



LUND UNIVERSITY

In the Service of Community: Somali Media in the Twin Cities

Carlson, Benny

Published in:
American Studies in Scandinavia

2010

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Carlson, B. (2010). In the Service of Community: Somali Media in the Twin Cities. *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 42(2), 3-19.

Total number of authors:
1

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

In the Service of Community: Somali Media in the Twin Cities

Benny Carlson

Lund University

***Abstract:** This article aims to describe a diasporic Somali environment—the Twin Cities of Minnesota, USA—where Somalis have been fairly successful in the labor market and where they produce a broad range of information through media—TV, radio, newspapers. It is suggested that ethnic media in the diaspora perform four basic functions: they spread knowledge about the old country, the new country, the immigrant group internally and the group externally. The conclusion is that Somali media in the Twin Cities devote considerable energy to spreading knowledge about the new country and about internal group activities. These functions help people to navigate in their new country and to mobilize group solidarity. When it comes to spreading knowledge about what is going on in the old country, the picture is somewhat mixed: some fear that political news will exacerbate tensions within the Somali diaspora. Sharing knowledge about one's community with others in the new country seems to be the function least developed. Some media workers, however, acknowledge that this is a future priority.*

***Keywords:** Somalis—diaspora—community—ethnic media—Twin Cities—old country—new country—solidarity—reputation*

Introduction¹

In Scandinavia, Somali immigrants have not had much success in the labor market and concerns exist over a prevailing negative picture of Somalis in the media.² How could this media treatment, and its impact on Somali Scandinavians, be improved? Could perhaps Somalis “take their destiny into their own hands” and produce more information than they presently do to make their fellow immigrants more aware of opportunities and barriers in their new country and, not least, to make the host societies more aware of the resources Somalis bring to their adopted communities?

This article aims to describe an environment—the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul in Minnesota, USA—where Somalis have been more successful in the labor market and are producing a steady stream of information through television, radio, and newspapers—a setting where a population of Somali immigrants comparable in size to that in Sweden produces at least ten TV shows, several radio shows, and two monthly newspapers.³

Somalis in the Twin Cities and the U.S.

Somalis in the Twin Cities consider themselves to be the largest Somali

- 1 Three institutions have enabled me to gather information for this article: The American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which, on the initiative of its director of museum education, collections, and programs, William Beyer, awarded me the 2008 Cornelia Malmberg Fellowship that made possible my spending two weeks in Minneapolis during the autumn of 2008; The African Development Center of Minnesota, which, through its executive director Hussein Samatar and its program coordinator Nimo Farah, at that time arranged for me to meet a number of Somali journalists; and The Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation, which, with its scholarship support, gave me time to work on the Somali diaspora. I am grateful to William Beyer for his suggestions on a draft of this article and for his supervision of my English. I am also grateful to Dag Blanck and an anonymous referee for constructive comments.
- 2 In Sweden, for example, a debate on the media picture arose when a major newspaper (Christer Lövkvist, “Mot undergången?” [Towards the abyss?], *Göteborgs-Posten*, October 28, 2007) sounded alarm on “serious crime, widespread drug abuse, welfare cheating, lousy school grades, and sky-high unemployment” among Somalis. According to Christina Bækkelund Jagd’s dissertation, *Medborger eller modborger?* [Citizen or Anti-citizen?] (Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, 2007), the negative media picture contribute to hopelessness among Somalis in Denmark. Participants at a conference, “Making Integration Work,” in Skien, Norway, in October 2008, identified the gloomy media picture of Somalis as a main concern throughout Scandinavia.
- 3 In Scandinavia the supply of information seems to be somewhat less plentiful. Swedish Radio International airs news and other programs in a dozen minority languages, among them Somali. Five local TV programs are produced in Stockholm, and one radio program, “Somaliweyn,” in Gothenburg. Danish and Norwegian public TV and radio companies produce no programs in Somali, but the private efforts, “Somali Radio in Copenhagen” in Denmark and “Radio Samadon” in Norway, do broadcast and webcast in Somali.

