Public Opinion Research in a Conflict Zone:
Grassroots Diplomacy in Darfur*

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This paper introduces a set of methods that have been used to capture attitudes and opinions in a conflict environment. Based on an ongoing project in Darfur, it details the two main streams of research: one developed to carry out interviews on the ground to allow people to frame key issues using their own language and world views; and the other, to keep contact with the formation of opinions from a distance, particularly when the security situation or other obstacles prevent the researchers from being in the field. The result of the combination of the two streams is the production of rich narratives about the actors involved in or affected by the conflict, their interests and the paths they value as the most effective to overcome the crisis and move toward reconciliation. The objective of this, and similar research, is the development of a grassroots diplomacy, a way to include a wider variety of voices in the negotiation process and in the building of a consensual idea of a post-conflict society.

This paper outlines a research framework to assess attitudes toward peace and conflict and support a form of "grassroots diplomacy," a way to include a wider variety of voices in negotiation processes and in the building of consensual ideas of a post-conflict society. Based on research in Darfur conducted in 2007-2008, a combination of methods is detailed and it is argued why they can be effective tools for addressing this challenge. The intent is to detail a framework enough to enable others interested in research in conflict areas to implement it in different scenarios.

The idea of grassroots diplomacy emerges less from an idealistic approach than from the realization that modern wars and related peace processes are increasingly affected by problems that need

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creative solutions outside the habitual channels of diplomacy. In practical terms, in the crisis in Darfur, grassroots diplomacy could contribute to addressing at least two major challenges.

The first is the proliferation of armed groups that claim to represent different constituencies and are invited to sit at the negotiation table, but whose real base is rarely assessed. Before the signing of the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) in May 2006, two Darfurian rebel groups were fighting the central government in Khartoum: the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudan Liberation Army/Movement (SLA/M). Even though open conflict with the Sudanese army did not erupt until 2003, these groups have been active in the region since the 1980s. After the DPA, which was signed only by the SLA/M faction headed by Minni Minnawi, JEM and SLA/M each split into myriad factions, and still others have been created outside of their umbrella. It has thus become increasingly difficult to assess how many groups are now operating in the region, even if efforts have been made to engage and unify them.[1]

In such a scenario, research capable of assessing the attitudes and opinions of the population on the ground—in refugee camps as well as in the main towns or in the villages—represents a fundamental check on those groups which claim to speak on behalf of large constituencies, but often manipulate their depth of local support to further their own economic and political interests. Directly, by investigating which groups of people feel most represented, or indirectly, by confronting the agenda emerging from interviews and surveys with those advanced by rebels and local politicians, public opinion research can temper the risks of negotiating with the wrong people and on the wrong issues.

A second, and related, problem is connected to the need to engage not just armed groups, but also a civil society that claims to represent significant portions of the population. Even here the problem of real versus claimed representation arises. When a conflict enters the international agenda, and increasing

[1] The UN/AU organized a meeting in Arusha in August 2007 to explore the potential for the groups to unite (see for example http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSHUL28262220070803?sp=true). Other groups later met in Eritrea and decided to create a united front (see for example, http://uk.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUKL1471644920070714?sp=true). Parallel tracks have also been opened by the AU and UN to facilitate a united voice in the talks that started in Libya in October 2007 (see for example, http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/10/24/news/UN-GEN-UN-Darfur.php).

commitments are made by international and humanitarian organizations, the risk of manufacturing instead of representing civil society also escalates. Organizations blossom with the injection of foreign aid and claim to speak for particular groups of victims, but the connection is often muddled. Although these groups speak   the language of international human rights, rarely are they politically neutral. In some cases, they merely operate as enterprises to support the agenda, both political and financial, of a leader or select group of people. It is typically non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that rise up and claim to give voice to the voiceless, but, as David Keen from the London School of Economics argues, just whose voices they are representing and how is debatable.

> While NGOs often claim to be speaking for the victims of disasters, the voice of these victims may come through very weakly if at all from programmes and publicity that are geared toward the delivery of relief commodities and the appearance of success. Indeed one of the advantages enjoyed by NGOs that claim to speak on behalf of 'those who have no voice' is that these latter are in no position to challenge this claim (Keen, 1998, p. 320)

Keen continues by noting that "Moving into a diplomatic vacuum created by Western disengagement, some NGOs claim a role in mediating the end of conflicts, but are frequently poorly placed to perform this role" (Keen, 1998, p. 320).

The use of rigorous public opinion research can be of great help in facing these — and other— challenges. By relying on a set of methods that overcome the obstacles of a conflict situation it becomes possible to reach the very people whose voices are said to be represented by different actors, to check which groups they really feel part of, and to determine what their real demands are.

This type of research, if broadly embraced (ideally, by the government as well), can play an important role in encouraging dialogue. In many conflicts, there are competing versions of history and ideas of the nation. Public opinion research which goes beyond simply assessing what people think in a particular point in time, but captures the historical base of opinions and values may represent an important step in highlighting the different ways of reconstructing the past and forming identities, thus offering new ground to promote reconciliation.

Less ambitiously, if public opinion research of the type we propose is taken into account at least by the negotiators, it could help to avoid the problems that arose in numerous peacemaking exercises, where deals were brokered quickly on the timetables of international actors, leaving significant local groups marginalized and soon leading to even deadlier conflict.[2]

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[2] One example is Rwanda, where a peace agreement was signed in Arusha on Aug. 4, 1993 between the government and the Rwandan Patriotic Front. The agreement did little in addressing the root causes of the conflict, which erupted again and more dramatically less than a year later, causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. The Darfur Peace Agreement, signed in Abuja on May 5, 2006, had a similar, even if less deadlier, effect, causing splits within the rebel groups and even more violence in the areas already afflicted by the conflict.

With grassroots diplomacy, we do not propose implementing a reformed version of Track II (or backdoor) diplomacy, which primarily involves elite participation in the informal exploration of paths for peace, nor Track III diplomacy, an initiative that operates and mediates in the field within a divided society, trying to reconcile it. Neither do we intend to provide support for a faction, organization, or group that merely seeks to obtain a form of "victory" or to claim success in the quest for peace[3]. Rather, the research of local opinions we propose seeks to support the role that organizations such as the United Nations or the African Union are facing in complex emergencies similar to that in Darfur. Our research methods and findings seek to equip these multi-lateral organizations with information that is shared and valued among the population affected by a conflict and that is better grounded than the anecdotic knowledge that most peace brokers or aid workers obtain after a short period of work on the ground. This research has the potential to represent a fundamental resource in effectively working toward peace and in collectively reconstructing a society in the midst and aftermath of violent conflict.

Moving Toward a Research Framework

To conduct research that could capture the voices of those affected by conflict in Africa and represent them at the negotiating table, we had to develop an innovative set of combined methodologies[4]. Before we elaborate on this framework, it is important to briefly contextualize this research and explain what kinds of public opinion research can be applied to conflict areas.

There is a tradition of wartime methods employed to assess and influence the enemy's public opinion. During the two World Wars, for example, both America and Germany, through their academic and diplomatic corps, were consistently trying to gauge public opinion through sources such as the press, personal contacts, and public demonstrations. More recently, the coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq have also encouraged and sponsored public opinion research to understand what Afghanis or Iraqis think about political developments. In Iraq, for example, the Coalition Provisional Authority has commissioned surveys by Gallup and other organizations on political preferences and on the Iraqis' perception of their

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[3] For this reason, we want to separate our research from similar endeavors attempted in the past, such as Project Camelot, developed by the U.S. Army in 1964 to obtain a cultural understanding of societies, especially in Latin America, as a way to support potentially friendly government and adverse revolutionary movements, or the more recent Human Terrain Team Program, which employs anthropologists in Afghanistan to understand the culture of counter-insurgents in an effort to combat them more effectively.

