

MEDIATE THE CONFLICT

Keynote address by Ross Howard to a seminar on the role of the media in peacebuilding.

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In any really big news story, the reporting of it eventually becomes news in itself. One example of this reporting about reporting is the attention paid to the American television networks' decision to censor themselves, and not to broadcast the later videotapes of Osama Bin Laden.

It was a shameful compromise of impartial journalism.

Fortunately it generated substantial criticism within the larger media industry and elsewhere. In fact, one major benefit of this new Online Era we live in -- the age of the Web and the Internet -- is that commentary and analysis has become widely accessible, and cannot be restrained by the conventional networks such as television.

But bringing this challenge to the individual level, to address the intention and motives behind what journalists themselves report, inevitably sets off a negative reaction within journalism circles. You know the refrain: at least among the English-speaking, Western Media -- We are supposed to remain clinically neutral in our work -- taking no sides, and being professionally and personally non-involved. And thus we report on conflict without motive, as if it were a football game.

This practice used to be called objectivity.

It is, of course, a myth. Every journalist unconsciously manipulates the story. We do it through the choices we make, the way we frame the story. We have an angle, a particular approach, on every story or picture we file -- who we speak to, what image we convey, what background to draw upon, what cultural values to reflect. All our work is subjective, to some extent.

At best, our reporting is balanced and accurate. However, the angles we take, driven by our culture and by our editors, often displace the best intentions.

Nonetheless, it is still argued that journalists cannot intervene in events, nor take responsibility for the impacts of their professed objectivity. Therefore, don't talk to journalists about their influence on conflict, or their potential to help reduce conflict.

This debate emerged recently among Western European journalists over coverage of the conflict in the Balkans. BBC correspondents Martin Bell and Nic Gowling, Tom Geltjen of National Public Radio, and others, seriously questioned the role and impact of their coverage of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Bell was particularly distressed by the early stages of the Balkan ethnic cleansing. The West stood by idly and the media reported the killings, with all the objectivity of covering a football match.

Bell coined the phrase “the new journalism of attachment.” He increasingly practiced a journalism that was more interested in reporting about the victims of the conflict, and the causes of the war, than the mere mechanics of waging war. His intention was to make somebody do something, to end it.

This is not to suggest abandoning journalism which is accurate and fair or balanced, as the daily routine. But we are not talking about routine news here, we’re talking about conflict – large or small-scale, motivated by religion, ethnicity, caste or history, much of it within single states – which is happening in 30 places around the world as we speak. The argument here is that conflict is a special case, which requires intentional commitment to provide more than a mechanical response in reporting it.

I want to make two points today.

First, this debate over objectivity versus intention has obscured the fact that conventional journalism – the kind that professes neutrality and personal disengagement -- is still enormously important in reducing conflicts and bringing about stability within war-torn states. I remain surprised that international efforts in war-torn countries and emerging democracies have not put much greater emphasis on conventional journalism development.

And my second point is, for professionals who are in the peacebuilding business, whose intentions are clear and involve a committed response to conflict, some of the techniques of journalism are proving to be effective tools. There are media-smart people out there who are doing some very impressive, unconventional journalism to ease the conflict, and their techniques deserve more attention.

I should explain that after almost 30 years experience as a conventional journalist, I was commissioned by a large and vigorous NGO in Canada called IMPACS – the INSTITUTE FOR MEDIA, POLICY AND CIVIL SOCIETY in Vancouver -- to pay some attention to the media’s potential for conflict resolution. The study, funded by the Canadian International Development Agency, is called a Framework for Media and Peacebuilding. The Framework is meant to assist donors, international agencies and NGOs, and media players, to recognize the importance of media upon conflict resolution, and to evaluate what they can do.

The Framework will be published within a couple of weeks. It will also be used by the European Centre for Conflict Prevention in a forthcoming publication.

My first point, about the value of conventional journalism to conflict resolution is based on the evidence. Around the world now, democracy within most societies varies almost directly with the presence of a competent, diverse and free media. If you have one, you have the other. And vice-versa.

