UN Strategic Communications and the Protection of Civilians: The Role of UN Radio

Hannah Smidt and Marc Werner   MAY 2025

Executive Summary

Several UN peacekeeping operations communicate with the populations in their host state through radio, which remains the most popular medium in many countries. UN strategic communications via radio can help reduce violence against civilians, both during and after armed conflict. This protective effect of UN radio is evident even in areas where no UN military peacekeepers are deployed.

There are four main ways that strategic communications by UN peacekeepers may reduce violence: (1) by building trust in the mission and enhancing cooperation with peacekeepers' protection activities; (2) by filling gaps in reliable information that might otherwise be filled by misinformation that incites violence; (3) by fostering pro-peace behavioral change among ordinary civilians; and (4) by incentivizing rank-and-file combatants to exercise restraint.

There are many conditions that enhance the persuasiveness of UN strategic communications. Most crucially, messages are more effective when they are perceived as accurate and informative by local audiences. Moreover, narrative messages that are adapted to the local context can strengthen the persuasiveness of UN strategic communications.

UN radio stations can leave a positive legacy for the protection of civilians even after peacekeeping operations have left if they transition into a local or regional media outlet. The radio stations that succeed UN radio stations once peacekeeping operations depart will be most likely to contribute to an information environment that protects rather than threatens civilians when NGOs guarantee their independence with continuous funding.

Going forward, as the UN seeks to enhance strategic communications in peacekeeping operations, it must carefully manage several trade-offs. These include trade-offs between empowering civilians vs. exposing them to risk; ensuring that messaging is coherent vs. tailoring it to the local context; sustaining independent media vs. promoting national ownership; and expanding access to data vs. maintaining security and host-state consent.

Introduction

UN peacekeeping operations tend to operate in conflict-affected contexts where domestic media have limited capacity to offer independent and credible information. In many cases, civilians are exposed to media that is politically biased or a source of mis- and disinformation, rumors, and hate speech.[1] In Mali, for instance, some domestic radio stations disseminated false information about the UN peacekeeping mission while also drumming up support for Russian mercenaries despite their involvement in human rights abuses.[2] When people cannot access reliable information, they become vulnerable to manipulation and incitement to violence. They may also lack the information they need to protect themselves.

UN peacekeeping operations with protection of civilians mandates engage in strategic communications to address these challenges.[3] In recent years, mission mandates have made explicit references to this intersection between strategic communications and the protection of civilians. For example, the peacekeeping mission in the Central African Republic (CAR) has been tasked "to make more proactive use of strategic communications to support its protection of civilians' strategy."[4] Ordinary people in mission theaters are a priority audience because their collaboration is crucial for the success of protection efforts.[5] Although access to the Internet is broadening, radio remains by far the most common source of news in Africa.[6] In major peacekeeping operations on the African continent like the missions in South Sudan (UNMISS), CAR (MINUSCA), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), UN radio is thus the most important tool for strategic communications.[7]

Nonetheless, UN strategic communications are not without risk. Armed actors and host governments have regularly sought to suppress UN communications that undercut their preferred narrative. For instance, in 2023, a UN radio journalist was briefly detained in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) for reporting on allegations against state soldiers, and in 2018, South Sudanese authorities temporarily suspended UN radio due to allegations of hate speech.[8] In some cases, armed groups or governments may even retaliate against people who access UN communications.[9]

Given these risks, it is important to consider whether strategic communications by UN peacekeeping operations can help protect civilians and, if so, how and when. This issue brief combines original data on UN radio coverage with existing geolocated data on violent events during the operation of the UN missions in Mali (MINUSMA) and Côte d'Ivoire (ONUCI) to analyze whether access to UN radio reduces violence targeting civilians. To better understand the mechanisms and conditions that underpin the protective effects of strategic communications, we review research on violence against civilians and the effects of media at the individual level, with a focus on the impacts of UN radio. Finally, we use policy reports and interviews with UN staff to understand the long-term impacts of UN strategic communications on protective environments after peacekeepers' withdrawal.

---

1 Marie-Soleil Frère and Anke Fiedler, "Balancing Plausible Lies and False Truths: Perception and Evaluation of the Local and Global News Coverage of Conflicts in the DRC," in *Media in War and Armed Conflict: The Dynamics of Conflict News Production and Dissemination*, Romy Fröhlich, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018); Jeff Conroy-Krutz, "The Squeeze on African Media Freedom," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 2 (2020).

2 Interview with UN official, January 17, 2025; Denis M. Tull, "Contesting France: Rumors, Intervention and the Politics of Truth in Mali," *Critique internationale* 90, no. 1 (2021), p. 157.

3 UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Handbook," 2020, p. 69.

4 UN Security Council Resolution 2552 (November 12, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2552, para. 31b, viii.

5 Nick Birnback, "Under the Blue Flag: Leadership and Strategic Communications in UN Peace Operations," International Forum on the Challenges of Peace Operations, March 2019, pp. 3–4; Jeni Whalan, "The Local Legitimacy of Peacekeepers," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 11, no. 3 (2017); Hannah Smidt, "Mitigating Election Violence Locally: UN Peacekeepers' Election-Education Campaigns in Côte d'Ivoire," *Journal of Peace Research* 57, no. 1 (2020). UN strategic communications are also aimed at host-state elites and a variety of other international audiences.

6 Jeffrey Conroy-Krutz, Kelechi Amakoh, and Komi Amewunou, "AD800: Africa's Shifting Media Landscapes: Digital Media Use Grows, but So Do Demographic Divides," Afrobarometer, April 2024, p. 2.

7 Bill Orme, "Strengthening the United Nations' Role in Media Development," Center for International Media Assistance, September 19, 2019.

8 Birnback, "Under the Blue Flag," p. 7; Sam Mednick, "South Sudan Suspends UN Radio Station," Associated Press, March 9, 2018; CIVICUS, "DRC: Violent Repression of Opposition Protest as Senate Adopts Law on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders," July 3, 2023. See also: Paul D. Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM), 2007–2017* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 296. Non-state armed groups have also threatened UN strategic communications, for example in Somalia, where hostility by al-Shabaab severely limited the information-gathering capacity of the UN Information Support Unit of AMISOM.

9 Inken von Borzyskowski and Patrick M. Kuhn, "Dangerously Informed: Voter Information and Pre-Electoral Violence in Africa," *Journal of Peace Research* 57, no. 1 (2020).