[4] The innovative contribution we want to offer depends not on our methods, per se, but on their combination and on the scope of their use, getting as close as possible to the ways opinions are naturally framed in a conflict situation. There can be different ideas about what innovative means. For example, an innovative way of combining methods in public opinion is represented by James Fishkin's deliberative polling. As Norman Bradburn, senior vice president for research at the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago said, "Deliberative Polling combines two familiar techniques—sample surveys and focus groups—into a powerful new technique for gauging informed public opinion. I think it is the most innovative approach to studying public opinion since the development of scientific polling in the 1930s" (Fishkin, 2002).

government and of the U.S. forces.[5] Similarly, public opinion research has been used in Afghanistan to identify support among the population for what the Altai Consulting Group calls "illegal state opposing armed groups"[6]. Extensive survey research has also been conducted for the U.S. and donor groups to identify what Afghanis perceive to be development priorities and on other pressing issues for the international community such as the narcotics trade. These research efforts are certainly interesting and based on a solid methodological basis, but, typically, they are not used for the benefit of the population being surveyed, but for the purpose of winning wars, or the hearts and minds of groups that are resisting changes from the outside. The only commonality between the framework they employ and the one we propose is the necessity of overcoming obstacles to conducting research in a conflict environment.

Similarly, there are cases of public opinion research being used in peace negotiation. Important examples, both successful and unsuccessful, can be found in Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine. In Northern Ireland, there have been multiple studies of public opinion on the conflict and the peace process. The questions that comprised the surveys were drafted and agreed upon by the party negotiators as a strategy to increase the inclusivity of the peace process, to encourage transparency during negotiations, and to test and develop issues of language and policies (Irwin, 2001). While these polls helped to explore problems and their solutions, and define critical issues, researchers conducting the polling argued that they were most important in "facilitating a discourse in which the society as a whole could play a part in the decision making process" (Irwin, 2001, p. 64). The public opinion polls were also used in an effort to "eliminate extreme opinions, map out common ground and areas of compromise and test comprehensive agreements as packages" (Irwin, 2001, p. 67). In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, public opinion research was also used and could have been an influential factor in the negotiations by better informing negotiators of options and solutions that they had perhaps, initially, not adequately considered, but it was marginalized by the interests of those who did not support the use of alternative methods to broker peace[7]. At a minimum, it still proved useful in providing scholars with important data, suggesting why previous peace processes had failed and allowing them to develop alternative analyses and proposals (Shikaki, 2006).

These experiences represent important resources for building effective techniques to assess public opinion. They suggest tools for data collection in a conflict situation and indicate how research might inform a negotiation process. But they do not succeed in capturing the cultural, social, and political differences that characterize different countries in Africa. Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine, or Europe during the Second World War all have significantly different infrastructural realities than much of sub-Saharan Africa. Nevertheless, we do draw on the experiences of the Afrobarometer team[8], which has been regularly polling citizens on issues of democracy, freedom of expression, and livelihood. They do

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[5] See, for example, http://www.comw.org/pda/0501br17append.html or
     http://www.iraqanalysis.org/info/55

[6] http://www.altaiconsulting.com/aid-development.htm

[7] The Israeli-Palestinian case represents an example of how research can help a negotiation process, but can do little in the absence of the political will to use it appropriately.

[8] http://www.afrobarometer.org/

not, however, conduct research in conflict situations; instead, they limit themselves to states that are largely at peace and favor research in more stable, relatively democratic countries. Given the intricacies of assessing public opinion in Africa, such as the lack of sampling frames or reliable censuses, their work has been an important precursor to ours

At the same time, however, while the Afrobarometer's broad, continent-wide methodology allows useful cross-country comparisons, it disregards the divergent meanings that may be attributed to the same words in different corners of the continent. Democracy, for example, a concept on which they regularly poll, can have different connotations across countries. To people in Uganda who have been part of the Movement System, a single-party democratic model, democracy means something quite different than it does for Ghanaians who have had a longer history of multi-partyism. What might seem to some researchers to be universally defined concepts are often differently interpreted in various cultural environments. Jok Madut Jok, for example, cites a case where researchers inappropriately ask a Dinka person to divulge the number of cattle he owns, without realising it is considered bad luck to tell someone this information, and that the exact number is seldom known by the owners. Similarly, confusing an ox with a bull can completely distort the responses, particularly if you ask a herdsman whether he sells bulls for grain in bad years. In Dinka culture only oxen are traded for grain (Jok, 1996).

To overcome such problems and capture the local meanings that are attributed to words such as peace, rights, or reconciliation, we decided to rely on a set of methods that may differ from those usually employed to assess public opinion, but are powerful tools in letting people frame these very ideas in their own terms and allowing shared experiences to assemble local versions of these words. This was obtained in two ways. On the one hand, for the methods that require direct questioning of people on the ground, we employed tools such as oral histories that let attitudes and values emerge in a very indirect way. We later moved to more focused techniques that built upon the initial data and lessons from the initial research. On the other hand, we used a set of unobtrusive methods to analyze alternative sources. Throughout the research, the results obtained by each of these methods were compared and triangulated as a way to improve the quality of data and the accuracy of findings, forcing researchers to reflect on inconsistencies and to ponder interpretations (Flick, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994).[9]

Letting People Write Their Own Questionnaire: From oral histories to survey research

Getting the research questions right is a fundamental first step in the overall research endeavor. Our project, for example, was initially interested in understanding what Darfurians think about the peace process and the recently signed Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA), but we soon realized that this was not viable. It became clear that asking Darfurians directly about the DPA would be deeply polarizing and contentious. Thus, it was crucial to get at the issues in a less direct way. Rather than asking Darfurians
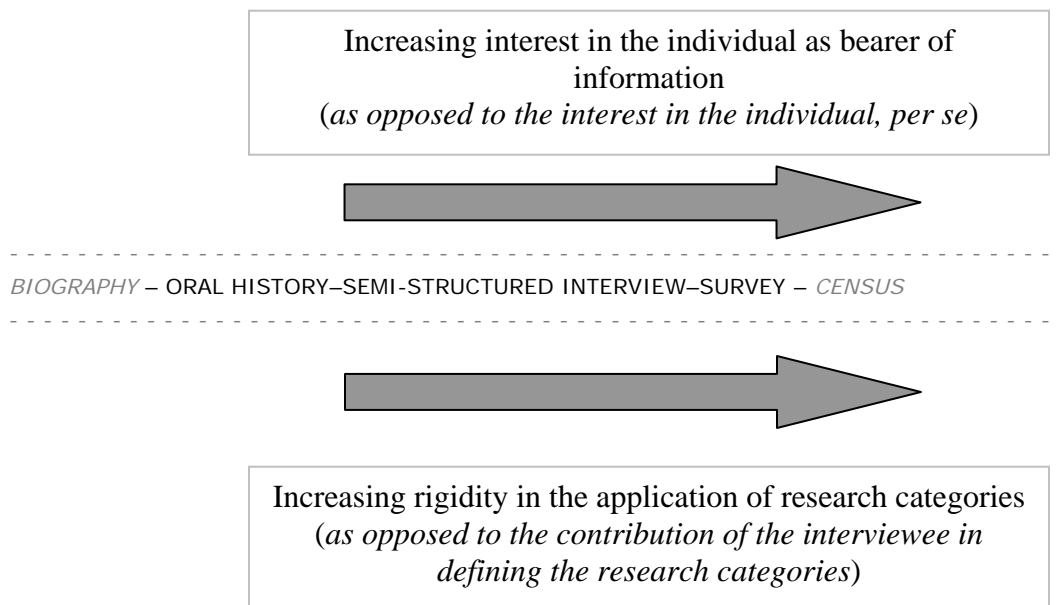
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[9] It is important to take into account that, even if different typologies of sources and methods may usefully converge to examine the same event, each of them brings with it a unique view, not equivalent to the others (Blaikie, 1991). This is a weakness to be aware of, but also an opportunity to produce different layers of analysis, which may complement each other (Robson, 1993).

what they thought about the substance, credibility, or possible improvements of the DPA and relevant actors, we defined a set of more tempered research questions.

