

Community Radio for Peacebuilding: The Case of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, Southern Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Southern Philippines has a history of ethno-religious conflict making efforts in peacebuilding desirable but obviously challenging. In this context, traditional media is limited in its accessibility among various constituents of this region. However, local radio programming offers opportunities for overcoming these communication constraints. Guided by the perpetual peacebuilding paradigm, in this descriptive case study we explore the role of three (3) radio stations in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), and their contributions towards local peacebuilding. Our findings highlight key areas of interest communicated via radio-based such as peace-related programs emphasizing religious teachings, advocacy for indigenous rights, and health literacy. Local media producers often made use of peace taglines within daily radio programs and practiced conflict-sensitive journalism in instances of news coverage regarding violent conflict and natural disasters. Overall, these radio stations often employed hyperlocalized strategies that facilitated contextualized communications via on-air programs, with a distinct multichannel approach which sought to strengthen interactions between local stakeholders.

Keywords: BARMM, pathways, peace, perpetual peacebuilding, radio stations, SDG 16

INTRODUCTION

The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in Southern Philippines (BARMM) is the geographical outcome of decades of armed violence and peace negotiations between the state and ethnic Moro Muslim insurgent groups. With the region's history of unrest and failed peacemaking efforts, BARMM constituents have an imperative task to sustain peace and maintain conflict prevention in their daily lives. In this case, the notion and outcome of peace is best understood as a continuum of experience rather than a fixed state (Davenport et al. 2018; Jarstad et al. 2019). This experiential notion relates to the concept of perpetual peacebuilding which entails a continuous and dynamic process of keeping a society on the track with pathways to peace (Paffenholz 2021). Perpetual peacebuilding is a desirable effort in this region as it faces challenges with violent Islamic extremism exhibited through armed factions, some of which are outsiders to the area, and unresolved local clan feuds known as *rido* (Kovacs et al. 2021).

Our work in this descriptive case study explores local media production in the BARMM as an instance of perpetual peacebuilding through community radio. We examine the work of three (3) radio stations in this region focusing on (1) the content of radio programming and its contribution to peacebuilding efforts; (2) the strategies employed by these radio stations in airing its programs fostering local peacebuilding; and (3) challenges faced by these entities in producing peacebuilding media. Our work contributes to existing research on peace and conflict studies in the Philippines and Asian media studies by looking at community-based media production consistent with Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) which emphasizes peace, justice, and strong institutions.

We frame our study using the perpetual peacebuilding paradigm which we elaborate later. This considers the relationship between local stakeholders and the social institution of community media which can promote peace by providing accurate information or news reporting, amplifying marginalized voices, and facilitating community dialogue (Paffenholz 2021; Ogeto 2019). Media coverage of local conflicts has the power to either lessen or intensify concerns among persons who occupy such localities through spreading fake news, misinformation, inciting violence, and deepening social cleavages (Kuusik 2010). Local stakeholders such as civil society organizations (CSOs) can enhance the stability of peace as these play a critical role in facilitating peace building initiatives (Abdurahim-Tagorda and Magno, 2023). Many studies observe the role CSOs play in supporting local radio stations for sustainable viability (Bhattacharya 2023). CSOs may use radio in addition to other forms of media in advocating a wide range of concerns among interest groups. It is this potential we seek to highlight in this case study of community-based media production in BARMM. For readers unfamiliar with the context of this study, we offer a historical overview of this region in Southern Philippines.

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

In 1968 a group of young military recruits from the Moro ethnic group were killed in the infamous Jabidah Massacre under allegations of defection from the Philippine army (Macasalong 2014). This event triggered the formation of the Mindanao Independence Movement led by Datu Udtog Matalam and propelled by Moro separatists' right to self-determination (Al-Fahad 2022).

Responding to human rights allegations against Muslim communities, during the Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. administration between 1965 to 1986 a Moro-based movement organized the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) with prominent members such as Abul Khayr Alonto and Jallaludin Santos (Galeriana and Ragandang 2018). Upon the establishment of the MNLF, leftist educator Nur Misuari joined the movement and became its chairman (Galeriana and Ragandang 2018).

The MNLF became an armed rebel group opposing state rule, which led authorities to create an autonomous region to grant Moro self-governance through the signing of the 1976 Tripoli Agreement (Adriano and Parks 2013; Abubakar 2019). The Tripoli Agreement led to the establishment of an independent region known as the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) in 1989. Before the creation of the ARMM, internal conflicts within the MNLF between chairman Misuari and vice chair Hashim Salamat led to establishment of a competing faction known as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) (Macasalong 2014). The split occurred due to disagreements concerning interpretations of Islamic law as the MILF were in favor of full independence which meant complete autonomy with no intervention by or accountability to the Philippine government (Özerdem and Podder 2013). The MILF was more radical in terms of their guiding principles, with the former seeing themselves as 'more Islamic' compared to the MNLF (Macasalong 2014).