Strategic Communications for the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping Operations

Strategic communications are defined as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission."[10] Informing audiences on what a UN peacekeeping operation is there to do and how it will do it is the essence of strategic communications.[11] UN radio broadcasts, for example, provide news on political developments and broadcast programs supporting missions' mandates, including on intercommunity reconciliation and the promotion of human rights.

When it comes to strategic communications for enhancing the protection of civilians, listening to communities is especially key. Missions utilize two-way communication tools to identify protection risks and understand what local resources and actors exist to address them.[12] For instance, to engage with local communities on this topic, UN radio stations organize call-in shows for listeners and invite civil society actors as guests on their programs.

UN strategic communications also aim to "affect the intentions, perceptions, and expectations of relevant actors."[13] Unlike psychological operations used in military interventions, however, strategic communications in peacekeeping focus on providing comprehensive, fact-based information rather than selective messaging tied to military objectives. Unlike propaganda, they rely exclusively on verifiable facts.[14]

This issue brief focuses on UN strategic communications targeting ordinary people in the host state who are a priority audience for the UN.[15] People-focused strategic communications include in-person civic education events, press conferences, information shared on traditional and social media, press releases, radio and TV programs, and printed products.[16] Since radio remains the most important medium in many mission theaters, the analysis focuses on the protective impact of strategic communications via UN radio.

Protective Impact of Strategic Communications

UN policy documents emphasize that strategic communications play a crucial role in civilian protection.[17] This claim is supported by anecdotal evidence from various UN host countries.[18] It is also supported by recent analyses of past missions, including an analysis of peacekeeping in Sierra Leone (1998–2002) that found that UN forces deterred violence against civilians, especially in areas where civilians could listen to UN radio.[19] But does this protective effect of UN strategic communications hold in contemporary operating environments?

To assess whether UN strategic communications via radio continue to play a protective role, we examine two more recent cases: ONUCI FM in Côte d'Ivoire (2004–2017) and Mikado FM in Mali (2015–2023). In both contexts, radio is the leading medium.[20] Both UN radio stations also had wider coverage than any

---

10 Kirk Hallahan et al., "Defining Strategic Communication," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 1, no. 1 (2007), p. 3.

11 Birnback, "Under the Blue Flag," p. 3; Albert Trithart, "Disinformation Against UN Peacekeeping Operations," International Peace Institute, November 2022, pp. 8–9.

12 UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Handbook," p. 69.

13 Ibid.

14 Kseniya Oksamytna, "Policy Entrepreneurship by International Bureaucracies: The Evolution of Public Information in UN Peacekeeping," *International Peacekeeping* 25, no. 1 (2018), p. 90; Richard R. Lau, "Classic Models of Persuasion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Electoral Persuasion*, Elizabeth Suhay, Bernard Grofman, and Alexander H. Trechsel, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 29.

15 Birnback, "Under the Blue Flag," pp. 3–4.

16 UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Handbook," p. 73.

17 Ibid., p. 69.

18 Ingrid Lehmann, *Peacekeeping and Public Information: Caught in the Crossfires* (London: Routledge, 1999); Michelle Betz and Helene Papper, "UN Peacekeeping Radio: The Way Forward," in *Communication and Peace*, Julia Hoffmann and Virgil Hawkins, eds. (London: Routledge, 2015); Lise Morjé Howard, *Power in Peacekeeping* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 39, 65–67.

19 Jessica Di Salvatore, "Can Information Campaigns Enhance Civilians' Protection in Civil Wars?" SSRN, June 12, 2023. Moreover, a cross-national analysis of fifty-one UN peacekeeping operations (1992–2014) found fewer combatant deaths where UN radio stations were present. See: Mahtab Shafiei and Kathryn Lauren Overton, "Peace Is in the Air: Reducing Conflict Intensity with United Nations Peacekeeping Radio Broadcasts," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 41, no. 6 (2024).

20 BBC News, "Mali Media Guide," April 25, 2023; BBC News, "Ivory Coast Media Guide," July 24, 2023.

private broadcaster in Mali and Côte d'Ivoire.[21]

Figure 1 illustrates UN radio coverage, with darker gray representing higher-quality UN radio reception. UN radio signal estimates were created using data on the technical parameters of the various transmitter antennas deployed in the host country of the UN peacekeeping operation (i.e., their exact locations, height, power, gain, and line loss) and signal propagation modeling software.[22] The orange dots show events of violence against civilians using data from the Armed Conflict Locations and Events Database (ACLED), and the blue circles represent the fifty-kilometer radius around UN bases.[23] The data suggests that locations with lower-quality UN radio reception saw more violence against civilians, especially in Mali.

To systematically examine how UN radio coverage affects violence against civilians, we approximate an experiment comparing monthly violent incidents in locations that receive good UN radio signal and locations that do not.[24] The locations under study are five square kilometers and repre-

sented as squares in Figure 1. This quasi-experimental approach relies on the fact that the quality of radio coverage in a location depends on several factors: (1) the technical parameters of the radio transmitter antenna that is closest to that location; (2) the distance between that location and the antenna; and (3) any obstacles (e.g., mountains or the curvature of the earth) between that location and the antenna that can block the radio signal.

Our analysis controls for the first two factors and for various other factors that may affect one-sided violence, including nearby UN troops, mountainous terrain, and any time-invariant differences between the larger areas covered by a given radio transmitter antenna.[25] Since the remaining differences in signal coverage depend on topographical obstacles and not on the risk of violence, we can assess the causal effect of UN radio on violence against civilians.