The central question we chose to examine was How do people in Darfur understand and perceive the present violence? Four sub-questions that address different periods in time were also identified: How do Darfurians understand the historical roots of the conflict? How do different Darfurian groups and constituencies understand the current peace initiatives? How do they think the violence can be stopped? And How do Darfurians think their society can be reconciled? These questions are intentionally broad to allow sufficient room and flexibility for the interviewees to define the issues of most pressing importance and, in some respects, to narrow the research questions themselves.

To answer these questions, we first designed a core research strategy, which, as outlined in Figure 1, moves along a continuum of methods that reinforce each other in the pursuit of accurate representations of attitudes, values, and opinions, and at the same time, provide unique results based on their own specific mode of interrogation.

| Increasing interest in the individual as bearer of information (*as opposed to the interest in the individual, per se*) |

BIOGRAPHY – ORAL HISTORY–SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW–SURVEY – CENSUS

| Increasing rigidity in the application of research categories (*as opposed to the contribution of the interviewee in defining the research categories*) |

Figure 1: *Continuum of research methods and their characteristics.*

Among the five techniques highlighted in Figure 1, the two at the extremes (biography and census[10]) are not included in our research framework, but represent signposts to indicate more clearly the nature of each end of the continuum along which the other methods are located.

At the left end, are methods that focus on individuals and their life-worlds. A biography centres on the experience of one individual and its success is determined by the richness of perspective and nuance the data provides. Similarly, an oral history points at reconstructing an event or a period from different perspectives, not limiting itself to the official version of a fact, but illustrating the past as remembered by the people who have witnessed or have taken part in its making. In these cases, the researcher facilitates the reconstruction of a life-story (biography) or a particular point in time (oral history), but apart from that his role is largely to allow a story to develop and ensure that the key events are addressed[11]. It is up to the interviewees themselves to define what is relevant and what is not, and to varying degrees, set the "rules of the game" to define the categories through which the research will develop.

In contrast, at the right end, are methods that put the researcher in control of what is relevant and what is not. Surveys, for example, usually focus on a limited set of predefined dimensions and must be administered to a minimum number of individuals (usually 1,200 for a national survey) to claim representativeness. The scope of a census is reaching every inhabitant of a region or a country. Interviewees are given little (survey) or no (census) chance to divert from the categories that are already set in a questionnaire or on a form to fill in. They can decide not to respond or not to choose among a predefined list of possibilities, but they cannot create their own categories to feel better represented and understood. Here, it is not so much the individual who matters, but the information that is "attached" to him.[12]

By moving from left to right (and vice versa), from one method to the next, the importance of certain factors increases or decreases and numbers acquire different importance. While methods on the left end are interested in maximizing the number of representations held by a single individual, those on the right are interested in maximizing the number of individuals who held a predefined set of

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[10] Strictly speaking, a census is not a technique, but a research enterprise that uses face-to-face interviews structured through a close-ended questionnaire as its main technique.

[11] These techniques, however, require a great degree of competence on the researcher's part about the interviewee and his social context. This is fundamental in pointing to the most relevant episodes of someone's life and in building a rapport.

[12] Along the continuum, on the bibliographical end, it is the object of study who sets the categories, but there is still influence exercised by the researcher who organizes them according to a specific paradigm or who selects certain things over others. On the census end of the spectrum, there is no flexibility offered to the participant, and all the categories are already set; there is no opinion involved. Still, there are limits to deciding, for example, to which ethnic group someone belongs, a decision that in many societies like Darfur, where intermarriage is common, depends on self-perception more than on evidence (Flint & De Waal, 2006).

representations or characteristics. The two measurements are inversely correlated; within a certain margin, when one increases the other decreases.

These methods also manifest themselves in particular ways in Africa. For example, on the left end of the spectrum, the narrative mode, which is characteristic of biographies and oral histories, builds on a competence that is common and highly valued in societies where orality plays an important role in the production and dissemination of information. Sitting with a person and asking her to recollect a particular event is common and can return rich accounts of the actors involved in it, its causes and its consequences. On the contrary, on the right end, a census or survey are less familiar exercises and are typically perceived as less natural and more political. Censuses have often been used to determine the redistribution of wealth within a nation and are thus frequently perceived as a direct intrusion of a government in the life of its citizens. For example, the census that was carried out in Sudan in April, as a step toward the subsequent elections, produced a number of incidents and deaths, especially in the most tense regions such as Darfur and Southern Sudan. In many refugee camps in Darfur, the IDPs refused to respond to the questions they were asked. In southern Darfur some census counters were fired on and assaulted, and people were killed by unidentified militia in response to their refusal to participate in the census[13]. Similarly, a survey can produce suspicion, especially when its goals, language, and procedures are not clear to the surveyed population. It may thus be particularly relevant for a survey to ask questions, using language that is not perceived as highly politicized.

Building on the differences and relative strengths of these methods, our framework operates by moving from the techniques that allow the interviewees the greatest freedom to express themselves, using their own language and worldviews (left of the spectrum), to the ones that allow researchers to ask more focused questions and to respond to specific aspects of a public opinion research (right of the spectrum). Conducting a survey after rounds of oral histories and semi-structured interviews, as described below in Figure 2, allows the researcher to build on the language and issues that directly emerge from the interviewed population and to avoid, at least partially, the imposition of external language and interests on the population affected by the conflict. This process is aimed at translating "exmanent" questions into "immanent" ones (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000), that is, reshaping questions based on the worldviews and interests of the researcher into ones that reflect the respondents' worldviews. The researcher should build a questionnaire, not by using, for example, the measures of optimism and pessimism developed in the Western traditions of opinion polling, but by building on the local views about past and future.

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[13] See for example http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSMCD136867, http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article26583, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7360066.stm, http://articles.latimes.com/2008/04/07/news/fg-census7

Figure 2: *Core set of methods for on the ground research.*

This process may seem laborious for those who are looking for quick responses to problems that require urgent solutions, but it has proved critical in a conflict environment like Darfur for at least two reasons:

First, by using frames that are familiar to the interviewee, it was easier to negotiate access and to mark a difference within a space occupied by a myriad of organizations, each with their own goals and policies. It differentiated our research and signalled that we did not have an agenda, but we were interested in the person and his or her narration.[14] This helped in building rapport with the population and became a resource that could be used during subsequent phases of the research. Second, in a conflict situation, the velocity with which old traditions change or disappear, and new ones come to replace them is much higher than in times of peace. By starting with methods that reconstruct the history of specific localities, it is possible to look into this process and understand which institutions played what roles and when, and to explore what their potential use in conflict resolution is.

Oral Histories as the Starting Point

As the name suggests, oral history combines historiography, through the collection of facts considered relevant for the purpose of the analysis, with the perceptions of those facts as experienced by the ones who witnessed them or participated in their making. Oral history sits between the methods used by historians and the interviewing techniques employed by sociologists. Like historiography, oral history is interested in facts, yet similar to qualitative interviewing, it also aims at creating "a fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values, and motivations in relation to the behaviours of people in a particular social context" (Gaskell, 2000, p. 39). Oral histories thus represent a valuable resource for reconstructing the puzzle of a violent conflict, a history that cannot be easily developed through the few secondary resources or written material available. Even more critical than the historical rigour that an oral history can guarantee is its capacity to let subjectivity speak.

