

The police chief who apologized live on air

By: Teije Brandsma

How often does a police chief apologize during a live news show because his officers have misbehaved? Only to share his cell phone number so that further misbehavior can be reported to him? It happened at a radio station in DR Congo, a local partner of Free Press Unlimited. What a difference one news report can make.

Hundreds of female merchants in the city of Bukavu, in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, arrive at the Nyawera market every morning. Each one chooses a spot for her mat and displays her fruit and vegetables on it, hoping to earn a few francs.

Unofficial and unregulated

To officially run a business in Congo you need to buy a permit and pay taxes to the municipality. And of course you need a building to run your office from. But the vegetable sellers are part of the unofficial, unregulated economy. They simply lay down their mats and start selling tomatoes, cassava, yam, or whatever they grow on the outskirts of Bukavu and bring into town.

The police are a nuisance at the Nyawera market. According to the law, every street seller is illegal and should be chased away. But there are hundreds of them and only the most eager policeman will give an unlucky seller trouble. Still, they can harrass the women at will. Those most likely to draw the attention of the police are sellers whose goods hamper traffic.

A violent incident at the market

In November 2016, an incident took place at Nyawera. A police officer beat up a woman selling tomatoes. Was she too far out in the street, obstructing traffic? Or did the officer just want to levy an unofficial 'tax' on her? Whatever the reason, the officer stomped her violently, her vegetables rolling out onto the street. This started a commotion, as curious bystanders gathered. Sometimes police officers can be heavy-handed, but this man was particularly brutal. The bystanders started calling Mama Radio, a newly established radio station focused on women's rights, to report what they witnessed.

Undercover reporting

A journalist from Mama Radio was sent to the location undercover. The police are regularly aggressive towards journalists, afraid of how they will be portrayed in the media. The victim and the officer had gone, but the witnesses had a story to tell. The chief of police heard the resulting report when it aired. He contacted Mama Radio to find out more and he apologized for the incident live on air. Several days later, he took part in a roundtable discussion broadcast by the radio station and gave his personal phone number, urging listeners to contact him if they witnessed police officers brutalizing women.

Already making a difference

"That was a beautiful moment in the young life of our radio station, to have such a positive influence on local society with just a single news item," says program director Julienne Baseke. "It was rather a small news item, but it had a big impact. This story made a difference.

A new radio station

Founded in February 2016, Mama Radio has rapidly become a popular radio station in and around Bukavu, the largest city in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Free Press Unlimited supports local partner AFEM with the production of media content.

Specializing in gender-sensitive reporting

Free Press Unlimited was especially involved in the design of the station's *Témoin Spécial* investigative journalism show. In 2014, specialist consultants trained staff on investigative techniques, online journalism, and using new technologies and audio-visuals in their productions. 11 of the participants were women, paving the way for more gender-sensitive reporting. This is a part of Africa that has seen suffering on a large scale in recent years, especially among women.

A highly engaged audience

Two years on, the bi-monthly show is going strong, reaching approximately 3,750,000 people. Many listeners contact the radio station to share their experiences, ask questions, or propose new topics for investigation. Free Press Unlimited has helped refine the style and format of the show, and gives advice on how to improve content to further enhance audience engagement. *Témoin Spécial*'s reporters cover both rural and urban areas and deal with topics like domestic violence, the stigma around people living with HIV and high poverty rates.

How to attract younger listeners

Free Press Unlimited project coordinator visits yearly to monitor the project and provide hands-on support. The next steps are improving the radio's online presence and visibility, and the development of a cross-media platform, to help attract a younger audience. AFEM is particularly pleased about its collaboration with Free Press Unlimited, as we are one of the only implementers to encourage the development of social media and online strategies.