community in North America. However, nobody really knows the actual size of this community. According to official estimates, approximately 40,000–45,000 Somalis (foreign born and children born in the U.S.) reside in Minnesota.⁴ Somalis themselves claim they are twice as many. By either estimate, Somalis in the Twin Cities make up more or less half of the Somali population in the U.S. They constitute a fairly new community in the Twin Cities, having arrived since the early 1990s and settling especially in the Cedar-Riverside area in Minneapolis, a gateway area where Swedish immigrants resided some hundred years ago when Cedar Avenue was nicknamed “Snoose Boulevard.”⁵

Somalis in the Twin Cities constitute, as they often say themselves, a struggling but “vibrant” and advancing community.⁶ Recent figures from the 2009 American Community Survey give clues to the economic and social situation of Somalis in the U.S., and these figures are, as far as one can tell, also representative for Minnesota. Half of the Somali-American population lives in poverty, compared to one out of ten in the general U.S. population. Employment among Somalis 16 years and over is 52 per cent, compared to 58 per cent in the general population. Approximately 2,400 Somalis are self-employed. About half of them operate in Minnesota.⁷ In the Twin Cities some 80 per cent of Somali-owned businesses are run by women!⁸

4 Figures are for 2009 according to Barbara Ronningen, Minnesota State Demographic Center.

5 See Anne Gillespie Lewis, *Swedes in Minnesota* (St Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2004) 32–33; David A. Lanegran, “Swedish Neighborhoods of the Twin Cities: From Swede Hollow to Arlington Illis, From Snoose Boulevard to Minnehaha Parkway,” in Philip J. Anderson & Dag Blanck (eds), *Swedes in the Twin Cities: Immigrant Life and Minnesota’s Urban Frontier* (St Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2001) 50; Anduin Wilhide, “A Place to Call Home: Immigration and Community-Building at the Cedar-Riverside Neighborhood in Minneapolis” (Senior Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2003) 94, 104.

6 For a more comprehensive view of this community, see Benny Carlson, *Somali i Minneapolis—en dynamisk affär* [Somalis in Minneapolis—a dynamic deal] (Malmö/Lund: Zufi 2006). For an overview of Somalis and other immigrants to Minnesota, see Gregg Aamot, *The New Minnesotans: Stories of Immigrants and Refugees* (Minneapolis: Syren Book Company, 2006) and Katherine Fennelly, “Latinos, Africans and Asians in the North Star State: Immigrant Communities in Minnesota,” in Elzbieta M. Gozdziaik and Susan F. Martin (eds), *Beyond the Gateway: Immigrants in a Changing America* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005).

7 See Hussein Samatar, “Experiences of Somali Entrepreneurs in the Twin Cities,” *Bildhaan, an International Journal of Somali studies* (2004).

8 Kristin Tillotson, “Mothers of Invention,” *Star Tribune*, September 11, 2009.

Somalis in the U.S. and Sweden

How does this compare to Somalis' living conditions in Scandinavia? In the interest of brevity, a look at Sweden can suffice—conditions for Somalis in Norway and Denmark, although fewer in number than in Sweden, are not much different.

About as many Somalis reside in Sweden as in Minnesota, approximately 50,000 in 2010. Employment figures for ages 20-64 were about 60 per cent in the U.S. as of 2009 and somewhat less than 30 per cent in Sweden in 2007. Since then, a heavy inflow of new arrivals has come to Sweden and unemployment there has increased, so the figure has surely not improved. Also in 2007, Sweden was home to about 170 Somali entrepreneurs, of whom less than 20 per cent were women.⁹ Entrepreneurs constitute approximately 4 per cent of the population aged 20-64 in the U.S. compared to less than 1 per cent in Sweden.

How might these differences in employment and entrepreneurship between the U.S. and Sweden be explained? Quite a few hypotheses, most of which cannot be dealt with in this article, have been advanced. First, some have pointed to self-selection among migrants (individuals with different skills and ambitions heading for different countries). Related to this hypothesis is differing educational attainment of migrants in their old and new country (the educational level among Somalis in Minnesota is higher than among those in Sweden). Secondly, observers have cited different conditions in countries of destination: labor market conditions on arrival, barriers of entry to the labor market, traditions of immigration, language spoken, business climate, government regulations, and attitude of authorities. Thirdly, commentators have noted differing possibilities for immigrants to organize into a productive community that can attract newcomers and reach a "critical market mass" necessary for extensive entrepreneurship.