> The first thing that makes oral history different is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning. [. . .] Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did [. . .] Oral sources are credible, but with a different credibility. The importance of oral

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[14] And, obviously, using local researchers who could speak the vernacular language.

testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge (Portelli, 1991, pp. 50-51).

Oral history has been chosen as a starting point in the research framework for several reasons. First, in the second half of the 20th century, oral history emerged as an emancipatory technique to give voice to the marginalized. It has been widely employed to narrate stories of simple soldiers (Arthur, 2005) instead of generals, and those of the working class (Portelli, 1991) instead of key politicians. Oral histories have illustrated the sufferings of displacement, recollected the memories of migrants (Arthur, 2006; Coan, 1999), and have reported the experiences of women during wars (Summerfield, 1998). In the case of our research in Darfur, this tradition proved extremely helpful in approaching the large segments of the population that have been excluded from the peace process to investigate their perception of marginalization. For example, in the words of two interviewees from internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in West and North Darfur:

The history of people should be showed in the right way. If we look to history, the history of Ali Dinar[15]: they brought the all history of Ali Dinar in five lines in the classes of grade 8. This is a disgrace for the whole people's history and these are all things that offend people.

There is development in Khartoum. I visited Khartoum and we had a warm reception. I saw there more than 32 mosques. Omer al-Bashir is responsible for us in the Day of Resurrection. Those who build mosques in Gezira region, why don't they come to Darfur and Kordofan and build mosques? This agitates the feeling of oppression in our people and causes disaster.

Second, oral histories can be adept in exploring crises and transitions. While the method has been used to look at varied subjects, from the routines of British cabinet ministries and civil servants (Seldon & Pappworth, 1983) to the history of punk (McNeil & McCain, 1997), they have also been widely used to investigate periods of war and change. Among the most popular examples are the collection of memories from wars (Arthur, 1987, 2005; Portelli, 1997; Steinhoff, Pechel, & Showalter, 1994; Summerfield, 1998), the struggles of trade unionists in the post World War II period (Portelli, 1991), and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Rubalcava, 2001).[16]

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[15] Ali Dinar was the last sultan of Darfur. He resisted the colonial assaults in Darfur, but was eventually killed by the British in 1916.

[16] There are several ways to analyze and interpret oral histories, which provide an important launching point for the other research methods. Below, we illustrate the one proposed by Alessandro Portelli (1991). On a paradigmatic axis, different events happen at the same time; they are inseparable, but logically distinct and different interpretations for the same events are equally available, but these have to be selected accordingly to make the story telling possible. Borrowing a literary category from the Russian formalists, in every story we can identify:

- a *fabula*, that is, the chronological, causal sequence of a story. (This is what most historians are interested in.);

Third, similar to the narrative interview (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000), the collection of oral histories involves little pre-structuring and strives to be unobtrusive.[17] This is particularly relevant when the interviewer and the interviewee do not share the same cultural background; it can be easy, through a tight questionnaire, to impose a specific and partial perspective on the informant, thus misinterpreting reality.

Oral histories have been instrumental in our research to gain an understanding of how the current crisis is perceived in Darfur. For example, references to how the 1984 famine affected the region have provided insight into how people perceive external interventions. Excerpts from two interviews are noted below:

> I was young at the time, but I heard that [there was a] president called Reagan, and
> they were the ones who sent the aid. Everyone in Darfur used to say Reagan. When

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- a *plot*, the way in which the story materials are arranged by narrators in order to tell their story (this is what we are interested in). Deciding what is to be told and what is not, and what should be told first, are operations related to the meaning that a plot gives to a narrative.

So, recalling the definition of Portelli, what is important is to take a story as truth, both in its adherence to and its departure from facts. Or as a German narrative tradition would argue "the reality of a narrative refers to what is real to the story teller."

It is in the interplay between fabula and plot that we discover the meaning of a story and, thus, the worldview in which our informants live. It is a highly interpretative work, but some instruments can be of help. Portelli, for example, identifies three different strata around which narratives are arranged:

- institutional: the sphere of politics, the national and international historical context;
- collective: the life of the community and the neighbourhood;
- personal: private and family life.

The placing of one event in one level is not intrinsic to the event itself, but to the narrator's perspective. A war can be narrated as the consequence of capitalism, as the catastrophe which caused the destruction of the hometown, or as a personal experience, e.g., the tragedy of the loss of relatives and friends.

In research he did on steel workers in the Italian city of Terni, Portelli noticed how the death of one of those workers, Luigi Trastulli, that occurred during a peaceful demonstration against the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949, was shifted by many narrators to the violent protests against massive loss of jobs and for workers' rights in 1953. The explanation he gives is complex, but can be summarized by the idea that for most narrators, interviewed in the '60s, the North Atlantic Treaty represented something abstract and far, while the loss of jobs had a huge impact on the lives of many of them. This event, important in itself, the death of a friend, couldn't belong to an unimportant dimension, but had to be motivated by something more crucial. Thus, interpreting this shift in time is helpful to understanding Italian culture in the '50s, the values of certain groups and people, and their attitudes.

Even if these stories don't tell exactly the truth — the one that historians seek — they are important to understanding the life of a community. From individual trajectories built by single narrators, collective trajectories can be assembled and interpreted.

[17] The narrative interview has emerged partially to contest the question-answer schema (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000)

you mention the corn beans we don't call it corn [we] call it Reagan, so the credit goes to the American President Reagan. He is the one who rescued us in Darfur at that time

We never receive assistance except the aid which was called Reagan as it was funded by President Reagan. In fact we appreciate what President Reagan did for us, because it alleviated the historical disaster which happened to us due to which some people died

Through oral histories, we understood how the perception of Americans and Europeans as those who can solve problems is rooted in what they did in the past. These findings can be used to explain recent political maneuvers, such as the resistance of the Sudanese government to inclusion of European troops as part of the hybrid AU/UN military force. An interviewer from West Darfur, in fact, noted: "I think that if the hybrid forces were mixed with European forces or if they were under European command, they might solve something, because the European forces cannot be fooled. Yes, nobody can deceive or trick the Europeans."

Since the Europeans are not allowed to take part in the hybrid force, the above statement will be difficult to prove, but, at the same time, other oral histories have showed that the capital accumulated by the West in the past is being slowly eroded, and a certain resistance has emerged as a result of an increased presence of foreign organizations in Darfur that are not always there just to help. A sheikh from West Darfur argued, for example:

There are some good organizations that want to help, and others that have special purposes. Unfortunately these organizations brought some of bad habits we are not use to think. For example many different things: the disrespectful appearance. [. . .]children go directly to these organizations and these organizations and give them gifts and candies. But the real man of Darfur has lost trust in these organizations because they are not concerned with the life of the people of Darfur and start to trade in the name of Darfur. So if he can give you the food and the clothes then he can take your son. And this is not the good life we are looking for and no one will accept this. So people start to stay way from dealing with these organizations.

As these accounts partially show, oral histories, while time consuming, provide the richest insights and are a crucial method in ensuring that subsequent methods are appropriate and culturally sensitive.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews complement oral histories and serve as a tool to access ideas and representations held by individuals such as local politicians, journalists, NGO workers and academics who have important opinions about a conflict and its potential resolutions, but who may already have access to multiple channels to have their voices heard.