As illustrated in Figure 2, we find that as the UN radio signal strength increases, the number of incidents of violence against civilians tends to

Figure 1. UN radio coverage in Côte d'Ivoire and Mali
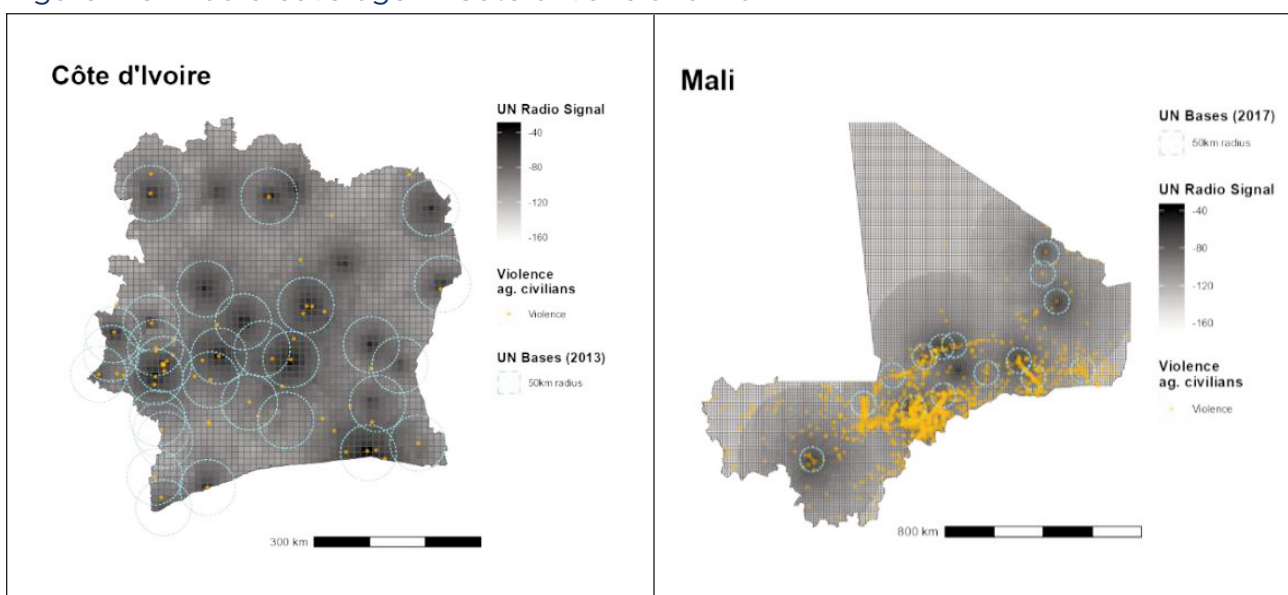
21 This is usually the case in UN host countries. See: Bill Orme, "Broadcasting in Blue: The Unexamined Past and Uncertain Future of Peacekeeping Radio," Center for International Media Assistance, February 16, 2010.

22 The data on transmitter antennas was provided by former staff of UN peacekeeping operations in close coordination with UN DPO.

23 Clionadh Raleigh, Roudabeh Kishi, and Andrew Linke, "Political Instability Patterns Are Obscured by Conflict Dataset Scope Conditions, Sources, and Coding Choices," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10, no. 1 (2023).

24 The analysis only includes locations between 10 and 100 kilometers from a radio transmitter antenna, discarding locations that are less than 10 kilometers away and more than 100 kilometers away from an antenna. This restriction ensures comparability.

25 In addition, we controlled for forest land, population size, road density, education facilities, nighttime light exposure, and food insecurity in any given area and month, as well as time-invariant differences between antenna locations that may affect violence against civilians.

Figure 2. UN radio coverage and predicted violence against civilians in Côte d'Ivoire and Mali
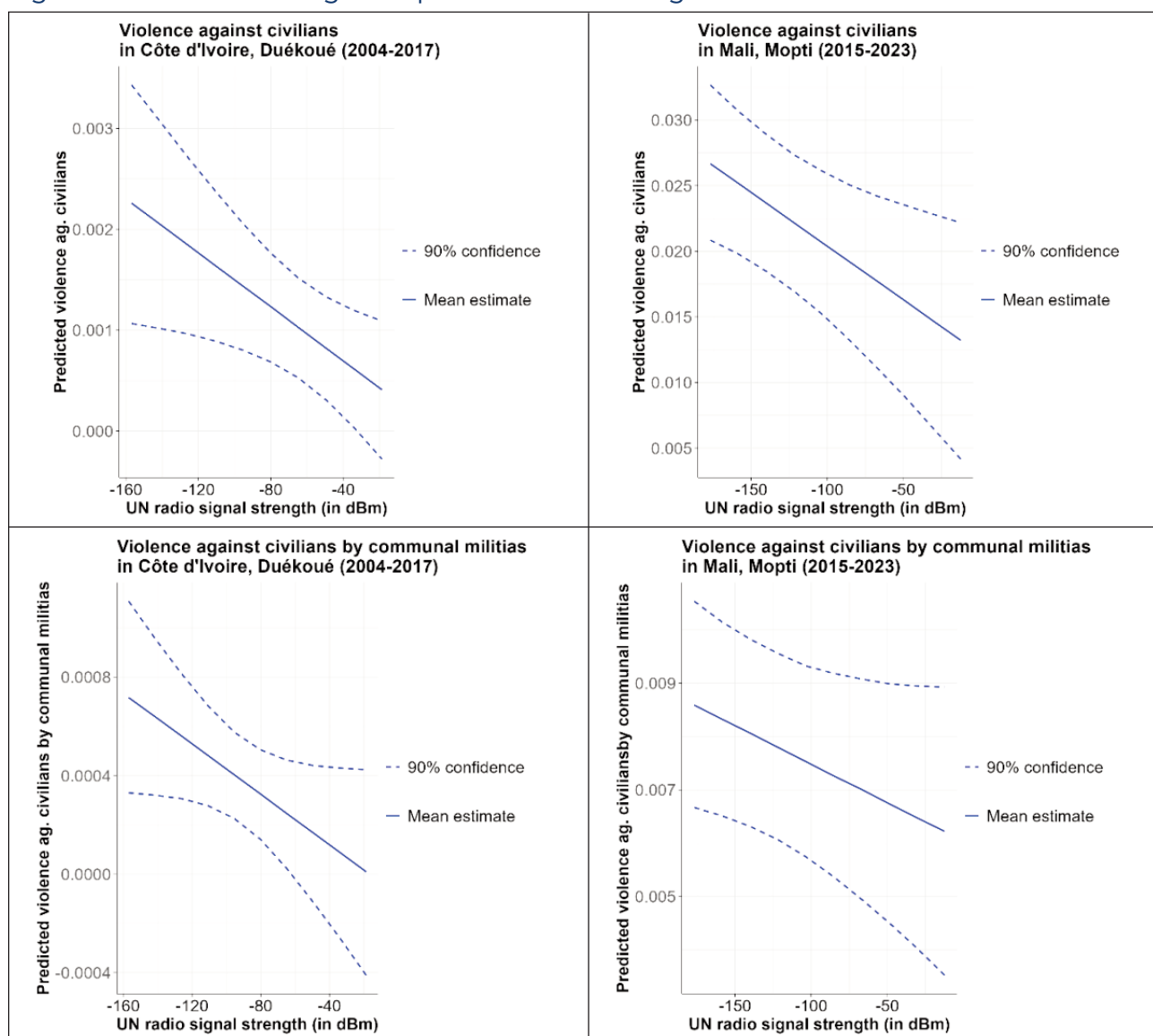
decline. The solid line shows the mean estimated number of violent events, while the dashed blue lines indicate the lower and upper bound of these estimates in 90 percent of cases.[26] This pattern holds for one-sided violence perpetrated by communal militias only.