The Philippine government sought to end armed conflict among the Moro and attain peace within Muslim-majority Mindanao. Under the Fidel Ramos administration in 1996, a comprehensive peace agreement for Mindanao known as the Final Peace Agreement was made in collaboration with the MNLF rather than the MILF (East 2005). However, peace remained elusive in this region despite this landmark agreement as nothing 'final' was in this legislation (Carolan 2016). The MILF increased in number and became the strongest insurgent group in the Southern Philippines despite the Final Peace Agreement and corresponding efforts for peace (Kovacs et al. 2021). Armed conflict between the Philippine government and the MILF escalated during the 'all-out war' less than a decade later under the Joseph Estrada administration in 2001.

Progress in peace negotiations between the Philippine government and MILF commenced when Murad Ebrahim assumed leadership of the MILF in 2003 (Kovacs et al. 2021). This led to the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) in 2014, which paved the way for the Bangsamoro Organic Law which subsequently created the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) replacing the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in 2019 (Kovacs et al. 2021). The BARMM subnational government is composed of six (6) provinces, namely Maguindanao del Norte, Maguindanao del Sur, Lanao del Sur, located in mainland Mindanao and the island provinces of Sulu, Basilan and Tawi-Tawi, and Special Geographic Areas (SGAs) (Martinez-Vazquez et al. 2021). This government entity follows a parliamentary form of government composed of a Chief Minister as the head of government and eighty Members of the Parliament, all appointed to serve as the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, while waiting for the first BARMM Parliamentary Elections in 2025. The tumultuous history of this region is acknowledged by locals, evidenced through peacebuilding efforts using community-based media. Given our focus on radio, we turn attention to the literature on the role of this medium in peacebuilding as we situate the contribution of our study.

PERPETUAL PEACEBUILDING AND LOCAL RADIO

Radio stations can engage in perpetual peacebuilding through shared understanding among communities within BARMM, especially its substantial role in mainstreaming local narratives, religious beliefs, and cultural heritage. Perpetual Peacebuilding is a dynamic process of “continuous negotiations, and re-negotiations, of the social and political contract of a society and polity, with pathways to peace marked by opportunities, setbacks, catalysts, friction and resistance” (Paffenholz 2021, 367–385). This framework of peacebuilding highlights the roles of multiple actors in a dynamic web of addressing issues of conflict, violence, injustice, and other factors that run counter to the pathway to peace. Scholars note that sustainable peacebuilding strategies emphasize local agency and capacity for local peace processes (Richmond 2012; Leonardsson and Rudd 2015). Laliberté (2016) observes that integrating indigenous and local knowledge into peacebuilding efforts challenges the limitations of traditional peacebuilding approaches. Peacebuilding through indigenous community engagement also challenges problematic hegemony from outsider groups, providing paths for local harmony (Randazzo 2021).

Laor et al. (2017) highlights the use of social media by radio-based media producers to engage listeners and complement live broadcasts and program segments. Such a multichannel approach amplifies peacebuilding initiatives and presents opportunities for social progress. Radio stations are mechanisms in conflict transformation and peacebuilding playing a key role in conflict prevention and resolution (Levesque 2023). Community radio at the grassroots level facilitates local participation and dialogue that effectively contributes to social and cultural development (Prahmana et al. 2021). Moreover, Anyuor and Achieng (2022) underscored that local radio promotes social cohesion during times of violence. Hartoyo et al. (2020) underlined the critical obligation of community leaders and media in framing public perceptions and behaviors towards peacebuilding. Santos (2021) also identifies the role of radio journalism in framing information that can intensify or deescalate tensions in conflict-driven areas. In the context of BARMM, we demonstrate ways radio stations build understanding among diverse communities and provide a platform for marginalized individuals and groups.