When paired with oral histories, semi-structured interviews serve to provide a context to the main stories. They offer a reality check for the oral histories, situating them in time and space, adding further details, and uncovering contradictions. Some themes can be taken from the oral histories and addressed during semi-structured interviews. In this case, it may be less important to be unobtrusive; more direct questions can be asked and a tighter topic guide can be developed. The focus can be more specific, building on dimensions that emerge from the first set of oral histories. Semi-structured interviews can also lead to a typification of different representations and interests at stake.[18]

For both oral histories and semi-structured interviews, the sampling strategy follows a purposeful sampling methodology. Since qualitative methods do not intend to include a large number of individuals to generalize results to a population, but rather are aimed at maximizing the number of different representations available of the same phenomenon, the informants are selected and not randomly sampled. Factors to consider include social strata, functions, and categories, (they are known and intuitive, e.g., sex, age, ethic group, etc.) as well as representations of a particular phenomenon (they are unknown and potentially infinite, e.g., opinions, attitudes, and feelings).

The number of interviews necessary to obtain the information required varies according to the research purpose, but to identify when to stop collecting new data, a useful criterion can be to look at the law of diminishing returns. When adding further strata, a progressively smaller difference is registered in representations to the whole; the corpus of data is then referred to as saturated.

Survey

As identified along the continuum of methods in Figure 1, the third research method is survey research. Most public opinion research is conducted through surveys, which makes this method the most prevalent, though as we have argued here not the only, means to assess attitudes and beliefs. Survey research usually relies on a wide set of elaborated techniques to explore the social world, predict behaviours, and analyze trends. Because of its randomness, scope and quantifiable aspects, it provides a strong foundation of legitimacy and a comprehensiveness that can be important for supporting claims of representation. However, while this research instrument has been widely employed for varied purposes, it

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[18] The interviews can be analyzed with a method similar to the five-stage analytic process proposed by Grant McCracken (McCracken, 1988). In the first stage, each interview is analyzed separately from the others, and the observations that emerge are derived mainly from its internal characteristics. In a second stage, these observations are further developed, confronted with the literature and with the oral histories, and tested against the evidence in the transcript. The third level shifts the attention from the transcripts to the observations themselves, looking for potential connections among them. In a fourth stage, a set of main themes is developed as a result of the former steps. The fifth and final stage brings together the main findings of the research through the development of a set of theses. The primary difference between the method employed here and the one adopted by McCracken is that in steps two and three the oral histories are also used to test the emerging observations, not just the literature and what he terms "cultural categories" (McCracken, 1988, p. 32).

is crucial that it be based on preliminary research to allow researchers to ask the right questions and to do so with language that can be easily understood by both the interviewer and the sampled population.

As explained above, moving from oral histories and semi-structured interviews to surveys works in this direction and allows for the transformation of "exmanent" questions into more "immanent" ones, and to build questionnaires that are based on local knowledge and adapted to the complexities of a conflict situation.

However, if a questionnaire can, or as we argue in this paper—must—emerge directly from the previous phases of the research, the sampling strategy for the survey has to be different from the one used for the oral histories and semi-structured interviews. The strategy we recommend closely follows the one developed by the Afrobarometer team, which skillfully addresses the problem of the lack of sampling frames (e.g., phonebooks, electoral lists, etc.) in most African countries, but allows for the random selection of people. Thus, the methodology we suggest is a clustered, stratified, multi-stage, area-probability sample. It is not based on the random sampling of individuals, but of geographic locations. In a series of stages, geographically-defined sampling units of decreasing size are selected. To ensure the sample is representative, it is stratified by key social characteristics in the population such as sub-national area (e.g., region or province) and residential locality (urban or rural). The area stratification reduces the likelihood that distinctive ethnic or language groups are left out of the sample. In addition, wherever possible, random sampling is conducted with probability proportionate to population size (PPS). The purpose is to guarantee that more populated geographical units have a proportionally greater probability of being included in the sample.

The sampling design has four stages: the first stage stratifies and randomly selects primary sampling units (e.g., the census enumeration areas); in the second stage, sampling starting points from which the interviewers will start working are selected; households are randomly chosen in the third stage; and, in the final stage, there is a random selection of individual respondents. We believe that this technique, which is similar to the methodology that Afrobarometer employed in regions of peace, represents an effective approach to public opinion polling in conflict areas or in refugee camps, because it is highly adaptable to informal settlements and areas that are highly in flux. Despite the volatile environment, maps, which are essential to the work of NGOs and international organizations, are often available and are important in contributing to the random sampling.

Unfortunately, the survey is the most politically complex and expensive part of our methodology. It often takes much longer than anticipated and can easily be derailed by government or rebel interference in sensitive areas such as Darfur.

Far From the Ground: Unobtrusive methods to conduct public opinion research in conflict environments

The second stream of our research relies on methods that target a different population, less marginal than the one covered by the core research stream. This research has, however, proved very

important for providing a context to the main findings, triangulating the results, and keeping contact with the formation of opinions on the ground when the security situation did not permit interviews.

The earliest examples of similar alternative methodologies for gauging public opinion date back to World War I when Harold Lasswell perfected content analysis as a way to map the symbolic environment that surrounds and influences people's lives, and used it to study the enemy's propaganda (Lasswell, 1927). He later employed the same technique to infer from German newspapers the status of the Nazi apparatus during World War II (Howland, Becker & Prelli, 2006). As Naisbitt (1982, p. 3) reported, "the strain on Germany's people, industry, and economy began to show up in its newspapers . . . . . Over time, it was possible to piece together what was going on in Germany and to figure out whether conditions were improving or deteriorating by carefully tracking local stories about factory openings, closings, and production targets, about train arrivals, departures, and delays and so on."

A similar attempt to understand others' opinions, values, and attitudes in inaccessible areas was made by Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead during World War II. Their project, grounded in anthropology and social psychology, had the ambitious scope of studying "cultures at a distance," and of understanding societies in Europe and Asia that were unreachable because of the war. This research enterprise, while controversial, devised key methods for understanding remote societies through local cultural products such as literature, films, and public imagery.[19]

Today, in the era of global networks and media, it has become much easier to access foreign newspapers and public imagery, and to assess the process of the formation of attitudes and opinions from a distance. Our research methodology benefits from this expansion of media spaces to study public opinions, but also builds on the experiences described above. We focus on two particular techniques: the content analysis of the local press and the ethnographic exploration of online forums.

These methods have the advantage of being unobtrusive; they make use of materials that are being produced independently from the research enterprise, thus minimizing the risk of politicized responses,[20] and they have a tracking system embedded, making it possible to follow changes of opinion and to assess the relevance and influence of certain events on attitudes toward peace and conflict.[21]

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[19] This research led to the creation of the Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures which was founded by Mead. Probably the most famous example of this effort is Ruth Benedict's *The chrysanthemum and the sword: patterns of Japanese culture* (1946).

[20] This does not mean that expressing opinions on an online forum is not political, or writing a piece for a newspaper does not aim at influencing decisions (usually it is the opposite), but these techniques reduce the probability of having the research manipulated by people who have a stake in the conflict.

[21] Even if multiple surveys can be administered over time, in a conflict area they represent a major effort; the continuous polling we are used to in Western countries has to be ruled out. Or, in the case of oral histories, it does not really make sense to interrogate the same person after a short period of time to see if her perception of the past has changed since our last visit. At the same time, however, these alternative methods also have important limitations. For example, even if some scholars argue that the press reflects the society of which it is a part (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Siebert, Peterson & Schramm,

Ethnographic Research of Online Voices

Ethnographic online research has been widely used to investigate the new forms of interaction emerging from the diffusion of the Internet.[22] Based on a constant observation of this virtual space, it has been employed to analyze the most varied phenomena, including exchanges between migrants and their families in the homeland (Bernal, 2006; Miller & Slater, 2000; Parham, 2004), resistance to Western ideas and discourses (Bickel, 2003; Mitra, 2001), and the inciting of hatred by extremist groups (Bunt, 2003).

