central African Republic came to an end. The mission’s radio service avoided the same fate thanks to the stubbornness of its director, who called upon the foundation to take over. In a country forgotten by the international community and still very unstable, it is difficult to fund a radio station, even if it is designated by the population as “the best defender of human rights”. Today Radio Ndeke Luka covers the whole of the Central African Republic’s territory for one hour a day on short-wave, and the Bangui region 24/7 on FM.



Bukavu, Zaire, 1994



Cyangugu, Rwanda, 1994



Bangui, RCA, 2000 – Radio Ndeke Luka

Radio Blue Sky: inaugurated in 1999 at Pristina at the request of the United Nations in the wake of NATO's military intervention in Kosovo. It relayed the UN news broadcasts and contributed to the dialogue within the country thanks to its multilingual programming demonstrating respect for pluralism. In July 2000 Fondation Hirondelle incorporated Radio Blue Sky into Radio Television of Kosovo (RTK).

Star Radio: set up in Liberia in 1997. A reference medium for the local and international communities in Monrovia, the chief source of information for two-thirds of Liberians and for the refugees in Sierra Leone. Star Radio made it possible to convey information between the capital and the districts. A survey stated that "Star Radio is used, in certain cases, to test the authenticity of the information spread by other stations and word-of-mouth." On 15 March 2000, after three years of resistance to Charles Taylor's dictatorship, the government closed it down.

Hirondelle News Agency (IDTA): a press agency launched in 1996 with the aim of providing information to the populations concerned by the Rwandan genocide. It relays, from Arusha, in Tanzania, information on the proceedings of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda all over the world. As the sole press agency continuously present, it acts as a bastion against the politics of impunity. Moreover, thanks to regular projects for training in understanding the judicial process, the agency is helping to create a professional body of print and broadcast media journalists fully aware of judiciary reporting and able to apply it.

Radio Agatashya: set up in August 1994 by the Swiss branch of "Reporters Sans Frontières" shortly after the Rwandan genocide, with the objective of informing the civilian populations and of combating the

harmful activities of local "hate media". The project was taken over by the Foundation, set up to that end in March 1995. Radio Agatashya broadcast in all the languages of the region. This close-to-home aspect and the scrupulous accuracy of the programmes were the main features of a credible and much-appreciated radio service. An impact survey revealed that Radio Agatashya was the most listened to by refugees in its coverage area and regarded as the most credible. In 1996 the routed Zairean army forced Radio Agatashya to go off air.

The Hirondelle Foundation will celebrate its ten years of existence in a few months' time. The importance of its activities is acknowledged by everybody, including a number of governments and institutions supporting its activities.

Its contribution to the broadcasting of independent information aimed at promoting reconciliation and peace was given recognition in 2003 when it received the Henry Dunant Award, which is intended for people or organizations working in noteworthy fashion to expand, disseminate, and bring new life to the ideas and commitment of Henry Dunant, founder of the Red Cross.

Independent information fostering reconciliation in many parts of the world is today more necessary than ever and the Hirondelle Foundation is determined to contribute to this through its expertise and commitment in the coming years, as it has since 1995.

Further information
www.hirondelle.org

