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## **Radio Buddu and the Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Bill**

### **Teaching Note**

#### **Case Summary**

When reporting on social issues, sometimes journalistic standards of objectivity and balance seem at odds with cultural or religious norms of the local community. Are there some views that, because considered taboo or condemned by a majority in the audience, should NOT be presented in a balanced way? Or is it a journalist's responsibility to try to teach the audience to see all sides of an issue, regardless of their preconceived ideas?

This case follows one Ugandan journalist as he navigates these difficult questions. Moses Walugembe is host of the Radio Buddu talk show *Kinanjokyankimize*, which serves the area surrounding Masaka, a town in rural Uganda. Radio Buddu's mission includes informing and educating its socially conservative, majority Christian constituency. In 2009, it had received a development grant from the BBC World Service Trust, which included not only equipment, but also training on responsible reporting of governance and human rights issues.

One of the BBC trainers suggests to Walugembe that he devote a show to a balanced debate and discussion of a bill, recently proposed in parliament, which will criminalize homosexuality and even impose the death penalty in some cases. The bill had been widely criticized as a human rights violation in the broader international community, and the BBC emissaries suggest framing the debate in human rights terms.

But Walugembe and his colleagues are torn. Providing a platform to both advocates and critics of the bill would comply with journalistic standards of fairness and balance. But the Radio

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Buddu staff is acutely aware that the vast majority of their listeners consider homosexuality a taboo subject, and, on religious grounds, morally unacceptable. Does it make sense to host a balanced debate of the bill under these circumstances, or is the likelihood of alienating their audience and damaging their own reputation too great? Since he actually shares their views, Walugembe also feels personally conflicted about giving voice to gay rights activists. Moreover, Uganda's official Broadcasting Council forbids discussions of issues that run "contrary to the public morality," so Radio Buddu runs the risk of a legal battle if it proceeds with the program.

On the other hand, the BBC grant will be up for renewal soon and the staff worries about losing that support. More importantly, can Radio Buddu risk turning down an opportunity to inform the public about an issue that, although private, is also political? Not doing the program seems at odds with its mission to help strengthen democracy and good governance by informing the people about decisions that elected representatives are making on their behalf, and providing a forum for discussion about how those decisions may affect the community. Students are left to decide if Walugembe should proceed with the program, or if the risks are too great.

### **Teaching Objectives**

Use this case to start discussions about covering controversial social and religious issues; fairness and balance in reporting; covering LGBT issues; relationships between news organizations and external donors, such as NGOs; and reporting in settings adverse to press freedom.

The central dilemma in this case is how to cover social issues that have become political—so are presumably important for citizens to understand—but that are widely considered private, morally unacceptable, or even taboo by the majority of the audience. Begin by asking students what they believe to be the role of a news organization when it comes to reporting sensitive social issues, especially when the government is taking action to regulate them.

Often, local norms dictate a particular understanding of the issue. Is it the responsibility of a news organization to educate the public about alternative modes of thinking, or does this show a lack of respect for the audience's beliefs? If the alternative is to simply mirror back to the audience its established opinions, and repeat government statements aligned with those, what might be lost? Students should especially consider the implications for democracy and an informed citizenship if the media self-censors on sensitive political topics.

Another way to think about the question is in terms of balance: journalism students are taught to approach all issues with fairness and balance, which usually means giving equal, impartial attention to opposing views on a given issue. But ask students if there are ever occasions when this is not necessary or ideal. For example, when the majority of the population is agreed about an issue, should journalists still feel obligated to present the opposing view? Why? If students respond with an automatic "yes," push them harder: there are many issues about which

reporters do not generally present a balanced view for just this reason. For example, journalists often unabashedly support their local sports teams in their coverage; and in communities where particular views are seen as deviant, reporters often do not feel the need to present both sides. Encourage students to think of other examples of when reporters seem to feel justified in presenting only one side of an issue.

Redirect students back to the facts of this case, with the above questions in mind. What is Radio Buddu's responsibility to its audience when it comes to informing them about the anti-homosexuality bill? Ask them to consider whether, in rural Uganda, homosexuality in general, and the anti-homosexuality bill in particular, are issues that should be discussed with a balanced approach.

Even if students agree that under ideal circumstances the best approach is a balanced debate of the issues, with both proponents and critics of the bill getting equal air time, prompt them to consider the very real constraints with which Radio Buddu must contend. These include the legal pressures not to discuss anything that might contravene public morality; concerns about its reputation with an audience that widely agrees homosexuality is a sin; and, for Walugembe, his own reputation and moral compass. Taken altogether, do students believe it is wise for Radio Buddu to air the program?

If they do proceed with the program, what should be its parameters? In order to ensure the most balanced approach possible (if that is what students believe is the best strategy), what makeup of guests should Walugembe include? What should he do to ensure that his own views do not slant the conversation unfairly and unprofessionally?