All three words – competent, diverse, and independent – are important. If the media is competent – meaning accurate and reliably impartial – it provides early warning of potential outbreaks or renewal of violent conflict; it serves as a watchdog over leaders and officials, and it monitors human rights. A diverse media reflects competing opinions and interests and enables citizens to make well-informed choices. An independent media is essential to the functioning of other civil society actors beyond the government, from community groups to political parties.

The other thing about a competent, diverse and independent media is that it has an almost innate potential to contribute to conflict resolution. Good journalism provides channels of communication which counteract misperceptions. It can frame the conflict and analyze it. Good journalism identifies the interests at stake, and provides a safe outlet for emotions, among other things.

As professionals in counseling and reconciliation tell us, these are precisely some of the elements involved in a classic conflict-resolution process. But journalists rarely recognize this, and are almost never trained to do so.

That's the theoretical underpinnings of efforts by national and international agencies, foundations, and NGOs to focus on journalism training in conflict-ridden societies and newly emerging democracies.

The most common initiatives provide basic training of journalists to achieve accuracy and fairness in their reporting, and to realize technological competency. There's also been provision of new technologies which can revolutionize media production and reach. More recently, there's been emphasis on managerial competency and on media outlets' sustainability. Sustainability means financial survival in economies unused to advertising revenues as a life-blood of media. Sustainability means still broadcasting after the foreign donor goes home.

The challenge some of these initiatives face is enormous. Consider this assessment last year of Bosnia-Herzegovina, by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting in London.

Quote: "Bosnia has no comprehensive journalism training or education in place. The existing journalism faculties are politically tainted, obsolete and often

incompetent. Many of the most talented journalists have emigrated and will never return.

“The younger generation of journalists lack mentors to teach them the craft. ...Some young reporters who have attended [training] courses have subsequently been fired by their editors, who view Western-style journalism education with suspicion.

“The ethnic slurs and excesses so common during the war have been replaced by slightly less-explicit language. However, the message of the sectarian media – that ethnic equality and integration is impossible – has not changed.

“Government agencies operate in a political culture of secrecy, withholding almost all information of vital interest to the public.”

The situation in Bosnia is not quite a write-off, but it will take several years to produce professional journalists there. And it will take several years for any sense of democracy to take root.

I encountered a similar challenge in Cambodia last month, where I worked with the International Centre for Journalists, training local reporters in election coverage, in advance of Cambodia’s first-ever local elections.

While Cambodia’s UN-imposed constitution theoretically allows the most untrampled free media in South East Asia, there is in fact absolutely no tradition of independent or reliable indigenous newspapers. The papers are almost all partisan and constantly repeat innuendo and political libel as fact. Because there is no independent broadcasting authority the radio and television is generally bland, biased towards the government and totally uncompetitive

Many journalists require bribes to supplant their meager salaries. The economy is so weak no publication can survive without political or other subsidy.

So how do you teach professional journalism there? With great patience. Only a little of what we taught in the course, and what we delivered in a terrific one-edition country-wide newspaper and radio package, will be practised on a daily basis by most of the Cambodian journalists we taught. Journalism is very fragile in Cambodia, as is democracy. It takes time.

It is also clear that journalism development must go beyond journalists and technology. You need a media-supportive infrastructure. This includes regulations and agencies, codes of conduct and statutes and political commitments to ensure a free and diverse media. The fact is, a competent, diverse and independent journalism cannot function very long without a legal and political infrastructure to support it.

One particularly important aspect of the infrastructure is the protection of journalists in their work.

This awakening to the importance of conventional journalism has not been without some colossal mistakes. Consider the Western world's rush into Bosnia following the Dayton Accords in 1995. It provided training, journalist protection, equipment and direct funding of media outlets worth tens of millions of dollars. The intention was to create diversity in the Bosnian media, which would professionally distribute free and fair information for the 1996 election.

However, what was created was a saturated and artificial media market almost totally dependent upon foreign donors, with minimal responsibility to the Bosnian public, and abysmal standards of journalism. Partisan broadcasting continued on the slick and more popular state networks, which everyone continued to listen to. The West's initiative suffered miserably for insufficient training, and inadequate capacity, among these upstart media outlets it created.

