

Journalists around the globe are producing high-quality investigative stories that make a difference. Their experiences offer lessons as well as inspiration.



A student journalist questions a man about his son's case of cholera at a clinic in Mirebalais for "Behind the Cholera Epidemic."

"There are a lot of challenges in the Haitian media scene today. A lot is lacking – in how they choose sources, how to do their analysis... and many journalists lack training and background that enables them to do analysis at all." – Professor Ary Régis, State University of Haiti

We didn't know how we could pull it off. All three institutional partners – AlterPresse online news agency, SAKS (which works with community radios) and the Network of Women Community Radio Broadcasters – had lost their offices, equipment and most of their archives. The professor was living in a tent. As for me – the sole foreigner in that group, who has worked on and off with the groups for 20 years – I had a job in Washington, D.C.

We also didn't know how we could fund it. As months rolled by, we learned that most donors prefer supporting things they can see, like a temporary school building, a drainage canal, and brandable things like tents, T-shirts and knapsacks.

But we were convinced it had to happen. As soon as foreign technocrats and officials began pumping out reconstruction plans, it became clear there had been little participation from Haitian experts and citizens. One more reason, we thought, to launch a "reconstruction watchdog" collaborative.

"[W]e think media like ours can... make sure that this reconstruction leads to the kind of society we all dream about: a just society, one that includes people, that doesn't exclude; a society that takes into account the needs of the human being. A society that addresses the needs of the victims – not just from the recent earthquake, but also of the invisible earthquake our society has been experiencing for dozens of years" – Gotson Pierre, director, AlterPresse, March 2010.

HAITI'S AFTERSHOCKS

Collaborative watchdog group follows the funds for rebuilding

BY JANE REGAN

When a massive earthquake killed some 200,000 people and devastated Haiti, billions of aid dollars poured in from around the globe. Groups such as "God's Pit Crew" and "Drops of Hope" descended on the island, ostensibly to help people rebuild their lives.

Although many of us in Haiti had lost friends, family, homes and offices, a group of Haitian journalists banded together soon after the disaster to follow the money to make sure it really was offering hope.

We were all part of the Haitian alternative media movement, a nonprofit effort producing public service journalism. Most commercial media are run by their owners, focusing on breaking news and politics. Reports can be biased to reflect the owner's politics. Propaganda and puff pieces abound, and there is little in-depth reporting.

Haiti stories online

www.haitigrassrootswatch.org – Website for Haiti Grassroots Watch

<http://bit.ly/haitimonsant> – Series on distribution of Monsanto and other seeds

<http://bit.ly/haitirecon> – Port-au-Prince reconstruction stories

<http://bit.ly/haiticash4> – Cash for Work stories

'Eyes peeled' on Haiti

Eventually we rounded up funding from International Media Support in Denmark and an anonymous U.S. donor and launched "Haiti Grassroots Watch" ("Ayiti Kale Je" or "Haiti Eyes Peeled" in Haitian Creole). Since then, we also have received grants from the several U.S.-based foundations.

We vowed to "fouyo zo nan kalalou" – "stick our fingers into the okra," as the Haitian saying goes. And we decided to produce text, video and audio in Haitian Creole and French (Haiti's two official languages) as well as in English and Spanish, because want to reach everybody from Haitian community radio listeners who don't necessarily have any formal education to Haitian and foreign politicians, consultants, aid groups and citizens.

Our distribution networks are varied: commercial and community radio in Haiti and the United States, online services and sites, Haitian newspapers, commercial television in Haiti and U.S. community television.

Despite our ambitious goals, Haiti Grassroots Watch is lean. We



Jane Regan teaches an investigative journalism course in a temporary classroom – plywood walls and sheet metal roof. The room has no electricity or sound insulation.

operate with volunteers from five community radios, the part-time efforts of journalists and producers at SAKS and AlterPresse, and three part-time interns who receive small stipends. Student reporting also plays a role. There is no office and were no “new hires” except for the interns and my position – coordinator/trainer.

Pretty early on, I realized that we needed to “grow” our own journalists, so I do skills workshops at radio stations and in the capital. Last January, I started teaching Haiti’s first-ever university-level investigative journalism course. With support from IRE, we translated one chapter of the *Investigative Reporter’s Handbook* and several chapters of an African investigative reporting manual.

“The course was more than useful. What I really liked is that you go out and report. When you speak to an authority, and then you go out and do research, you find out he was not telling the whole truth. I realized that there were real gaps in my learning.” – Esther Labonté, fourth year student, State University of Haiti. Her final project is part of a report on Port-au-Prince reconstruction (<http://bit.ly/haitirecon>).

Story ideas and reporting come from the journalists at SAKS and AlterPresse and “the crowd” – the students and community radio members. Reporting done by radio stations is sent to the capital on paper and audio cassette or CD, where we vet and verify it. Then, the best radio reports are re-done on video, with the radio member serving as “talent.” Finally, all reporting is combined for the final text, videos and radio documentary.