Minnesota is well-known for the vitality of its non-profits and the diversity of its for-profit economy, which has apparently offered fertile ground for Somali self-organization. This fertile ground has attracted many Somalis to the state and to Minneapolis especially—one could perhaps talk of an ethnic enclave—which in turn has seen the proliferation of ethnic media, *one* facet of community organization.

9 Statistics Sweden, Stativ database.

Ethnic Media and Their Functions

Ethnic media have a long history in the United States. The Twin Cities, for example, was home to one of the most successful Scandinavian American immigrant newspapers, the Swedish-language *Svenska Amerikanska Posten* (1885-1940) brought to prominence by Swedish immigrant publisher Swan J. Turnblad (1860-1933), who erected the mansion that has housed the American Swedish Institute since 1929.¹⁰

The literature dealing with the role of ethnic media in U.S. immigrant communities is considerable. If we start out from a *recent* examination of ethnic media in *contemporary* immigrant communities, we can identify some more or less self-evident functions that these media can fulfil. One article posits that “[t]o a varying degree, ethnic media preserve the cultural identity of ethnic groups by providing relevant home country news. They also facilitate immigrants’ adaptation process by providing local news and information they can use in their host society.” The authors of this article on what they call “geo-ethnic storytelling” also conclude that “a preoccupation with the home country may undermine immigrants’ ties to the local community, holding back their adaptation to the host country” and that “although ethnic media help with immigrants’ adaptation in the initial phase, a possible damaging impact on adaptation emerges when immigrants depend on ethnic media for too long”¹¹

Now, as we apply these general observations to Somalis in the diaspora, I will use, instead of “home” and “host” country, the terms “old” and “new” country. This second pair of terms reflects the language many immigrants choose to refer to their host country and the growing attachment that immigrants and especially their children voice in their media.

The Somali diaspora has distinctive characteristics. Firstly, Somalis are refugees and not labor immigrants. Secondly, they have arrived in their new countries fairly recently. Thirdly, news from the old country might have a particularly disturbing effect for Somalis since the chaos in Somalia understandably impacts the diaspora. Fourthly, as suggested in the introductory

10 Nils William Olsson and Lawrence Hammerstrom, “Swan Johan Turnblad and the Founding of the American Swedish Institute,” and Ulf Jonas Björk, “*Svenska Amerikanska Posten*: An Immigrant Newspaper with American Accents,” in *Swedes in the Twin Cities: Immigrant Life and Minnesota’s Urban Frontier*, eds. Philip J. Anderson & Dag Blanck, (eds). *Swedes in the Twin Cities: Immigrant Life and Minnesota’s Urban Frontier* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2001) 117-123, 210-222.

11 Wan-Ying Lin and Hayeon Song, “Geo-ethnic storytelling: An examination of ethnic media content in contemporary immigrant communities,” *Journalism* 7 (2006) 363, 382. This article contains a fairly extensive list of literature on ethnic media in immigrant communities.

paragraph, Somalis have experienced considerable negative media coverage in some of their new home countries. This creates an extra challenge for Somali immigrant media to address mainstream society and try to provide nuance to this gloomy picture.

Within this context, I would suggest that Somali media in the diaspora perform four basic functions. They can spread knowledge about:

- 1) the old country, which influences immigrants' plans to return home when circumstances allow or to create their future and their identity in their new country;
- 2) the new country, which enables immigrants to take advantage of social and medical services, as well as education, employment, housing, and business opportunities;
- 3) the immigrant group itself internally, which allows group members to mobilize internal solidarity and help one another navigating in their new country, thereby shaping their group identity;
- 4) the immigrant group externally to others in the new country, which affects the reputation of the group and thus also the acceptance of its members.