We note important differences in the impact of UN radio across contexts. First, the protective effect is more pronounced in Mali. On average, an increase in UN radio signal strength by one standard devia-

tion lowers violence against civilians by 0.8 events per month in Côte d'Ivoire and 3.4 events per month in Mali.

Second, in Côte d'Ivoire, UN radio seems especially effective in mitigating violence perpetrated by communal militias. One reason might be that communal militias were the most salient threat to civilian security in Côte d'Ivoire, and ONUCI FM dedicated special programs to fostering intercommunal reconciliation.[27]

---

26 The estimates are for Duékoué in western Côte d'Ivoire and Mopti in central Mali, but the shape of the decrease in the mean number of violent events is the same for any other location in the two countries. All figures are for violence against civilians measured with ACLED data, downloaded in September 2024. See: Raleigh, Kishi, and Linke, "Political Instability Patterns." The results are highly similar using UCDP-GED data version 24.1: Shawn Davies, Garoun Engström, Thérése Pettersson, and Magnus Öberg, "Organized Violence 1989–2023, and the Prevalence of Organized Crime Groups," *Journal of Peace Research* 61, no. 4 (2024); Ralph Sundberg and Erik Melander, "Introducing the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 4 (2013).

27 Mary Kimano, "Broadcasting Peace: Radio as a Tool for Recovery," United Nations Africa Renewal, October 2007.

Third, the violence-reducing effect of UN radio in Côte d'Ivoire only holds for areas that are within fifty kilometers of a UN base. A plausible explanation is that UN radio communication strengthened UN peacekeepers' protection activities by, for instance, attracting people to intercommunal reconciliation events, which the UN often organizes near peacekeeping bases and field offices.[28]

Fourth, unlike in Côte d'Ivoire, the violence-reducing effect of UN radio in Mali is not restricted to areas within fifty kilometers of a UN base. This finding suggests that UN radio in Mali not only strengthened UN peacekeepers' protection activities but also reduced violence through other pathways, such as by countering incitement to violence. Taken together, this statistical analysis adds to the growing evidence base that UN strategic communications can play a crucial role in protection efforts.

Pathways to Protection

By combining insights from research on violence against civilians with findings on the effects of UN radio and pro-peace information interventions, we

can identify at least four plausible pathways through which UN strategic communications can reduce violence against civilians (see Figure 3).

First, UN strategic communications may reassure civilian populations of peacekeepers' trustworthiness. The perceived need for protection is a key motivation for civilians to collaborate with armed groups.[29] Such collaboration strengthens armed groups, enables them to use targeted violence against civilians, and is likely to perpetuate insecurity in the long term.[30] To maintain civilians' support, conflict actors thus often portray UN peacekeepers as ineffective or even as a cause of insecurity.[31] This narrative that peacekeepers are unable or unwilling to provide protection could further motivate civilians to collaborate with armed groups. Strategic communications may help break this vicious cycle. By reporting on UN peacekeepers' efforts to protect civilians and by explaining potential obstacles they face, strategic communications may help convince local communities that UN peacekeepers can be trusted not to deliberately endanger civilians and to try to ensure their safety.

At a practical level, strategic communications

Figure 3. Pathways to protection of civilians through UN strategic communications
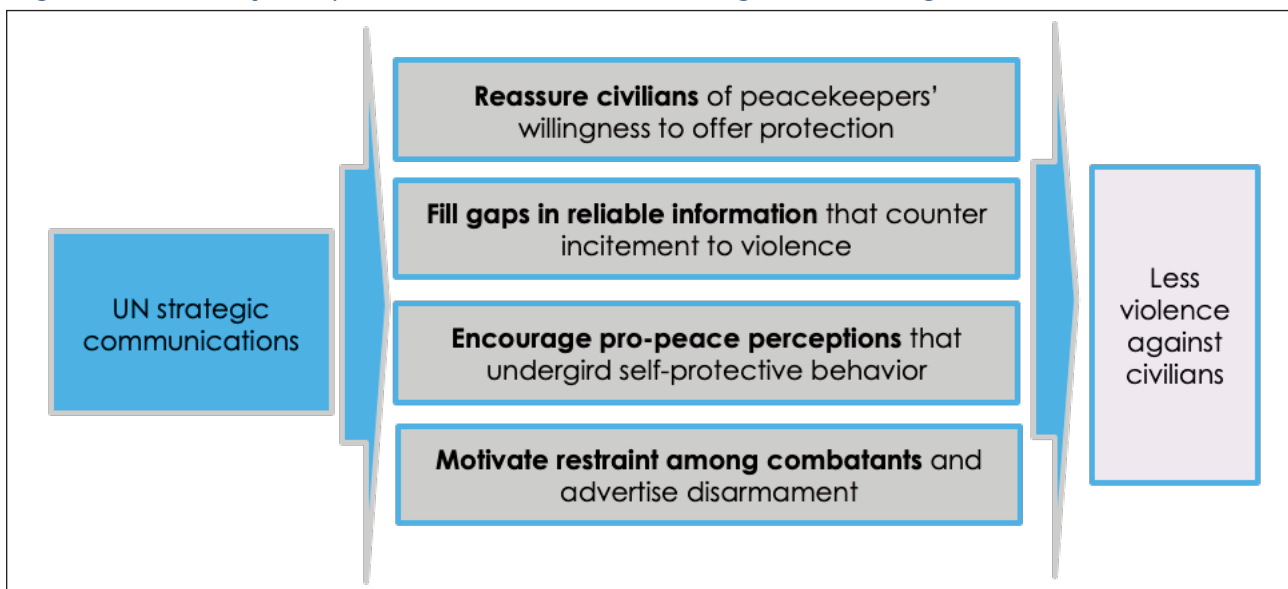
28 Hannah Smidt, "United Nations Peacekeeping Locally: Enabling Conflict Resolution, Reducing Communal Violence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, nos. 2–3 (2020), p. 361.