Since our research framework is interested in the analysis of attitudes toward peace and conflict, among the virtual spaces available — Web sites, online newspapers, blogs, etc. — we chose to focus primarily on online forums. Unlike Web-based newspapers, which usually are the expression of a relatively organized group of professionals, and blogs, which are typically centred on the opinions of a single individual, online forums provide a more open space, where multiple voices can compete and where every member is given the opportunity to post and make his/her ideas known to the other forum participants.

In general, each thread of discussion is opened by a member posting a stand-alone message. Other participants can then extend the thread by sending their comments or deciding to open a new one on a similar or different topic. This structure allows a researcher to quantify the amount of interest in different issues by counting the number of threads on a particular topic and the number of overall comments received by the threads and the topic, making this method particularly conducive for studying public opinion.

The variety of forums and their differing features[23] make it difficult to design research techniques of universal application; it is necessary to adapt to the different scopes of the research and the virtual environments where it is taking place. Nevertheless, we propose a general two-step plan that can be relevant for a range of studies interested in tracking public opinions online.

1956), focusing only on individuals who speak to an audience on a daily basis will contribute little to research that aims to represent the voices of those who have no voice. Similarly, while online forums are a good space to observe the emergence of a multiplicity of opinions, it would be risky to base assumptions only on the messages of a largely anonymous group in an arena where it is difficult to identify participants who might have particular interests in the conflict.

[22] The ethnographic exploration of online spaces dates back to the very origin of the Internet as we know it. It was initially used by social psychologists (Mantovani, 1995; Spears & Lea; Sproull & Kiesler, 1992; Turkle, 1997) and linguists (Cherny, 1995; Danet & Herring, 2003) to investigate issues such as the representation of the self online or the new form of orality that the medium was encouraging. It was based on participant observation of discussion forums centred on particular issues or open to more generic debates. These first studies set the basis for methods that are still used today to analyze both the private and public use of the Internet.

[23] Some forums can be accessed only through invitations, while others are open to every new participant. Some forums keep the main threads on the home page and allow contributions mainly in the form of replies to those main threads.

The first step is mainly explorative. Its goal is to gain access to the online spaces that are relevant for a specific research. In the case of our project on Darfur, for example, the interest was identifying online forums hosting reactions to events connected to the conflict as expressed by Darfurians, in particular, and Sudanese, in general, inside and outside Sudan. This exercise resulted in the listing of 10 forums,[24] addressing various political issues, among which the conflict in Darfur emerged more or less prominently.

Once the appropriate sites are identified, techniques such as participant observation and/or thick description can be used to understand the dynamics at play in each forum, to form a general impression of categories that can be later used during the research, and to approach ethical issues such as anonymity, confidentiality, and data publication. In the case of our research, participant observation was key to developing an initial understanding of the composition of each forum, in terms of provenience of members, political affiliation, and relationships among the most active participants,[25] and to later guide the selection of a smaller number of forums for the subsequent phase of the research. The outcomes of this first step should be accurate descriptions of the forums and a preliminary comprehension of the ways in which the issues under scrutiny are addressed online.[26]

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[24] The Web sites hosting the online forums were http://www.sudaneseonline.com, www.sudaneseoffline.net, http://www.shamarat.net, http://www.sudanjem.com, http://www.sudan-forall.org, http://www.alnilin.com, http://www.sudanile.com, http://www.sudanforum.net, www.sudanyat.org, and www.kartowm.net

[25] In the case of the research on Darfur, we did not use thick description, a technique initially developed by Clifford Geertz (1973). However, it can prove extremely useful in an initial phase. The accurate description of habits, behaviours, and routines that characterize each forum is a way to develop a deeper understanding of the underlying features of each online space. Because of the particular scope of this paper, there is not enough space to detail all aspects of ethnographic online research, but for a more comprehensive illustration of these techniques, we suggest consulting Miller and Slater (2000).

[26] At the beginning of the research project to test the techniques, two points in time that we judged relevant to the peace process were analyzed. The first period was the month of November 2006, which was chosen because of the meeting held on the 15th and 16th in Addis Ababa; it was attended by representatives of the Government of Sudan, the AU, the UN, and a number of officials from other African countries and aimed at finding a way forward for the deployment of troops, which could improve the security situation in Darfur, as a consequence of the UN Security Council resolution 1706. The meeting was the first to involve the participation of the Government of Sudan after the signing of the DPA. The second timeframe was the month of August 2007, chosen for somewhat similar reasons. Between the third and the fifth the rebel movement gathered in Arusha, with the support of the UN and AU, to find a common voice in preparation of the following peace negotiations. In addition, a new UNSC resolution had just been passed on July 31, setting a new mandate for the AU/UN hybrid force.
The selection of these two periods in the negotiations of the process saw the participation of the two main actors involved in the conflict: the Government of Sudan and the rebel movements. At the same time, the same periods also captured the initiatives put forward by the UN to find a solution to the conflict by improving the security situation.

The second step focuses more closely on the tracking of specific opinions by using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods[27]. The methodology employed for research in Darfur, which can be extended to the analysis of other cases, consisted of the daily count of the number of threads about Darfur among the total threads for each forum. This served the purpose of understanding the importance of a particular event by the selected online population. In addition, for each thread, we counted the number of its comments as a measure of the popularity of the particular issue addressed in that thread.

For the analysis of the content of the threads, different approaches can be used. One way is to simply report the issues as framed by the online members in a narrative way, saying, for example, that "on August 9 the discussion on Sudanese offline was monopolized by a thread about the inappropriate behaviour of international organizations' workers in South Darfur . . ." Another way is to develop coding frames to categorize each thread by attaching labels such as "criticism toward the government," "racism,"

The findings were somehow surprising and partially disconfirmed the initial expectations. If the Addis meeting received good coverage in the international press (see, for example, The Washington Post "Sudan Indicates Approval of U.N. Forces to 'Assist' in Darfur" by Alfred de Montesquiou, Nov. 18, 2006; p. A22 or The International Herald Tribune "An About-face in Sudan on UN troops for Darfur" by Robert F. Worth and Helene Cooper, Nov. 18, 2006, p. 1), the meeting generated almost no discussion online.

- no posts appeared about the meeting on Sudan-forall.org or Sudanjem.com;
- on Sudaneseoffline.com, among the 25 threads on Darfur, only one was about the Addis meeting;
- on Sudaneseonline.com, the most popular forum, just 8 out of the 71 threads on Darfur were connected to Addis.

On Sudaneseonline.com, where some threads on Darfur can generate a lot of comments, reaching hits of 48 comments to a single thread and an average of 14 comments per thread, respectively, for the month of November, those on the Addis meeting generated very few responses among participants.

- on Sudaneseonline.com, 4 out of 8 threads generated no comments; only one produced 11 comments, while the other three produced 2, 2 and 4 comments;
- on Sudaneseoffline.com, the only post produced no comments at all.

Eight months later, the articulation of opinions expressed online about the Darfur crisis and the peace process had not changed too much. The meeting in Addis among the GoS representatives, the AU and the UN as well as the meeting among the various Darfurian movements, held in Arusha at the beginning of August to find a common position in preparation of the upcoming peace talks, produced very few comments.

Direct references to Arusha could be found only:

- on the JEM forum, where 3 out of 9 threads addressed the outcomes of the meeting;
- on Sudaneseonline.com, with 11 out of 121 threads on Darfur dealing with the rebels' gathering.

So, judging from these events, assumptions about the relevance of the negotiation events, which receive high visibility in the international press, but are not as popular in the online forums, had to be re-evaluated.