Information about immigrants' old country and their circumstances as a group (see functions #1 and #3 above) can either reduce or increase the speed with which the immigrant group negotiates its new environment while information about the new country and about the group available externally (see functions #2 and #4) serves mainly to speed up the process.¹²

Somali Media in the Twin Cities

Now, let us have a closer look at Somali media in the Twin Cities. The following survey is based on information available in print or electronically and on interviews with nine Somali journalists in November 2008. Since some of the information and the situation of individual journalists might have changed since then, the picture here should be seen as a *snapshot* of Somali media at a certain point of time.¹³

Somali communities are often characterized as "oral," which implies that TV and radio play an especially important role.¹⁴ In Minnesota Somali tele-

12 There are other media effects which are outside the scope of this article. Mainstream media reports from the old country will affect the image of the immigrant community in the new country and ethnic media reports from the new country will affect the situation in the old country.

13 Interviewees appear with their real names. They are making important contributions to their community and should therefore not be obliged to resort to anonymity (unless they themselves ask for it).

14 Media of this kind are sometimes referred to as "narrowcasting." See e.g. Hamid Naficy, "From Broadcasting to Narrowcasting: Middle Eastern Diaspora in Los Angeles," *Middle East Report* 180 (1993).

vision programs are remarkably numerous. Volunteers at the Minneapolis Television Network (MTN), a non-profit organization founded by the City of Minneapolis in 1983, create the shows. MTN carried the first Somali television program in Minnesota.¹⁵ MTN's mission centers on "empowering communities to bring their own unique voices to cable television." For a nominal fee, MTN gives training in video, television, and internet technologies to people who want to start a show as well as provides them access to studios, equipment, and cable television channels.¹⁶

Radio shows broadcast through KFAI, a non-profit FM station operating in Minneapolis and Saint Paul since 1978 and funded by contributions from listeners and support from foundations. Its mission is to provide "a voice for people ignored or misrepresented by mainstream media" and to increase "understanding between peoples and communities, while fostering the values of democracy and social justice."¹⁷ One of the Somali pioneers at KFAI is Hussein Samatar, currently executive director of the African Development Center, who produced and hosted the "Somali Voices" radio program for ten years.

Two monthly Somali journals are also published in Minnesota, one in Somali, *Warsan Times*, and one in English, *The African News Journal*.

The stories of these media projects—of the people active in them, and of the details of the mission, economy, circulation, contents and plans—all offer insight into the role these media play in Somalis' adjustment to the Twin Cities.

Television

Somali TV

The first Somali television program in the Twin Cities, "Somali TV," started on MTN in 1997. It has focused on giving information about health and education to non-English-speaking Somalis. The founding father, Abdulkadir Osman, today serves as executive producer and works with anchor Mahamud Abdi and camera director Siyad Salah.

15 Except for the four TV programs that will appear in this article there are, according to the MTN program schedule, six more Somali TV shows: "Jig Jiga TV," "Regional Somali TV," "Somali American Media Association (SAMA)," "Somaliland American TV," "Qaranimo Somali TV," and "Wacyi TV."

16 <http://www.mtn.org>

17 <http://www.kfai.org>

In an interview about “Somali TV” with Mahamud Abdi, I learned that he escaped from Somalia in 1992, and spent two years in a refugee camp in Kenya and several years more in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, where his mother had a shop. In 2000, the twenty-year-old Mahamud Abdi came to Minneapolis, sponsored by his sister. He had long dreamed of being a TV anchor. While serving as a presenter at a wedding, he was approached by cameraman Siyad Salah who observed, “We have a Somali TV program. You look like one who could help us.” After a few days training, the young immigrant’s dream came true.

Mahamud Abdi explains the lofty but simple aims of “Somali TV”: “We want to be part of the community and to help make it productive. It is quite a struggle. But we [Somalis] are here and we are not going back [to Somalia] so what do we need? We want people to be Americans first, then Somalis. We want to encourage people to be politicians, lawyers or whatever here in America. We want to help people not to take the wrong way, as some of the people born here are doing.”

“Somali TV” has no revenue, only expenses. All three staff members work as volunteers and support themselves through other jobs. Mahamud Abdi works for a company that repairs mobile phones. Sometimes, when a service provider wants to get a message out, the TV-crew can expect to receive a little gas money or some videotapes. Otherwise, the reward is having people in the Somali community say, “You are doing a good job. Keep it up.”