29 Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew Adam Kocher, "How 'Free' Is Free Riding in Civil Wars? Violence, Insurgency, and the Collective Action Problem," *World Politics* 59, no. 2 (2007); Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy Weinstein, "Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (2008).

30 Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

31 Tull, "Contesting France: Rumors, Intervention and the Politics of Truth in Mali," p. 156; Paul D. Williams, "Strategic Communications for Peace Operations: The African Union's Information War Against al-Shabaab," *Stability International Journal of Security & Development* 7, no. 1 (2018), pp. 2–3.

provide local communities with the information they need to manage risks in cooperation with a peacekeeping mission. For instance, UN radio in Mali helped publicize a telephone hotline that people could use to alert the UN mission to threats.[32] Likewise, missions can use strategic communications to inform the public on when and where they can access patrol escorts to markets or water sources and how to find safe spaces or exit routes as needed. However, this practical information likely only enhances people's trust in a peacekeeping mission if they live in areas with a UN military or police presence.

Research backs up the idea that UN strategic communications can increase civilian confidence in a peacekeeping operation as a provider of security. Experimental evidence and surveys of the population of eleven cities in Mali (2018–2023) demonstrate that, although confidence in the UN peacekeeping operation remained low on average, UN radio increased trust in MINUSMA to a similar degree as positive personal experiences with mission personnel.[33] The evidence also suggests that UN radio improved people's perceptions of peacekeepers' impartiality.[34] Moreover, polling data shows that the strategic communications efforts of the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) led to "a significant positive shift in AMISOM's reputation," including by building "trust in the military component of AMISOM."[35]

Second, UN strategic communications may help fill a vacuum in reliable information. Armed conflict weakens the capacity of domestic media. Rumors, mis- and disinformation, and hate speech often fill the void, potentially inciting people to support or even participate in violence.[36] UN strategic communications may help decrease people's reliance on potentially harmful information. For example, UN radio has been likened to a national broadcaster to which people can turn to verify information and navigate uncertainty.[37] In conflict-affected contexts, the provision of credible information about peace agreements appears to be particularly relevant for protection, as it can help people avoid falling prey to the arguments of peace process spoilers. For instance, the UN radio station in Mali had a dedicated show to inform the public about the 2015 peace agreement.[38] UN strategic communications may also help counter potentially violence-inciting narratives that blend fact and fiction.[39]

So far, we only have limited research-based evidence that UN strategic communications can make people less susceptible to violence-inciting information. An analysis of surveys together with data on violent events from Côte d'Ivoire (2010–2016) suggests that UN strategic communications in the form of face-to-face civic education campaigns not only helped reduce fear of and support for political violence but also decreased the risk of violent protest and rioting around the time of elections.[40] A plausible interpretation of this finding is that civic education campaigns countered attempts by politicians to incite intergroup violence. Indeed, evidence from Nigeria shows that anti-violence education campaigns can reduce support for violence-inciting politicians.[41]

Third, UN strategic communications may foster perceptions that undergird self-protective behaviors of local communities. Specifically, communications may promote the perception that it is socially desirable to cooperate across local group-based divisions.[42] Indeed, under the label of recon-

---

32 Interview with former UN official in Mali, April 29, 2024.

33 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, "Mali-Mètre," June 2021, p. 58.

34 Hannah Smidt, "Does Strategic Communications Affect the Legitimacy of UN Peace Operations? Evidence from Mali," on file with author, December 2024.

35 Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, pp. 282–283, 290–291.

36 Frère and Fiedler, "Balancing Plausible Lies and False Truths," p. 271; Conroy-Krutz, "The Squeeze on African Media Freedom," p. 104. On how hate speech and rumors incite violence, see: David Yanagizawa-Drott, "Propaganda and Conflict: Evidence from the Rwandan Genocide," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129, no. 4 (2014); Adam Sandor, "The Power of Rumour(s) in International Interventions: MINUSMA's Management of Mali's Rumour Mill," *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (2020), p. 913.

37 Orme, "Broadcasting in Blue," p. 20; Frère and Fiedler, "Balancing Plausible Lies and False Truths," p. 273, 282.

38 The show is called "L'Accord de A à Z." While the show was accessible in many local languages, it was not entertaining but rather dry, according to an interview with a UN official on December 1, 2023.

39 Trithart, "Disinformation Against UN Peacekeeping Operations," p. 8. For example, Mikado FM launched a weekly program against disinformation called "Vrai ou Faux."

40 Smidt, "Mitigating Election Violence Locally."

41 Paul Collier and Pedro Vicente, "Votes and Violence: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Nigeria," *Economic Journal* 124, no. 574 (2014).

42 Jana Krause, *Resilient Communities: Non-Violence and Civilian Agency in Communal War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Jana Krause, Juan Masullo, and Emily Paddon Rhoads, "Civilian Protective Agency: An Introduction," in *Civilian Protective Agency in Violent Settings: A Comparative Perspective*, Jana Krause et al., eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

ciliation and social cohesion, UN radio often seeks to achieve such changes in perception through entertaining and participatory programs that weave educational messages into stories with local characters.[43] To be clear, UN strategic communications should not encourage high-risk activities (e.g., refusing to collaborate with armed groups when such behavior could trigger reprisals), but rather support changes in local political cultures conducive to self-protection.

Research-based evidence supports the plausibility of this pathway to effective protection. A field experiment combined with focus group interviews in the eastern DRC demonstrated that a dialogue-based UN radio show increased empathy toward the outgroup and fostered awareness of structural barriers to sustainable peace.[44] Other studies provide evidence for the effectiveness of media-based reconciliation programs more generally. A core finding is that such media-based interventions instill perceptions of social norms associated with pro-peace behavior, including a perceived social desirability of expression of dissent in group settings and a perceived social acceptance of interethnic cooperation.[45]

Finally, UN strategic communications may incentivize rank-and-file combatants to exercise restraint vis-à-vis the civilian population. Research shows that state and non-state actors are more likely to use targeted violence against civilians if they can act with impunity.[46] UN strategic communications may augment the perceived risk of punishment by explaining that violence against civilians breaches international law and by promulgating laws and institutions that strengthen

accountability. For instance, the UN radio station in CAR broadcast trials of perpetrators of human rights abuses in the Special Criminal Court.[47] In addition, UN strategic communications may target rank-and-file combatants with advertisements of alternatives to violence, including disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs.