For example, Anyadike et al. (2015) identified how local dialect radio programs are fruitful in fragmented multilingual contexts. This is an example of *hyperlocality* which refers to “news coverage of community-level events which normally mainstream media ignore unless they have mass appeal” (Dutta and Gangopaghyay 2019, 10). We identify this as a key feature of the radio stations included in this case study. Similarly, James et al. (2019) also note the value of a *realist evaluation* of community radio in Mindanao in examining its impact in facilitating dialogue, livelihood and participatory communication. Media studies scholars also observe the importance of *conflict-sensitive communication* which involves news reporting that constructs new narratives that shape potential conflict resolution opportunities rather than exacerbate violence (Lee and Maslog 2005; Lynch and McGoldrick 2013; Abunales 2016; Oluoch et al. 2016). As such, radio stations in the region empower communities toward resilience and addressing conflicts constructively in the post-BARMM era of Southern Philippines.

These approaches are relevant in BARMM where media audiences are primarily composed of Muslim-majority Moros, but also include Christians, and several other indigenous groups such as

the Teduray, Lambangian, and Manobo Dulangan (Uesugi et al. 2021). Such an environment presents challenges for media producers to adopt peace-oriented reporting mechanisms that accentuate commonalities rather than differences with such a diverse population. Considering this, radio stations in BARMM can facilitate communication between conflicting parties (Uesugi et al. 2021). This is imperative in the region where sociopolitical complexities challenge direct dialogue. Local stakeholders, including the media, are important in linking divides within such a community with a history of conflict. In the next section we discuss the analytical approach employed in this descriptive case study (Coombs 2022), providing further detail concerning the structure and content of the radio stations investigated.

METHODOLOGY

Six (6) Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) served as primary sources for our data collection in this case study. We received consent from all participants and anonymized their identities accordingly for privacy considerations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow flexibility while ensuring that the important information was consistently addressed in all the interviews (Bearman 2019). Participants came from three (3) radio stations located in different provinces in BARMM. Stations included Radio DXUP FM 105.5 in Maguindanao del Norte, Radio DXBUP 100.1 in Maguindanao del Sur and Radio DXTG 95.9 in Cotabato City. Interviewees included local radio program managers, hosts and journalists. Our interview questions were informed by the media and peacebuilding literature cited earlier and focused on an in-depth examination of these media practitioners' experiences and motivations concerning local peacebuilding. We also examined the content of three (3) radio program episodes aired in 2024 from each of three radio stations selected. These radio program episodes were transcribed and translated from Maguindanao into English. Thematic analysis was employed for both interviews and radio programs. We began with open coding, which we subsequently put into themes related to local perpetual peacebuilding efforts. Lastly, triangulation methods were applied to validate the reliability and depth of analysis of our findings. These include comparing the transcriptions of the interview, field observations, and the thematic analysis of the radio programs. The understanding of the findings of our study were greatly informed by the local knowledge communicated by participants during interviews.

FINDINGS

Radio stations in BARMM were predominantly non-commercial with local sponsorship from community donors. As such, these radio stations are more focused on delivering news and updates about current local affairs within the subnational region. Key themes which emerged from the data included the promotion of peace and good governance through religious teachings, advocacy on indigenous rights, and health literacy. These themes were dominant in the content of the radio stations investigated. Radio DXBUP 100.1 promoted peacebuilding through Islamic teachings through an on-air program called *Hayyatul Muslim* (The Life of a Muslim). The focus and recurrence of religious teachings in this radio program aimed to reinforce public perception of peace in BARMM. The idea of attaining peace through spirituality is a central discourse in this sub-national region as *Hayyatul Muslim* disseminated values on peaceful co-existence among audiences. One guest on

Episode 2 of the program pointed out: “The purpose of Hayyatul Muslim (The Life of a Muslim) is to raise awareness about peace through Islamic ways. The goal of this program is to see the era where all the Bangsamoro are living the Islamic life.”

Another important theme which emerged in our study is advocacy for indigenous people’s rights. Radio DXUP FM 105.5 in collaboration with the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples Affairs of BARMM produced the radio program *Usaping Katutubo sa BARMM* (Discourses on Indigenous Peoples in BARMM). This program aimed at framing public opinion and cultural politics of the region. It focused on cultural preservation, land ownership and local issues concerning the indigenous communities in BARMM. This radio program also dealt with systemic issues against the indigenous people by promoting justice and representation, which are critical pillars in building lasting peace. *Usaping Katutubo sa BARMM* emphasized inclusiveness for perpetual peacebuilding as in Episode 1 the host remarked: “This is our commitment towards the lasting peace in BARMM. We should recognize, include and respect the indigenous people of our region. Without these values, any peace efforts in BARMM will not prosper.”