Seen across the Twin Cities metro area and suburbs on MTN and Saint Paul Neighborhood Network (SPNN), “Somali TV” can also be accessed on the internet. Programs broadcast on Monday and Thursday evenings and then re-broadcast at midnight. The one-hour shows are divided into three segments: religion, a daily theme, and traditional Somali songs. Everything is in the Somali language. There has been talk of producing programs in English for a wider audience, but that would require funding. The programs focus on what people need to know locally. Politics, especially Somali politics, are avoided in order not to alienate any viewers. “Somali politics are too dangerous; they are what divide people,” says Mahamud Abdi.

Somali Media TV

“Somali Media TV” was founded in 1998 by Abdimalik Askar, who is producer and anchor of the show. Its mission, according to the program’s

homepage, is to respond to Somalis' need "to be educated, engaged, enlightened, and entertained." The program has four goals: 1) translating vital news and information into the Somali language, 2) addressing the issues that directly impact the Somali community in Minnesota, 3) providing an effective educational forum, and 4) bridging the gap between the Somali community and its neighbors.

Abdimalik Askar left Somalia in 1991 when he was 17 years old. After two years in a refugee camp in Kenya, the young man arrived in the U.S. and made his way to Marshall, Minnesota. His long educational journey brought him to the Twin Cities where he attended business school, Normandale Community College, and Saint Mary's University, from which he received his B.A. in information technology and master's degree in project management. He is currently pursuing a doctorate in leadership.

Three people—all volunteers—staff "Somali Media TV." The program irregularly receives minor sums from people within the Somali community to buy tapes. To support himself, Abdimalik Askar has worked as an immigrant student recruiter for the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system and as a staff member funded by a grant to teach Minnesotans how to get along with new immigrants.

"Somali Media TV" is broadcast in Somali and English on four cable channels as follows: Fridays and Saturdays on MTN that has approximately 80,000 subscribers, Fridays on SPNN with approximately 55,000 subscribers, Saturdays on Metro Cable Network (MCN) with approximately 600,000 subscribers, and Sundays on Twin Cities Public Television (TPT), which covers all of Minnesota. Programs are also available on You Tube.

Abdimalik Askar hopes that one day he will have a studio of his own and a channel that operates around the clock. This hope hinges on Somali businesses, since it requires sponsors to underwrite some \$100,000 for equipment and even more for operating costs. Abdimalik Askar also plans to start his own business offering cultural training. "My goal," he explains, "is to be a national speaker on different topics focused on culture."

Bulsho TV

Ali Musse started "Bulsho TV" or "Society TV" on MTN in 2003. Since 1995, Ali Musse has had a KFAI radio program on Africa, and, beginning in 1998, he has worked on another program that transmits news, music, and local events information four hours a day, seven days a week. Ali Musse's ambition is to spread information from Somalia and Minnesota to Somalis

in Minnesota, to spread information within the Somali community, and to be un-biased so that he can reach the whole Somali community.

In 1990, Ali Musse fled to the Somalian city Kismayo, close to the Kenyan border, and then moved across the border to Mombasa, Kenya's second largest city. Ali Musse's sister sponsored his journey to the U.S. in 1995. In Minnesota, he has worked for camera and furniture manufacturers and at a Minneapolis medical clinic. He also earned a degree at the Leadership Institute of the University of Saint Thomas in Saint Paul.

Ali Musse's radio and TV activities generate no income. To support himself, he works weekends delivering medication within the city of Minneapolis. An optimist, he hopes for a steady income from subscribers to his TV show in the future.

"Bulsho TV" is on the air four hours each week. Ali Musse himself is producer, cameraman and host, all in one. On "Diversity Radio," he also hosts a show that airs two hours a day Monday through Friday in several African and East Asian languages. According to Ali Musse, the program has about 2,000 listeners. Eventually he plans to start a new satellite radio program within Scola, a non-profit educational organization that receives and re-transmits programs from all over the world. His ambition is also to produce programs in English, in order to transmit information to people outside of the Somali group.

On top of all these media ventures, Ali Musse serves as executive director of Somalia Family Advocacy Group, which he himself has founded. Through this unfunded organization, Ali Musse and five volunteers work as advocates for people in trouble: prostitutes, people at risk of losing their jobs, youngsters under 18 who have committed minor crimes, and offenders who might reach settlements with their victims and avoid facing prosecution.