Research-based evidence supports this pathway linking UN strategic communications with effective protection through advertising alternatives to violence. An analysis of surveys together with data on violent events in South Sudan, the DRC, and CAR (2008–2015) shows that UN-supported community radio stations that broadcast "come home" messages encouraged the defection of combatants from armed groups, thereby lowering violence against civilians.[48] However, evidence from South Sudan also indicates that such "come home" messages may inadvertently instill fear in civilians about the return of perpetrators of atrocities.[49] UN strategic communications aimed at civilian populations could try to mitigate such unintended side effects, for example by explaining the modalities of combatant return.

Enabling Conditions for Effective Strategic Communications

All four pathways through which UN strategic communications may encourage people to think or act in favor of civilian protection require people to engage with these communications in the first place. For instance, UN radio can only foster trust

43 For instance, the UN radio in Côte d'Ivoire, ONUCI FM, partnered with the NGO Search for Common Ground to produce radio programs with stories on building social cohesion. See: The Communication Initiative, "Search for Common Ground (SFCG) in Côte d'Ivoire," available at https://global.comminit.com/content/search-common-ground-sfcg-cote-divoire. In Mali, Mikado FM broadcast Batrou Inagoto with the aim of improving social cohesion between the Peulh and Dogon people, who frequently found themselves on opposing sites in militarized farmer-herder conflicts, according to an interview with a UN official on December 1, 2023.

44 Jacob Udo-Udo Jacob, "Transforming Conflicts with Information: Impacts of UN Peace Radio Programmes in the Democratic Republic of Congo," *War & Society* 33, no. 4 (2014). On how UN radio can encourage behavioral change, see also: Eric Mvukiyehe, "Can Media Interventions Reduce Gender Gaps in Political Participation after Civil War? Evidence from a Field Experiment in Rural Liberia," World Bank, January 2017.

45 Elizabeth Paluck, "Reducing Intergroup Prejudice and Conflict Using the Media: A Field Experiment in Rwanda," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 3 (2009); Elizabeth Paluck and Donald P. Green, "Deference, Dissent, and Dispute Resolution: An Experimental Intervention Using Mass Media to Change Norms and Behavior in Rwanda," *American Political Science Review* 103, no. 4 (2009); Elizabeth Paluck et al., "Prejudice Reduction: Progress and Challenges," *Annual Review of Psychology* 72 (2021), p. 546.

46 Benjamin A. Valentino, "Why We Kill: The Political Science of Political Violence against Civilians," *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014).

47 COUR PÉNALE SPÉCIALE (@cour_penale), "Après une audience à huis clos ce 5.02.24 avec l'audition d'un témoin protégé, le procès devant la Section d'assises de la CPS dans l'affaire Azor KALITE et consorts se poursuivra par une audience publique ce 6/2/24 à 10h à la CPS. En direct sur Guira FM et Radio Ndélé pas loin," X, February 6, 2024.

48 Alex Amand, Paul Atwell, and Joseph F. Gomes, "The Reach of Radio: Ending Civil Conflict through Rebel Demobilization," *American Economic Review* 110, no. 5 (2010).

49 Anouk S. Rigterink and Mareike Schomerus, "The Fear Factor Is a Main Thing: How Radio Influences Anxiety and Political Attitudes," *Journal of Development Studies* 53, no. 8 (2017).

in the willingness of a peacekeeping operation to protect civilians if people tune into UN radio rather than alternative stations.[50] The prevailing perception that the UN and, by extension, UN peacekeeping operations are communicators with their own interests could make local audiences less willing to receive and engage with UN strategic communications. Even if people do not disagree with the goals of a UN peacekeeping mission, they may think of it as an untrustworthy source because they suspect its information to be slanted.[51] Consequently, UN strategic communications may fail to encourage local audiences to think or act in favor of civilian protection.[52]

However, research on media effects identifies several conditions under which communication encourages people to alter their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, even when the communicators are known to be communicating to achieve a specific goal rather than to provide neutral information.[53] We highlight two of them. First, if UN strategic communications are perceived as accurate and informative, they are more likely to guide the beliefs and behaviors of local audiences.[54] Interview-based research demonstrates that the UN radio station in the DRC partly fulfills this role: UN journalists are seen as "better informed, and willing to inform the Congolese population with no fear," equipped with "effective means for news production," and free from government interference. As one interviewee said, "That's why their information is true."[55] Tellingly, one of the inter-

viewees perceived UN radio as too "pro-MONUSCO" but still trusted the station "at 80 percent."[56] Thus, if UN strategic communications want to fill gaps in reliable information and help local audiences resist misinformation that can incite violence, they should not only portray the mission in a favorable light but utilize the UN's capacity and expertise to provide fact-based and relevant information.

Second, if UN strategic communications use narrative messages, or messages contained in a story, they can better attract the audience's attention and help them focus on these messages.[57] Narratives transport audiences into a story, thereby encouraging empathy with different characters. In so doing, narrative messages allow people to change prior beliefs and to adopt new behaviors.[58] For example, the UN radio station in Mali broadcast personal narratives shared by UN staff ("Allo MINUSMA") and stories of reconciliation between the Dogon and Peulh people ("Batrou Inagoto"). These programs may have helped instill more cooperative attitudes toward the UN mission and reduce prejudices among members of different ethnic groups, respectively. Of course, to resonate with local audiences, the stories must be adapted to the local context.[59] UN peacekeeping missions should therefore enable the agency of public information officers, who are often national staff with in-depth knowledge of the local context. Collaboration with local artists and content creators can also be a fruitful strategy.[60]

50 On how the audience's effort, motivation, and prior orientation influence persuasion effects, see: James N. Druckman, "A Framework for the Study of Persuasion," *Annual Review of Political Science* 25, no. 2 (2021), pp. 2–5.

51 On source credibility, see: Carl I. Hovland and Walter Weiss. "The Influence of Source Credibility on Communication Effectiveness," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1951–1952); James N. Druckman, "On the Limits of Framing Effects: Who Can Frame?" *Journal of Politics* 63, no. 4 (2001).