The final theme of health literacy was presented in Radio DXTC 95.9’s *Suwara Kalilintad* (Voice of Peace), which addressed the importance of public health literacy and the improvement of the health institutions in BARMM. Public health is a key priority of the regional government in BARMM as this relates to local peacebuilding. Such a focus highlights the role of health literacy towards sustainability BARMM. For instance, in Episode 3 of *Suwara Kalilintad*, the program host attested that: “A healthy community is a peaceful community. In BARMM, it cannot thrive if our health institution is weak and people can’t afford or access to basic healthcare.”

Similarly, an informant from this station told remarked: “The motivation to raise awareness about health issues was important because of the Covid-19 Pandemic. When the health systems are strong and well-established the community may understand how to protect themselves and that might foster a stable society.”

Hyperlocality was evident in the broadcast strategies of the radio stations featured considering their effort towards peacebuilding. Like the other media outlets featured in this study, Radio DXBUP 100.1 broadcast content extracted from updates provided by local government agencies in BARMM. The morning program from Radio DXTC 95.9 called *Bantay Bayan* covered an array of topics in one segment of the show encompassing information about agriculture, education, current affairs and peace and security. Such content demonstrates the importance of locally relevant information which was vital for fostering an informed and engaged audience. An informant from Radio Station 1 pointed out:

[There are] special coverage, especially like yesterday, there’s a public consultation and meeting [where] Sanguniang Bayan Officials had a session, it was aired so that the people can listen to the ongoing works of the public officials, and there’s also in healthcare, it cannot be removed, just earlier, the PhilHealth (Philippine Health Insurance Corporation) also had their program, then from the health unit even Ma’am Jackie is retired, she’s still active in giving information.

Also, most informants highlighted how their radio stations encouraged inclusivity among a range of stakeholders including regular guests from government and CSOs. For instance, representatives from the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples Affairs (MIPA) of BARMM, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and other leaders from the local government often shared matters of public interest. Similarly, representatives from Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) were often featured. Muslim clerics such as Ustadz, Imams and Ulamas provided discussion in matters of public interest from a religious perspective. These BARMM-based radio stations also employed a multichannel approach in engaging audiences and increasing local reach. All three radio stations made use of Facebook Live as an additional channel to air radio programs and engage with local audiences. An informant from Radio DXTC 95.9 shared:

Yes, we can be aware, so as of this moment, if [a lot of] people call and text and send text messages to us, when they are texting, we are going to emphasize that they have to state where they're from so when we do "shoutouts" we can locate and identify. For our coverage we have the entire Maguindanao, Cotabato City, Lanao del Sur, and a portion of Marawi that we can reach.

Peace taglines were often used by radio stations as a common discursive feature of their radio programs. These were often used as a rhetorical device to provide a sustained focus on peacebuilding in contrast to commercial interests. The use of peace taglines by radio stations in BARMM was also a means of handling sensitive topics on air especially in the reportage of conflict-ridden areas. For instance, such taglines were used when reporting occurred regarding the mobility or real time location of military personnel directly involved in local clan feuds. From the tagline of Radio Station 2, "Radyo para sa Kapayapaan" (Radio for Peace), to Radio Station 3's initiative to center government efforts in establishing peace through health literacy updates, the use of peace slogans is a distinct broadcast feature. Notable examples include the taglines "Boses ng Kabataan" (Voice of the Youth) and "Manuliman Bangsamoro" (Speak Bangsamoro) by Radio DXTC 95.9, in addition to "Suwara Kalilintad" (Voice of Peace) by Radio DXBUP 100.1. The use of these taglines also highlight the services and initiatives of the local government for the youth sector within the sub-national region. An informant from Radio Station 3 attested that: "We utilized peace slogans in our program—from its name to our greetings. It is an important and constant reminder to the people of BARMM about the importance of peace in the region."

Conflict sensitive reporting was also an important part of peacebuilding efforts in the region. This concerned the ways in which urgent matters of public interest were communicated with tact to avoid escalations of public disorder. Broadcasting regulations were also important to safeguard local media practitioners and the information they shared on-air. An informant from Radio DXTC 95.9 emphasized: "We have boundaries and limitations that are also followed because KBP or Kapisanan ng mga Broadcasters sa Pilipinas (Association of Broadcasters of the Philippines) also has a guideline as to what we can only comment on."