Somali Mai TV Network

Mai is a spoken, but not written, language in the southern part of Somalia; the dominant language in northern Somalia is Maha. "Somali Mai TV Network" on MTN is the only Mai language television program in the world. It is the creation of one man, Liban Hussein, who is producer, cameraman, and host.

Liban Hussein left Somalia in 1993, when he was 25 years old, by plane to Nairobi. His goal was to get out of Kenya immediately, but he waited for a visa until 1999, when he could finally leave for the U.S. He arrived

in Maryland and travelled by Greyhound bus to a sister in Iowa. There he worked for two years in a slaughterhouse, but all the time, he says, “I had this idea about TV in my head.”

After Liban Hussein moved to Minneapolis, the Somali Mai community there urged him to do TV, and he started his own show in 2003. It is broadcast twice a week on MTN and SPNN, which means over the entire Twin Cities area, and it is archived on You Tube.

“Somali Mai TV Network” mixes old songs and contemporary interviews on different issues within the Somali community. Liban Hussein does not shy away from reporting on political events in Somalia. He has hired a reporter in Somalia to send news on audiotape through e-mail. The program is often bilingual—Mai and Maha—and sometimes, when dramatic events happen, in English translation.

To support himself and his show, Liban Hussein works as an administrator and media specialist at Higher Ground Academy, a kindergarten-through-high school Afro-centric charter school in Saint Paul. At the same time, he is studying journalism at Saint Paul Technical College. His commitment to his show is unshakeable: “What is the purpose of doing this program, people ask. It is my future. I started this TV [show]. I want to bring it to my country—Somalia.”

Radio

Somali Voices

The pioneering English-language “Somali Voices,” which dates from 1997, broadcasts over the non-profit station KFAI one hour a week across the Twin Cities, and it can also be accessed over the internet. “Somali Voices” seeks to educate its Somali audience about current affairs, education, health, and social issues. The current host, Mukhtar Gaaddasaar, started out as a co-host to Hussein Samatar. “I see myself as a bridge between two cultures,” says Mukhtar Gaaddasaar, “I try to empower the community by giving people information.” The bridge is mainly a one-way thoroughfare, from the majority American society to the Somali community, not the other way. In Mukhtar Gaaddasaar’s other activities such as public presentations on Somali culture, however, he tries to carry information in the opposite direction.

Mukhtar Gaaddasaar grew up in southern Somalia. In 1991, the then 14-year-old and his family escaped to Kenya. There they stayed in a refugee camp before moving to north-eastern Somalia for four years, returning to

Kenya, and finally arriving in Minnesota in 1997. Mukhtar Gaaddasaar's aim was to get an education, but he had to support his family back home and so found jobs as a computer assembly line worker and as a security guard. After testing successfully for high school graduation equivalency, he attended Minneapolis Community and Technical College for three years and then the University of Minnesota, where he completed a degree in 2005. After service with AmeriCorps—a U.S. government program that places U.S. citizens and permanent residents 17 or older with non-profit organizations and provides AmeriCorps members educational benefits in exchange for at least 10 months service—Mukhtar Gaaddasaar became a translator for Saint Paul public schools. Presently back at the University of Minnesota on a fellowship, he is studying for a master's degree from the University's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs.

On the side, Mukhtar Gaaddasaar has become involved in yet another media project, "Egal Shidad: Stories of Somali Health for Radio, TV, and Classroom Use." Egal Shidad, a humorous character from Somali folktales, serves as an "ice breaker" in materials that demonstrate how family members can confront mental illness and begin working together. This project aims at fostering understanding and help for Somalis with mental health problems, particularly at eliminating taboos surrounding mental illness within Somali culture.

Somali Community Link

From KFAI, the "Somali Community Link" program covers the Twin Cities area and is accessible on the KFAI website. The host is a young woman, Zuhur Ahmed, who, like Mukhtar Gaaddasaar, started out as radio pioneer Hussein Samatar's co-host in 2006. The program airs in the Somali language one hour on Mondays, and the main topics are youth, health, and education. On the day of my interview with Zuhur Ahmed, the program's theme was the increasing number of autistic children in Somali families.