“Haiti Grassroots Watch helps a lot of people realize what rights they have. It listens to the people living under the tents... Now I can go and talk to the authorities and NGOs and make them respond to ques-

tions. I have to walk several hours from my land... but I do it so I can help my brothers and sisters rise above the misery in which we live.”
– Jean-Maxot Guerrier, 48, father of six, farmer with elementary school education, member of Clofa Pierre Community Radio in La Vallée.

Road blocks to progress

But it’s not all good news. Not surprisingly, more than just lack of training stands in the way. Most media owners pay pittances (most journalists end up in public relations jobs). Radio reporters are expected to turn in three or four reports a day. On top of that, few journalists have their own cars or computers, nor do they have access to the Internet outside of work. Some don’t even have much electricity outside of the newsroom.

But lack of materials, time and experience are – in many ways – the least of the challenges.

Many commercial media owners are very wary of stories that might endanger their revenue streams – the Haitian and foreign government agencies, the NGOs, and the private sector. Until 2000, there was an exception: Radio Haiti Inter. Owned and run by journalist Jean Leopold Dominique, its reporters used to dig into prickly dossiers and face what Dominique said were near-complete advertising boycotts. In the 2003 documentary “The Agronomist,” Dominique told filmmaker Jonathan Demme: “I tried to introduce information... risky business. I know I am attacked because I’m doing my job the way it should be done.”

On April 3, 2000, Dominique faced his last attack. As he headed into the station to begin that day’s newscast, the 69-year-old and a guard were gunned down. Dominique died from four bullets in the head and chest.

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Journalists and community radio members gather in Haiti's capital for a story idea session for the pilot reporting project. They overcame numerous obstacles in their collaboration.

... there are no laws in Haiti, and few in foreign countries, that require government contractors and NGOs to publish their budgets.

In addition to the dangers, Haiti has no laws that give reporters access to authorities and documents. There is also no access to government tax, zoning, budget, land ownership, baptism, birth, death or other records. (Even if there were access, record-keeping is scandalously deficient. And then there's the earthquake that destroyed most of the government buildings in the capital and four other cities.)

Because Haiti is practically occupied by multilateral, U.S. government and non-governmental humanitarian and development agencies, a great deal of important information rests with them – in Haiti as well as at their home countries. But there are no laws in Haiti, and few in foreign countries, that require government contractors and NGOs to publish their budgets.

"[A] journalist is trying to do a report... I ask you to be very vigilant and, if the case presents itself, do not respond to any question, no matter how simple it seems... It is important to advise us immediately of all incidents, or requests, in order to help us better respond. – Email sent to employees of a U.S. Agency for International Development-funded project during the months HGW was requesting an interview via email, telephone call and letter. Despite repeated requests, no interview was granted.

Finally, there is distribution. Most commercial radio and television stations in Haiti are not interested in free content, especially if it might hurt their businesses. They are "pay to play" only.

Overcoming obstacles

We have a long way to go, but we've come up with work-arounds:

- **Logistics:** Because transportation is so difficult and expensive, there are few meetings where all journalists are present. We communicate via email, cell phone and text message. But most journalists have no Internet at home, and community radio members have none. The radios send cassettes or CDs with sound files into the capital on the back of a motorcycle or with a bus driver. If rains flood a river, meaning one of the stations is completely cut off, we shift our schedules, adjust our deadlines and change the

calendar. In the capital, text messages and motorcycle couriers keep everyone coordinated.

- **Danger:** We do not investigate certain subjects (drug trade, for example). Articles – which are all collaborative – are not signed, and they are in at least two languages, meaning that we are more visibly attached to the outside world. This does not mean that we are immune to possible dangers, but it does provide a bit more protection.
- **Lack of access to authorities:** Sometimes I make the calls or send the emails requesting interviews. Sadly, Haitian and foreign officials, and NGO employees of all nationalities, tend to react more favorably to a foreign reporter's request. I secure the interview, and a Haitian team member follows up.

Haiti Grassroots Watch partners and the State University hope to work with other media organizations to promote new, open records laws. We are exploring permanent partnership possibilities with few Port-au-Prince commercial radio and television stations. Little by little, we are expanding our reach among Haitian diaspora and U.S. alternative media. Last spring, a student at American University's Investigative Reporting Workshop helped Haitian reporters learn more about a U.S. government contractor. Maybe U.S. reporters and journalism students can team up with Haitian reporters on long-term investigations into U.S.-funded reconstruction projects, acting as both mentors and researchers? Perhaps kicked off by international, bilingual workshops?

"The reconstruction is hidden from everyone, behind a curtain, and that keeps actors from playing their roles. We are 'constructing' a media project that will assure citizens, and the media, can take part." – Professor Ary Régis

Jane Regan is an investigative journalist, communications scholar and documentary filmmaker who has worked in Haiti for most of the past two decades. Her work has been featured in the Miami Herald, the Christian Science Monitor, Interpress Service, Associated Press Television News, the BBC, the Public Broadcasting System and numerous other outlets.