The *Kapisanan ng mga Broadcasters ng Pilipinas (KBP)* (Association of Broadcasters of the Philippines) are responsible for ensuring broadcasting entities are regulated and operate consistently with the Broadcast Code of the Philippines. This institution mandates that in the progress of any crime or crisis, news coverage must not provide information that might support perpetrators and includes strategies, plans, and tactics of authorities in the report (Feliciano 2012). An informant from DXUP FM 105.5 attested:

When we are in the location or when we are in the area, and there is a really big fight or conflict, we only report about the situation on what's really happening, do not report the movements of the government, do not report that the soldiers have entered, because the opponent can monitor it, don't mention it. Secondly, when there's someone hit by a bullet, don't say "someone was carried now in Cotabato Regional Hospital" don't mention a [particular] hospital, because they might follow them, just state that it was carried to a hospital in North Cotabato, just say hospital, we really have to be careful about that.

This limitation on news reporting in the Philippines not only mitigates the escalation of conflict but also creates a mechanism to facilitate balanced coverage of sensitive issues. It creates a path for an informed public shaped by journalists mindful of delivering news in a sustainable peace process. Considering that radio broadcasting in BARMM plays an important role in peacebuilding, challenges to this process were also identified. Media practitioners often encountered threats of violence, especially on-air commentators and field reporters. One news anchor from Radio DXTC 95.9 conveyed personal experiences of being threatened:

Yes, it came to that point that one of our anchors at Arangkada Balita, our morning program, is threatened physically by someone who follows him when he comes to work and even when he heads back home, he is being watched. There were no extreme threats encountered but he feels unsafe since he is being followed all day.

Various parts of the Philippines are volatile and at risk for the common challenges of natural disasters. Typhoons, flooding, and pandemics have threatened the continuity of program delivery hindering the local broadcasting system (Hugelius et al. 2016; Potane 2022; Estonilo 2023). During local crises, radio remains a valuable information source, network disruptions often restrict broadcast potentials. One example of this concerned the impact of typhoon Paeng in 2022 on Radio DXBUP 100.1 in Maguindanao del Sur (Delina et al. 2024). Its broadcasting operations halted for three (3) days since flooding damaged radio equipment, specifically their transmitters. Because these radio stations are non-profit entities, they also have difficulties in maintaining a long-term sustainable operation. These difficulties can be divided into two primary groups: financial and labor force (Jalloh 2005; Hussain and Tongia 2007). Radio DXBUP 100.1, for example, is a community-based radio operated by the Community Media Education Council (CMEC) seeking more sustainable

operations. The organization aimed to institutionalize the station and receive yearly support from the government. An informant from the station shared:

These past 2 decades had been really challenging, DXUP struggled a lot. It really cannot stand alone in terms of operation. We cannot provide enough compensation for broadcasters since we do not receive advertisements since it is in the nature of our license. We really cannot provide ample compensation for them.

Among pressing challenges encountered by radio stations in BARMM, financial and labor constraints create job insecurity among local media practitioners and threaten the sustainability of their operations. Consequently, efforts in peacebuilding may be undermined by the limitations in resources to continue community-based media production. Nevertheless, community radio stations in BARMM are avidly supported by volunteers rather than receiving funding from the state or commercial entities. This is vital for social inclusion, as their work is centered upon community participation.

CONCLUSION

Our study investigated perpetual peacebuilding via radio-based media using the case of practitioners located in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), Southern Philippines. In this descriptive case study we do not present a general position concerning the Philippines or Muslim-majority contexts. The findings in this article contribute to the field of peace and conflict studies by highlighting the opportunities and challenges of community-based media in perpetual peacebuilding efforts. Radio stations spotlighted in this article promote inclusive and local ownership to peace processes that ensure its intentions are community-driven and reflective of grassroots realities. These local radio stations used a hyperlocal approach which truly reflected concerns and issues of their respective communities in a contextualized manner. As such, these radio stations served as platforms of advocacy that promoted good governance, and inclusivity. This included an emphasis on religious teachings, indigenous people's education, public health, and government services.

A multichannel approach was also used by local radio stations, as audiences were also actively engaged with social media. As such, local radio stations programming was broadcast both on-air and online. However, local radio stations in BARMM encountered various challenges to achieve these ends. Financial and budget constraints also put risks to the continuous operations of these local radio stations, while natural disasters were also instances of limitation. The personal safety of radio hosts and guests were also issues of concern despite the employment of conflict-sensitive journalism. Actions towards peacebuilding are desirable and necessary for contexts marked by violence and conflict. Peacebuilding efforts in BARMM did not end with the signing of peace agreements and the passing of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) as local communities made strides in fostering an environment conducive to their desired lived experience. Understandably, a high premium was placed on promoting peace and non-violence through local radio-based media as investment in this means holds promise for BARMM communities.

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