It got so bad that two years ago the per capita distribution of media outlets in Bosnia had become twice that of Great Britain -- there were in Bosnia about 300 broadcasters, for a population of only 4 million people.

What happened when the West rushed into Bosnia to remake the media clearly proves there are lessons to be learned. We need analytical frameworks for taking journalism development into these places. That's part of the work I've been doing for IMPACS.

My second point, about unconventional journalism and conflict resolution, is based on reality: in most societies the ability of the media to reach large populations over large areas is simply too powerful to be ignored.

The fact is, cheap technology has made the media so pervasive around the world that it is almost like air. It is everywhere, even in dark places. So peacebuilders, lacking other elements of social cohesion to work with, such as responsible government, are learning to work with the media. It is becoming clear that the media can alter social and political behaviour to help resolve conflicts almost as effectively as it can enflame conflict. And, inflammatory media such as the hate radio broadcasts in Rwanda, cannot be ignored.

This kind of thinking goes beyond conventional journalism. The focus is on the effect of media rather than the mere presence of news media outlets and their practice. The intention here is to communicate information which turns public sentiment toward resolution of conflict. That's why it is called intended-outcome programming. The media becomes a facilitator of positive social change, rather than a professional, disinterested observer.

The programming format for this kind of media usage can vary from conventional news-casts with a different focus, to popular music or soap operas, or children's entertainment which attracts audiences to the conciliatory message, and to unconventional media such as street theatre or posters, and to new technologies like Internet and the Web. Overall, the intention is to achieve a synergy between the communications skills of media professionals and the people-centred approaches of conflict resolution.

Under no circumstances, however, is the promotion of biased or knowingly inaccurate information, or viewpoints masquerading as objective journalism, a valid approach. This cannot be just propaganda for peace.

One of the most successful examples of intended outcome programming is the BBC World Service broadcasts into Afghanistan. In the last 8 years until September 11 the BBC beamed programmes on subjects ranging from conflict reduction to mine safety to child nutrition to reducing violence against women, into Afghanistan from transmitters in Pakistan. All the messages and themes were developed within entertaining soap-operas or family-life dramas, scripted for radio. The soap opera, called *New Home New Life*, was the single most listened-to program in the country.

The BBC programmers found the Afghani people were starved for entertainment, and through entertainment they received life-saving and behaviour-changing information. BBC actually did the listener surveys in Afghanistan and confirmed the programs success in altering behaviour. The children stopped picking up butterfly bombs. Malnourished mothers switched diets while nursing babies.

Similarly, in Macedonia the American NGO called Search for Common Ground use a television format. Working with the producers of *Sesame Street*, they mix film and animation to craft messages intended to reduce social tension and strengthen inter-ethnic relations. The story-line involves five children from different ethnic backgrounds, living in the same apartment block. Only the kids know the secret – the apartment building can talk. The building, known as *Karmen*, gives the children encouragement in tolerance and generosity. It offers them non-violent solutions to their daily crises. It's a cute kids show, a little more sophisticated than *Sesame Street*, and just as well produced. And it is brilliant in its design and effect.

Macedonian children say they find the series authentic, identifiable with the troubles of living in divided communities, that they enjoy the episodes' mediated solutions to those troubles, and they love its humour. The program's greatest measurement of success, however, may be that the theme song for the series was been made into a rock video, using singers of three different ethnicities. Apparently, kids all over the country sing that song on their way to school.

This kind of overtly programmed media is reaching the stage where most major international agencies, and certainly the UN in every peacekeeping mission, build a media project into their operations.

[One early example of positive use of media for peacebuilding occurred with Radio UNTAC, the UN's broadcasting station in Cambodia in 1992. Created just to inform citizens about how to vote, it added popular and traditional music, newscasts, talk-shows, drama, and free-time political commentary to its mix. It became the most listened-to station in the country, generating awareness of the democratic process and electoral rights. Radio UNTAC was widely credited for the 90 per cent voter turn-out in 1993. It also unleashed a flood of independent, although unprofessional, media in Cambodia – the kind that I encountered last month. Unfortunately, the UN pulled the plug on its radio station UNTAC immediately after the election. Sustainability wasn't appreciated, back then.