Zuhur Ahmed and her family journeyed first from Somalia to Syria, and then, in 1998, when she was 13 years old, to the U.S. As a child, Ahmed used to imitate TV anchors and people often said that she had a radio personality. "People encouraged me and I didn't have any stage fright," she says. "Also, I knew how important radio is to Somalis. We're an oral society."

For "Somali Community Link," Zuhur Ahmed requires a co-host herself because she does not always have time enough for the program. No wonder! She is completing her medical school studies at the University

of Minnesota, she works full time at a university clinic, and she somehow finds time for community work on weekends. She also does a monthly TV program, "Echo," on health and safety issues for non-English-speaking minorities. Although this young dynamo sleeps only three or four hours a night and often suffers headaches, she obviously loves what she is doing.

Newspapers

The African News Journal

The oldest Somali newspaper in Minnesota, *Warsan Times*, dates from 1996 when Dr. Hassan Eibakar began publishing the free monthly paper in Somali and English. In 2005, Minneapolis newspaperman and businessman Bashe Said started another free monthly, *The African News Journal*. With a circulation of about 10,000, the English-language paper intends to serve the entire African community in Minnesota, not just Somalis. In 2007, Said also opened First Cup Cafe at a shopping mall in Minneapolis.

Bashe Said has a degree in business administration from Somalia, but civil unrest there prevented him from starting a career in his native land. He arrived in Washington D.C. from Kenya in 1996 and moved on to Minneapolis in 1998. He sensed a need for information within the Somali community and started a TV program, "Sahan TV," on SPNN soon after Abdulkadir Osman pioneered "Somali TV" on MTN in 1997. "Sahan TV" offered information about health and education as well as a forum for personal stories to non-English-speaking Somalis. Bashe Said was immediately contacted by Somali and non-Somali organizations that wanted to disseminate information. "It was an important job," he remembers, "I didn't get paid, but it was the best I could do for the community and for myself."

Saint Paul Neighborhood Network recognized Bashe Said as "best producer of the year" in 2000. In the long run, however, he could not keep on working without sufficient income. He stopped doing TV in 2002 and boldly drew on his credit card to start *The African News Journal*. He was banking on his reputation within the African and broader business communities. His costs were limited to printing since his co-workers were volunteers, and half of the printing cost was covered by revenue from advertisements. "The response was great," says Bashe Said, "Everybody was just waiting for it."

Today advertising revenue covers costs. The paper is free and circulated in the Twin Cities metro area through community centers and libraries, but

libraries, organizations, and individuals wanting delivery at their doors also pay subscriptions. At most, the journal has had 300-400 subscribers. Advertising and subscriptions support two salaried, non-Somali employees, one full-time and one part-time. Staff but also university professors, business people, "anybody who want to share their ideas," contribute articles.

The wide-ranging content is evident from glancing at a typical issue that includes editorials, local and national as well as international news, "Africa newflash," community issues, business coverage, education features, and health information. Sometimes a theme will dominate an entire issue. Occasionally, news and reactions appear from outside the African immigrant communities. Bashe Said sees the paper as a link between the African communities and other Minnesotans, whoever they may be. His plans for the future are bold: "Our vision is to reach every African in the nation. We will try to do that next year if we can find investors and distributors willing to help us."

Freelancers

Just how many freelancing Somali journalists there might be in the Twin Cities is unclear, but two "case studies" suggest who the freelancers are and how they work.

A Multi-Media Man

Abdullahi Sheikh works in all kinds of media, both electronic and print. He loves to write but says: "The population I target use TV and radio more than printed media. They tend to be very receptive to audiovisual information."

Abdullahi Sheikh was trained as a nurse in Somalia. He lived in Kenya from 1993 to 2000, and during that time spent two years in the United Kingdom where he earned a master's degree in health planning and development. In Kenya, he pursued writing as a hobby, publishing articles on development issues in journals and newsletters of international organizations. In 2000, a cousin sponsored him to come to the U.S. In Minnesota, Abdullahi Sheikh started out with a factory job but soon moved to work as a liaison for the court system and at the Office of Multicultural Services, a unit of Minneapolis' home county, Hennepin, established to assist immigrants regardless of issue and language.