52 Lisa Dellmuth and Jonas Tallberg, *Legitimacy Politics: Elite Communication and Public Opinion in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 93; Farsan Ghassim "Effects of Self-Legitimation and Delegitimation on Public Attitudes toward International Organizations: A Worldwide Survey Experiment," *International Studies Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2024).

53 For an overview, see: Druckman, "A Framework for the Study of Persuasion."

54 For this argument, see: Joanne M. Miller and Jon A. Krosnick, "News Media Impact on the Ingredients of Presidential Evaluations: Politically Knowledgeable Citizens Are Guided by a Trusted Source," *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 2 (2000). For evidence from the Global South on how the lack of accurate reporting reduces individuals' trust in media, see: Herman Wasserman and Dani Madrid-Morales, "An Exploratory Study of 'Fake News' and Media Trust in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa," *African Journalism Studies* 40, no. 1 (2019).

55 Frère and Fiedler, "Balancing Plausible Lies and False Truths," pp. 276–277.

56 Ibid., p. 278.

57 Elizabeth Levy Paluck, "Media as an Instrument for Reconstructing Communities Following Conflict," in *Restoring Civil Societies: The Psychology of Intervention and Engagement Following Crisis*, Kai Jonas and Thomas Morton, eds. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Druckman, "A Framework for the Study of Persuasion"; Jeffrey J. Strange, "How Fictional Tales Wag Real-World Beliefs: Models and Mechanisms of Narrative Influence," in *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Foundations*, Melanie C. Green, Jeffrey J. Strange, and Timothy C. Brock, eds. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), p. 280.

58 Elizabeth Levy Paluck and Donald P. Green, "Prejudice Reduction: What Works?" p. 353.

59 Sally Deffor, "Ebola and the Reimagining of Health Communication in Liberia," in *Socio-cultural Dimensions of Emerging Infectious Diseases in Africa*, Godfrey Tangwa et al., eds. (Cham: Springer).

60 Jake Sherman and Albert Trithart, "Strategic Communications in UN Peace Operations: From an Afterthought to an Operational Necessity," International Peace Institute, August 2021, pp. 13, 15.

# Impact of UN Strategic Communications after Peacekeepers' Withdrawal

UN strategic communications can leave an important positive legacy for the protection of civilians after peacekeeping operations have left. For example, when a UN radio station transitions into an independent media outlet, it may retain its role as a source of reliable information. In practice, most UN radio stations are not permanently shut down after peacekeepers have departed. Instead, they are taken over by NGOs or regional bodies, or they are merged with state broadcasting services.

Two examples illustrate how transferring UN communications capabilities and resources to an NGO can effectively sustain a mission's legacy. Radio MINURCA, which was run by the UN Mission in CAR from 1998 to 2000, transitioned into Radio Ndeke Luka with the support of Fondation Hirondelle. Reporters Without Borders describes Radio Ndeke Luka "as one of the few media outlets that respects facts and sources," providing reliable news in a country increasingly affected by disinformation.[61] Similarly, ONUCI FM in Côte d'Ivoire became Radio de la Paix, operating

with support from the Félix Houphouët-Boigny Foundation for Peace Research. Although the transition was bumpy, due in part to uncertainty over funding, Radio de la Paix upholds editorial independence and impartiality in an otherwise "politicized and polarized" environment.[62] By providing high-quality, fact-based information, both radio stations continue to contribute to the protection of civilians, just as their predecessor UN stations did.

A successful and sustainable transition from UN radio to a local or regional broadcaster depends on securing independent funding. For example, UNMIL Radio in Liberia was transformed into Radio ECOWAS, a region-wide radio station. However, its future remains uncertain due to reliance on donors with short-term funding cycles, underscoring the need for sustainable financing to ensure continued access to reliable news.[63] Two former UN radio stations have been transformed into national broadcasting organizations: Radio and TV UNTAET transitioned into Radio-Televisão Timor Leste (RTTL), and Radio UNAMSIL transitioned into the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). However, these transitions have faced significant challenges, as national broadcasters often become overly reliant

Figure 4. Map of UN peacekeeping missions with radio stations

---
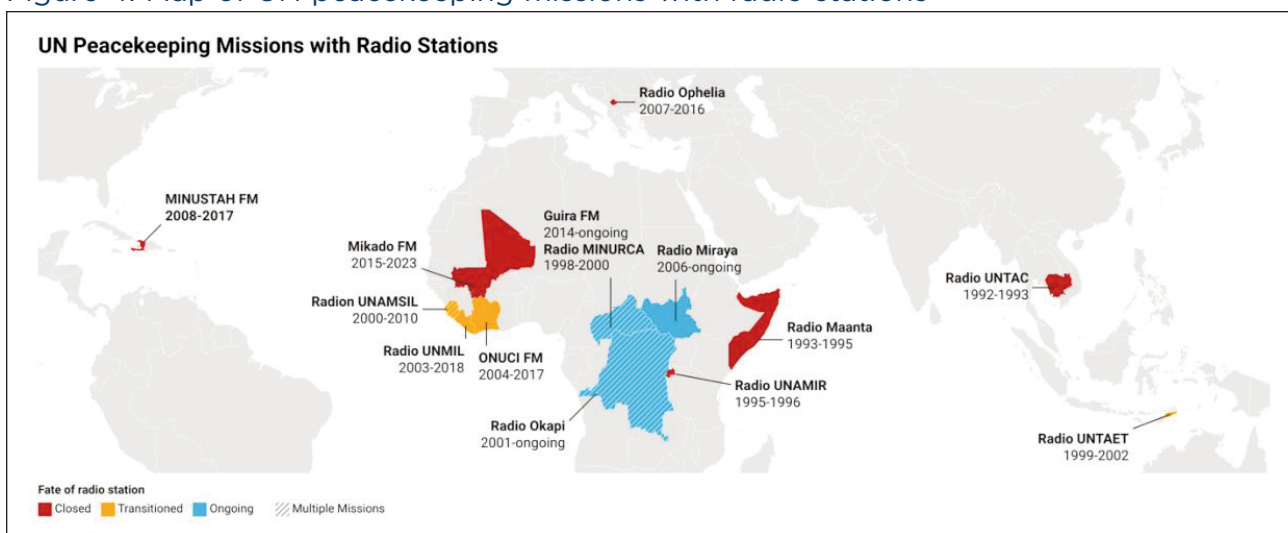
61 Reporters Without Borders, "Central African Republic," available at https://rsf.org/en/country/central-african-republic. See also: Fondation Hirondelle, "In CAR, A Study Measures the Impact of Radio Ndeke Luka Before and After Its Launch in a Remote Region," available at https://www.hirondelle.org/en/in-car-a-study-measures-the-impact-of-radio-ndeke-luka-before-and-after-its-launch-in-a-remote-region.