Finally, students should consider Radio Buddu's relationship with the BBC World Service Trust, which is a complex one. On the one hand, it accepted the grant because it is eager for the equipment and training offered by experienced international journalists. The station has deliberately embraced the values inherent in this agreement, which include promoting human rights and better governance by educating and informing the local populace. At the same time, this means that the BBC representatives have the power to potentially influence coverage of issues about which the local population has strong beliefs. Do students believe that Walugembe and his colleagues are right to take their ongoing relationship with the BBC into account in making this decision? Is dismissing their input advisable, given that the grant is up for renewal soon?

## **Class Plan**

Use this case in a course/class on journalism ethics; editorial decision making; reporting on human rights and social issues; or reporting on politics.

*Pre-class.* Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

1. Should Walugembe proceed with the program? Why or why not?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students' work both to craft talking points ahead of class, and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

*In-class questions:* The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 80-90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

a) What are the pros and cons of broadcasting a show dedicated to a balanced debate of the homosexuality bill? List on board.

b) Specifically consider, in turn: the legal and government pressures not to talk about this issue; implications of the decision for Radio Buddu's relationship with the BBC World Service Trust; and possible effects on Radio Buddu's relationship to its community. What should the station's leadership keep in mind when considering each of these, and which do you believe are most important?

c) If Walugembe decides to broadcast the show, what should be its parameters? How should he frame the issues, and what kinds of guests should he invite? What should be the goals of the program?

d) If Walugembe does decide to broadcast the show, is there anything he could do to minimize potential legal problems? How might he minimize damage to his own, or Radio Buddu's, reputation in the community?

e) Walugembe has personal convictions about this issue. If he does the program, what do you recommend he do to prevent these convictions from slanting the discussion?

f) If Walugembe proceeds with the show, he will be giving precedence to his professional convictions over his moral and religious ones. Is this the right decision in this case? Is it always? Can you think of issues that you, as a journalist, would refuse to cover because of your personal beliefs?

g) Are there circumstances under which it is not necessary or appropriate for news organizations to present both sides of an issue? Is this one of those situations?

h) Is it appropriate for news organizations to discuss subjects that the vast majority of the audience views as religious or moral? Is a balanced approach to these issues the most appropriate?

i) Should Ugandan journalists discuss homosexuality in general, and the anti-homosexuality bill in particular, on their programs and in their articles? Why or why not?

j) Radio Buddu's grant stipulates that the station work to strengthen democracy and good governance. What should it do to achieve this, in general and in this particular case?

k) Throughout the case, we see signs of international intervention in Ugandan operations, first in the influence of US-based organizations in support of the bill, then in the BBC World Service's support of Radio Buddu. Do you find these interventions problematic? Is it fair to compare them?

### **Suggested Readings**

Maria Burnett, "Uganda Making Life Tough for NGOs, LGBT rights," *Human Rights Watch*, August 30, 2012.

SYNOPSIS: This international NGO focused on monitoring human rights violations around the world dedicates a section of its website to the state of human rights in Uganda, all of which provides useful background to this case. The specific article cited here is a brief, current overview of human rights in the country in summer of 2012. The report is highly critical of the Ugandan government on a variety of issues, including LGBT rights and freedom to speak about them. It notes that while it is illegal to practice homosexuality it is NOT technically illegal to discuss it—but that doing so is, in practice, dangerous. It further argues that this suppression of free speech is especially problematic because the government actively disseminates misinformation about homosexuality (presumably making accurate news coverage all the more crucial for the public to be well-informed).

<http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/08/30/uganda-making-life-tough-ngos-lgbt-rights>

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*Handbook for Journalists*, Reporters without Borders, April 17, 2007 (updated July 20, 2012).

SYNOPSIS: The website of Reporters Without Borders, an international nonprofit organization founded in 1985 by a group of French journalists, is a useful resource for journalists working in places where their freedom to report is compromised. The organization's handbook is especially useful, with sections on press freedom and ethics, as are the individual country pages (including one for Uganda), which are continuously updated with news about threats to journalistic freedom in each country.

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Jocelyn Edwards, "Uganda anti-gay bill draws church, battle lines," *Reuters*, June 29, 2012.

SYNOPSIS: This article explores the state of LGBT rights in Uganda three years after the period explored in this case, just as the anti-homosexuality bill is being reintroduced. It discusses accusations that Western influence on Ugandan values both gave fuel to the bill and is being used to unfairly suppress it, and provides good background on the main players in the debate.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/29/us-uganda-gays-idUSBRE85R0XR20120629>

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"Uganda's LGBT Community Under Threat," *The Stream, Al Jazeera*, July 23, 2012.

SYNOPSIS: This episode of Al Jazeera's English-language program, "The Stream" provides useful background for instructors and, if instructors choose, an interesting companion to the case itself. Broadcast in 2012 soon after the bill discussed in this case was reintroduced, the program in many ways is exactly what Walugembe and his colleagues propose: a frank debate between a gay rights activist and an anti-homosexuality activist. The program is especially interesting because it includes discussions about the role of Western intervention in Ugandan affairs and the media's coverage of gay rights issues. It is also an excellent example of a modern and sophisticated news program that incorporates extensive input from its audience via social networking tools.

<http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/uganda's-lgbt-community-under-threat-0022293>