Abdullahi Sheikh earns his living with the African Wellness Program, a federally funded program to educate African-born people in the Twin Cities

about HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, and substance abuse. As a freelancer, he tries to get information out through any and all available channels: TV, radio, newspapers, even focus groups. He writes about a wide range of concerns but focuses on social issues such as marriage and senior concerns. "I write what appeals to me," he explains, "but not politics, because it divides Somalis." As a rule Abdullahi Sheikh does not get paid for his freelance writing.

To reach "the mainstream," Abdullahi Sheikh writes for English-language papers such as *The African News Journal*. Of the media people interviewed for this article, he is the most outspoken on the need to reach out to non-Somalis. To create a dialogue between established Minnesotans and immigrants, he says, "I would like to see newspapers that can create a dialogue. Lack of communication creates a lot of misunderstandings."

A Born Writer

Samatar Mohamed grew up in a family of writers in Somalia. His grandmother worked at a government-owned newspaper, *October Star*, during the regime of Siad Barre. As long as he can remember, Samatar Mohamed wanted to be a journalist and writer. He left Somalia in 1990 and stayed in a refugee camp in Kenya until 1998 when he sought asylum in the U.S.

In Minnesota, Samatar Mohamed earned a B.A. in Psychology at Metropolitan State University in Saint Paul. From 2000 to 2004, he worked as reporter at the *Warsan Times*, where he wrote articles in English and Somali on a variety of topics. Between 2000 and 2007, he also worked on the "Somali Voices" program at KFAI.

Samatar Mohamed's dream, however, is to be a literary writer. He has translated into Somali a children's book by a Swedish author, Gunilla Bergström, about a little boy, Alfons Åberg (Alfie Atkins in English). In simple stories, Alfons/Alfie experiences everyday events in the company of his father who provides an unassuming, positive model for the boy. Samatar Mohamed has also written a novel in Somali about a young Somali woman struggling to get a foothold in the U.S. His next project is to write a book in Somali and English on Somali psychology. "I want to be the first to write such a book," he says.

To earn his living Samatar Mohamed works as employment counsellor at Hired, a non-profit organization in Saint Paul. He is determined to keep on writing. He aspires to be a publisher of works in and about unique minority languages. He worries that the Somali language is slowly eroding both in

Somalia because of domestic upheaval and in the Somali diaspora because of external cultural pressures. He sees younger generations of Somalis losing their command of Somali, and he is intent on trying to reverse this process.

Conclusion

The accounts about individuals in this article bear witness to the willingness of Somali-Minnesotans in media to work hard in service of community, not to make money but to create social value and to be able to feel proud when people say “you are doing a good job; keep it up.”

From these profiles we can conclude that Somali media people in the Twin Cities devote considerable energy to spreading knowledge about the new country and about internal group activities, that is, to informational functions #2 and #3 mentioned at this article’s outset. These media ventures focus especially on health and education issues. They probably contribute to mobilizing group solidarity, shaping group identity, and helping people individually or jointly to navigate in their new country. As far as I can judge, they are not, however, focused on employment and business opportunities.

The picture is more mixed on function #1, spreading knowledge about what is going on in the old country, at least as far as politics is concerned. Some avoid political news since they fear exacerbating tensions within the Somali diaspora. Others think un-biased reporting makes handling such news possible. Cultural and religious program features, whether anchored in the old country or in the diaspora (functions #1 and #3), surely contribute to molding group identity.

Sharing knowledge about one’s community with others in the new country, function #4, seems to be least developed by Somali media in the Twin Cities. Most media workers I interviewed, however, are highly aware of this function and acknowledge that this is a future priority. The only media readily accessible to a wider audience presently is *The African News Journal*, published in English for, most immediately, a pan-African audience.

In Scandinavia, spreading knowledge about one’s immigrant community to others outside, and so opening channels that could qualify negative mainstream media pictures, is highly important currently. Perhaps it is less urgent in Minnesota. In the Twin Cities, where Somalis are generally seen as ambitious and hard-working because of their visible presence in

the workforce and because of their conspicuous entrepreneurial activities, presenting one's immigrant community to mainstream society becomes less pressing.