62 Reporters Without Borders, "Ivory Coast," available at https://rsf.org/en/country/ivory-coast; Fondation Félix Houphouët-Boigny, "Radio de la Paix on Live," available at https://www.fondation-fhb.org/en/activities/radio-de-la-paix-on-live/.

63 Openaid, "ECOWAS Radio Liberia," available at https://openaid.se/en/contributions/SE-0-SE-6-12540. Swedish funding for Radio ECOWAS expired on December 31, 2024.

on government funding and control.[64] In 2023, European Union election observers criticized the "SLBC's subservience to the government."[65] Transitions into national broadcasting services would thus benefit from the establishment of a system of checks and balances while the UN still has leverage.[66] Otherwise, former UN radio stations risk becoming tools of state control, potentially undermining civilian security rather than enhancing it.

Unfortunately, not all UN radio stations undergo a transition process. At least six UN radio stations have closed without successors. The shutdown of Mikado FM in Mali following the withdrawal of MINUSMA in 2023 is the most recent example of how losing a UN radio station leaves a vacuum for disinformation and extremist messaging. Beyond disinformation, the closure of Mikado FM has been particularly detrimental to more rural areas, where UN radio stations had been the only accessible source of reliable information.[67] The closure of UN radio stations has significant consequences, not just for their audiences but also for former local staff who may become vulnerable targets if left behind in a hostile environment.

Conclusion

UN strategic communications have proven to be a valuable protection tool, but their effectiveness hinges on their credibility, sustainability, and adaptability to complex conflict environments. As the UN seeks to enhance strategic communications in peacekeeping operations, it must carefully manage four trade-offs:

1. **Empowering civilians vs. exposing them to risk:** UN policy states that strategic communications should "mobilize protection actors," including local communities and civil society, to enhance civilian security.[68] However, the effectiveness of self-protection depends on the sensitivity of armed groups to maintaining a good reputation among civilians, which varies across groups and conflict contexts.[69] In contexts, where armed groups rely on foreign sponsors rather than local communities for material support and recruitment, civilians may face heightened risks if encouraged to act independently. A tailored, context-sensitive risk assessment is essential to balance civilian empowerment with safety.[70]

2. **Message coherence vs. local fit:** Decentralized communication allows UN public information officers and local radio journalists to tailor messages to local contexts and reduce perceptions of bias. However, a lack of centralized oversight risks incoherent messaging.[71] For example, if UN public information officers promote dialogue with armed groups while the UN force commander announces offensive action to meet protection needs, then the latter message may undermine the deterrent effect of the former.[72] Thus, the UN must strike a balance between maintaining oversight to maximize the coherence of messaging and granting sufficient autonomy to tailor messaging to the local context.

3. **Sustaining independent media vs. promoting national ownership:** UN radio stations are often praised for their professionalism and reach.[73] To preserve their impact after UN mission drawdowns, peacekeeping operations

---

64 Orme, "Broadcasting in Blue," pp. 39–42, 50–61.

65 European Union, "EU Election Observation Mission Sierra Leone 2023," p. 26.

66 In Sierra Leone, for instance, the departing UN Integrated Office in Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL) was too weak to prevent government control over top appointments at the SLBC. See: Orme, "Broadcasting in Blue," p. 59.

67 Interview with UN official, January 17, 2025.

68 UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Handbook"; See also: Emily Paddon Rhoads and Aditi Gorur, "United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protective Agency," in *Civilian Protective Agency in Violent Settings: A Comparative Perspective*, Jana Krause et al., eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

69 Oliver Kaplan, *Resisting War: How Communities Protect Themselves*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 54.

70 Amand, Atwell, and Gomes, "The Reach of Radio."

71 Birnback, "Under the Blue Flag."

72 An example of incoherent communication comes from the DRC in 2013, when the MONUSCO website reported on UN officials urging peace negotiations with the March 23 (M23) rebel group, while the UN force commander stated that civilians can be effectively protected only through proactive operations against this and other rebel groups. MONUSCO, "UN Envoys Urge Renewed Talks Between M23, DR Congo Government," September 6, 2013; *The EastAfrican*, "UN Force in DRC Appears Poised to Strike FDLR," October 11, 2014.

73 Orme, "Broadcasting in Blue."

should attract international partners to ensure the political independence and financial viability of successor stations. However, heavy-handed international involvement in media may be perceived as foreign interference, hindering national ownership and buy-in. To mitigate this, UN peacekeeping operations should invest in a diverse domestic media landscape from the outset, offering financial, logistical, and technical support to multiple outlets according to locally determined needs. Notably, between 1991 and 2019, only four out of forty-eight UN peacekeeping operations included media assistance in their mandates, highlighting room for greater investment.[74]

4. **Expanding data access vs. maintaining security and host-state consent:** Any analysis is only as good as the information it relies on. Stronger mechanisms for data sharing with researchers and analysts would enhance evidence-based policymaking for UN peacekeeping operations. However, concerns about host-state consent and security may limit data sharing in the context of ongoing missions. One potential way to manage this trade-off could be to develop and institutionalize a mechanism (e.g., an online application process) to facilitate researchers' access to historical data from closed missions. As demonstrated by our analysis of former UN radio stations in Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, access to past data can generate insights to inform future protection of civilians strategies without jeopardizing consent or security.

---

74 Jessica Di Salvatore et al., "Introducing the Peacekeeping Mandates (PEMA) Dataset," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 66 no. 4–5 (2022).

The **INTERNATIONAL PEACE INSTITUTE** (IPI) is an independent, non-profit organization working to strengthen inclusive multilateralism for a more peaceful and sustainable planet. Through its research, convening, and strategic advising, IPI provides innovative recommendations for the United Nations System, member states, regional organizations, civil society, and the private sector. With staff from around the world and a broad range of academic fields, IPI has offices facing United Nations headquarters in New York.

IPI

INTERNATIONAL
PEACE
INSTITUTE