[27] Continuing to use participant observation and thick description, also in phase 2 can, however, prove useful in deepening the knowledge of the online forums in terms of provenience of members, their political leanings, their relationships, etc.

etc., and measuring their recurrence over time. In both cases, especially if coupled with a calendar of events related to the conflict, this technique identifies how opinions evolve in a number of selected online spaces and the degree to which certain events influence the perception of the conflict itself.

Indicative of the usefulness of this component, online ethnography was very important in an initial phase of the research to explore some of the criticism addressed at expat workers and to determine, on the ground, if the same resentment expressed online was also common among the population in IDP camps. Later, on the occasion of the attack on Khartoum by one of the Darfurian rebel factions, the JEM headed by Khalil Ibrahim, online research could follow how the attack was perceived online and which interpretations were developing while it was unfolding.

The following posts illustrate how these two themes were articulated online. The first quotes refer to the reactions to the incident that involved the French organization l'Arche de Zoé, whose members tried to fly Chadian and Darfurian children to France, claiming their status of orphans.

> Darfur is becoming like Iraq. Everything is overlapping and people do not know anymore who the friend is and who the enemy is. And above all, it became a topic for earning money through marketing the empty bellies of the innocents. (Sudan.net, April 9, 2008)

> Those children are victims for the long European hand which is dishonest in the way it deals with countries of the south. The return of the children does not reflect the awakening of the European consciousness. They were returned because Europe is fed up with immigrants and refugees and it does not intend to receive any more of them. (Sudaneseoffline, March 27, 2008)

The following quotes are taken from debates on the Khartoum attack of May 2008, and highlight how, among the online community, the Darfurian rebel movements are the object of strong criticism. The last quote by a member affiliated to JEM, which is the movement that organized the attack, illustrates how the online forums are becoming a space for the members of the rebel movements to articulate their thoughts and respond to criticism.

> As we saw in the news there are children among the prisoners who were pushed by Khalil Ibrahim to fight in Khartoum while they were supposed to be at school working for a promising future. What the leaders of JEM have done confirms that their struggle is for a luxury life for them and their children, not for a better life for the Darfuri children. Why didn't the JEM leaders send their children to fight instead of the children of poor simple people? They are staying in the expensive hotels of Cairo and London. (Sudaneseoffline, May 11, 2008)

> What did the JEM expect to benefit from this attack? They are attacking with 200 cars, let's say that each car contains 10 soldiers, which means 2,000 soldiers participating in the attack. Did they expect to take over a city which has thousands of police and military soldiers with this number? Do they watch action movies too much or what? This

means it was a suicidal attempt. Their leaders sent them to die. (Sudan.net, May 10, 2008)

I personally do not agree on war or killing, but you know what our people in Darfur have been suffering from during the last five years. . . . And then you should notice that the movement has been very careful to keeping citizens unharmed . . . we only target the regime and nothing else, the citizen will remain a citizen and nothing will change that. (Sudaneseoffline, May 18, 2008)

Content Analysis of the Local Press

The local press can also be an important forum for representing attitudes toward peace and conflict. The media is accessible in both peaceful and in violent environments, and this can prove extremely useful when the researcher cannot reach the ground, but has access only to the media outlets in the capital city, a library abroad, or through an online database. Obviously, the major drawback of this technique is that it does not capture the opinions as they emerge on the ground, but as they are articulated by local elites.

Content analysis has been employed to study varied phenomena, from advertising (Frith & Shaw, 2005; Livingstone & Green, 1986; Thomas & Treiber, 2000) to elections coverage (Coleman & Wasike, 2004; Schweitzer, 2005), but, as was briefly illustrated above, its initial use on a wide scale was, during the two world wars, for analyzing news coverage and propaganda (quote). Our interest in conflict environments makes these early experiences extremely relevant, even if our goals do not include deciphering an enemy's mind or assessing its morale; rather we centre on understanding a society through its media and representing media actors themselves as stakeholders in the resolution of a conflict.[28]

Most content analysis techniques share the feature of linking qualitative and quantitative techniques together, of returning a numerical representation of texts in the form of frequencies and percentages[29]. But apart from this aspect, content analysis studies can widely differ from each other. They can have different focuses: the source of the message, the message itself, or its receiver. Or they can serve a different strategy: tracking changes over time, revealing differences among different media

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[28] As Bauer argues, "content analysis allows [the construction of] indicators of worldviews, values, attitudes, opinions, prejudices and stereotypes" (Bauer, p. 134).

[29] Human coding is based on the construction of a coding frame that allows us to classify the unit of analysis according to a specific research question. A different approach consists of counting the occurrence of specific words and calculating their relevance as compared to their average use or to their use in other selected documents. This can be done by looking at "keywords out of context" (simple world counts, where specific words are looked at through the construction of an appropriate dictionary), or at "keywords in context" (the focus here is on the co-occurrence of certain words with others and their positions within a text). A comprehensive description of content analysis techniques can be found in Neuendorf (2002).

outlets, constructing indices or maps of knowledge (Krippendorf, 1980), or looking at the text as a medium of expression or as a medium of appeal (Bauer, 2000).

Among this variety of applications, our main interest is making use of content analysis as "public opinion research by other means" (Bauer, p. 134), so we primarily focus on the messages and their sources, following how the framing of a conflict and the actors involved in it evolve over time.

Our interest is on the press, which is central to media systems for reasons often specific to poor countries, and can serve as a forum, both effectively and ineffectively utilized, for the negotiation of power between different factions and, importantly (and often overlooked), the government. Print journalists in Africa have also had substantially more freedoms than their electronic counterparts and were very active during and after political transitions. As Charles Onyango-Obbo, a founding editor of the *Monitor* newspapers in Uganda, argued, in his country it is the print media that really matters because:

> In print, you have the policy debate. In Africa, you cannot have policy debates in any sensible way in the broadcast media. For call in shows in Uganda and a lot of Africa their function is for people to vent. People go home after they have vented. They don't actually call in so their point of view can form the basis of government action but they call in spur of the moment. It is not recorded. But the people that write in the media are very meticulous, they do their research, it is the intellectual forum.[30]

The press, as Onyango-Obbo implied, remains the realm of the intellectuals and elites. Even in authoritarian countries, such as Sudan, the press can be one of the few arenas for the negotiation of power. In Sudan, we often see the paradox of a very authoritarian society, where, nonetheless, multiple voices have been represented in the press with a relative degree of freedom. At various times, the press is opened and restricted. Thus, a comprehensive study of the press system can provide important data and understanding into the broader debates occurring within society on a particular issue.

Similar to the study of public opinion in online spaces, also in the case of content analysis, we propose a two-step research approach.

The goal of the first step is mapping the main media outlets in terms of ownership, political leanings, and readership. Unfortunately, little secondary literature is available. Reports on national media systems regularly published by organizations such as Reporters Without Borders or Freedom House can be of some help, but their focus on ranking countries according to their degree of press freedom typically fails to provide a richer picture of the primary actors in a particular media scene or the nuances of particular positions. To really understand what interests are represented by specific media outlets, the best approach is direct interviewing of editors and journalists, delving into their past and determining the reasons why they embraced the profession, and exploring the role they think they are playing in their country. As noted by authors such as Francis Nyamjoh (2005), the press in developing countries often has different objectives than performing the role of watchdog or neutral advocate as idealized from a Western

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[30] Interview: Charles Onyango-Obbo.

perspective. Journalists frequently use the press as a platform to advocate for a different idea of society or to play (or try to play) a role of opposition in a single party system. Having a nuanced understanding of these dynamics is essential for research that wants to look at public opinions and for providing a context to the data collected through the analysis of individual texts. At the end of this process, the result should be the creation of an exhaustive picture of the press in the country, so as to later select a representative sample of newspapers to be analyzed.

The second step is the actual implementation of the content analysis strategy. According to the resources available, a lower or higher number of items (usually articles) can be selected for analysis. In the case of our research on Darfur, we chose to sample five papers out of the many published in Sudan. On a rotational basis, one paper per day was analyzed and each opinion piece on the conflict in Darfur was coded, using categories such as "the blaming of the Khartoum government for the cause of the war," "the positive" or "the negative impact of China," "advocating support for the International Criminal Court," etc. Other techniques could be used instead of, or in parallel, to this. For example, with the support of software for text analysis and text mining such as Alceste, Hamlet, or Taltac, it could be possible to register the occurrence, co-occurrence, and frequency of certain words that are key in the framing of a conflict and peace process.[31]

Whatever specific technique is employed for the treatment of texts, content analysis can track attitudes and opinions of a certain segment of the population. While its constituency may be debatable and vary, a daily examination of the local press allows the reader to register the impact of certain events, the increasing or decreasing inclination for particular courses of action, etc.

In sum, for both the ethnographic online research and the content analysis, it is ideal for researchers to use these methods as a complement to the interview-based research. From our experience, for example, the exploration of online spaces in our Darfur project allowed us to register the emergence of a strong criticism toward the "improper behaviour" of some AU soldiers and aid workers, a dimension that was later incorporated in other components of the research.

In unpredictable conflict situations, these methods also provide important means of maintaining the continuity of the research when particular environments are inaccessible as has been the case for our research, which has been hampered by logistical and bureaucratic problems. They allowed us to continue

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[31] It is possible, for example, to capture the adjectives used to characterize specific actors involved in the conflict (in the case of our research, for example, "the African Union," the "government of Sudan," or "the Justice and Equality Movement"), or to identify language elements shared by different newspapers (common language) as well as words and sequences that, on the contrary, occur only in one or more papers, but not in others (exclusive language). Unfortunately, there is yet no software that can treat languages other than those based on the Latin alphabet; the analysis of newspapers in Arabic, for example, requires an additional effort of translation. Since single words or strings of words are the main object of analysis, the translation has to be carried out with particular care. It should be as literal as possible and ideally carried out by the same translator over time, or at least produce a dictionary clear enough to be used by different translators.

to collect data on opinions about the conflict and possible solutions for peace; they also kept the team focused on what was happening on the ground.

Politicization and Ethical Considerations

Underlying the research framework, particularly the interview and survey-based research, are very serious ethical considerations that must not be ignored. In conducting research during sensitive time, there is a risk of endangering the safety of the researchers as well as the informants. While we recommend that research should be conducted anonymously, there is always the very real potential of people being persecuted for taking part.

Research in crisis situations can also be easily politicized and manipulated. NGOs, for example, which are often the most active researchers, typically have an interest in particular outcomes and may prioritize public relations, consequently providing misinformation in conflict zones.[32] Difficulties conducting research may be further compounded by a lack of accurate baseline data, some of which should be provided by governments. Governments share a similar interest in manipulating information, and particularly, census data that can serve as a valuable starting point for new research. In Sudan, for example, the 2008 census has been highly controversial because, according to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the North and South, the results will impact the distribution of resources. Leaders in the South have been strongly encouraging Southerners living in the North to return to the South temporarily to be counted in the census[33] to ensure that the South gets a greater share of the wealth, which has to be divided between the Government of Sudan and the Government of Southern Sudan.

Additionally, in some places such as Darfur, which has been inundated with relief organizations, informants can become exhausted by the continuous cycles of researchers and suffer "assessment fatigue." This is a major issue affecting research and the validity of results. Informants may simply respond with the quickest answer or even intentionally mislead the researchers as a polite way of

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[32] For example, during the Great Lakes conflict, there were widespread reports of NGOs providing information that was self-motivated and inaccurate. Organizations reportedly made false claims, for example, that 50,000 people were dead of cholera in Eastern DRC, or that soon 1,000 plus refugees would be dying everyday. When journalists would get there, however, there would be no such catastrophe. While MSF claims that its assessment was based on statistical data––certainly solid information can be difficult to come by in such circumstances–these organizations were also clearly in a public relations competition for funds. The reality is that organizations with the most dire predictions or highest numbers of casualties are those that make the evening news. This problem has been substantially elaborated by Nik Gowing in reference to the Great Lakes Region, where he has quoted several journalists saying that "the NGOs were found out." And, "the usual, pleasant NGO-media conspiracy where we needed each other, broke down in the Great Lakes bloodletting of 1996/1997. It has not recovered" (Gowing, 1998, p. 25).

[33] The census in Ethiopia has been similarly politicized and contentious as the Ethiopian government has been accused of stalling the nationwide survey out of concern that some Ethnic groups would prove larger than official estimates and that the officially Christian country would be more than half Muslim.

expressing their frustration. And too often, for people suffering from disasters, there appears to be a major disconnect between the researchers and the desperately needed peace. When people are suffering from traumatic events, such as losing family members along with their home, questions about peace can seem naïve, patronizing, and irrelevant. Thus, a major challenge for all researchers is how to conduct research with dignity.

Improving Understandings of Violence and Peace in Africa

The methods we have detailed in this paper are extremely powerful when deployed together, but this does not mean they *must* all be used to carry out research in conflict environments. Interesting accounts can emerge from a collection of oral histories that, per se, can contribute to the understanding of certain aspect of a crisis. Or a content analysis of local papers can highlight how different sectors of society look at the same problem, but advocate for different solutions. We believe it is also important to have a sense of perspective and context, especially the researcher who has decided to use one method over the others. Oral histories, for example, can be undertaken as an isolated endeavour, but also as a possible contribution to the development of categories that can be employed by another researcher coding newspapers articles or preparing a questionnaire for a national survey.

The research methods we propose contribute to broader understandings of violent conflict in Africa. There is an urgency in giving voice to the people affected by the conflict, primarily because African wars are so often misunderstood and inaccurately portrayed, whether by the news media, academics, or the international community involved in the peace settlement. African wars are often considered "new wars," signaling a break with those that were fought before the Cold War ended. Some scholars perceive a level of anarchy, brutality, and senselessness about the new civil wars that previous wars did not share (Kaldor, 2006; Kaplan, 1994). While the wars of the present may involve a significant proportion of the population, arguments that they are largely about private loot, lack public support, and sponsor gratuitous violence, or are even "about nothing at all," can reflect a lack of field research and understanding of the historical and political dimensions of the conflict. They also may suggest a superiority bias where "our wars" have been "real struggles over serious issues." In fact, as some authors remind us (Dexter, 2007; Elshtain, 2001; Newman, 2004), most of the current wars trace their roots to the Cold War world and earlier. Participation in such conflicts is often complex and sophisticated. As Kalyvas notes, "ideological motivations are simply not always visible to observers looking for 'Western' patterns of allegiance and discourse. They make the flawed assumption that organizations using religious idioms and local cultural practices to mobilize people—rather than easily recognizable universalistic appeals—lack any ideology" (Kalyvas, 2001, pp. 104-105). Such claims tend to focus on the effects of violence rather than understanding the motivations of the participants and their loyalties and ideologies. Ignoring the insurgents' arguments, or the history of the conflict and its economic and power dimensions, risks misunderstanding the nature of a conflict.

In an effort to move past misleading analysis, collecting the opinions of those involved and affected by the violence can bring a nuanced perspective to understanding both the nature of the conflict and its possible resolutions. Given the dearth of secondary literature and baseline data with which to build upon and corroborate findings, contemporary research must often blaze its own path. Nevertheless,

public opinion research in African conflicts promises rich contributions to understanding the demands of the government and particular groups and their constituencies, real and imagined, and has the potential to contribute to peaceful resolutions.

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