The organization I work with -- IMPACS -- has picked up the threads of Radio UNTAC. IMPACS runs a training program for radio journalists – radio is the most powerful medium in much of South Asia -- and it is working to build local capacity for training radio journalists who can feed the hunger for non-partisan, and reliable information and entertainment.]

It is a field of rapid, diverse expansion. In South Africa an NGO called Soul City uses what it calls edutainment media to bring about social change. Now in its fifth series, it includes a prime time television drama series, daily radio dramas, booklets, and partnerships with social issues networks. And of course a website. All are interlinked, and adaptable based on feedback. Soul City is one of the few such media programs to do a detailed impact assessment. In its last series, Soul City reached 16 million people in South Africa.

The opportunity for rapid intervention, with greatly reduced logistics and cost, invites all sorts of imaginative media programming. For example, a complete digital radio production studio can now be contained within the files of a laptop computer.

But the problem with technology is the gross disparities in availability. Consider the Internet: the online population of all of Africa is less than 2.5 million people. Two point two million of them are in one country – South Africa. Only 8 countries in Africa have nation-wide dial-up access.

However – there is more to this business about journalism and conflict resolution.

In between conventional news journalism and the intended outcome programming, lies a stage of ambivalence and fusion. Some call it

transformational journalism. For Western journalists it is a sort of grey area, clouded by those strictures about objectivity and non-intervention. They balk at any reporting which openly seeks conflict resolution.

But to those who have studied media history, it is clear that this Western tradition of disengagement is both a recent one, and it is not necessarily the be-all and end-all of journalism. Nor is it relevant to large parts of the modern world.

As I said earlier, independent, fair-minded reportage already inherently plays a role of conflict mediator. Most journalists can recognize that.

What there is needed, however, is journalists' open recognition of the importance of framing, and of framing more stories for conflict resolution.

Such journalists have to recognize they are more than just observers and purveyors of fact, that their message has a major effect in fomenting or reconciling groups who are in conflict

Some people call this post-realism journalism, conflict resolution journalism, or peace journalism. It involves journalists and reporting which is sensitized to conflict resolution techniques. It is committed to including reports which maximize understanding of the underlying causes of conflict, such as poverty. It is journalism that also seeks to explore the opportunities for resolution, such as education. For example, a story about child soldiers focuses on their rehabilitation and shows how education programs help their reintegration into society.

Post realism journalism is certainly not widely practised in the North American daily media. Although it has offshoots in what is called civic journalism. But maybe North America is irrelevant. Conflict resolution journalism is the way ahead in some other countries. In Liberia, Sierra Leone and Uganda for example, there are journalists now who carefully evaluate the impact upon local tensions of breaking certain stories. Sometimes they withhold the story while alerting mediators to defuse an explosive situation. In other places this peace journalism involves reporters who actively identify divergent points of view, inform the public, and then personally facilitate meetings between the conflicting sides.

Particularly in the Third World, journalists are asking for this conflict sensitization training, as the only thing worth practicing in countries full of conflict. There are several NGO organizations, such as Internews in Indonesia, offering this kind of training now.

In another example, in South Africa, a new generation of black newspaper editors and television executives are linking the news media more directly to the community and to fulfilling social needs. This new group of media professionals

foresees the media as facilitators for some of the most important dialogues that take place in the community. In short, they view the role of the media as more complex than being observers or simply carriers of information. They are aware that media messages are never completely neutral. Beyond the basic facts, the media can provide the kind of analysis that would assist in resolving conflict, at the local and national level.

This then, is what is my Framework study of Media and Peacebuilding found: There is a spectrum of 5 types of media which can contribute to conflict resolution. This spectrum or typology is useful for analyzing what to do.

At one end of the spectrum are initiatives to overcome journalism crippled by its lack of competency, diversity, freedom and technology. This rudimentary journalism training addresses unskilled, inaccurate, conflict-obsessed, or highly partisan media. Often this media is, or was, controlled by the state or special interests and it reflects narrow views or propaganda. There is likely no legal framework regulating and protecting the media. The foremost tool for peacebuilding here is training in the basics skills of journalism, such as impartiality, accuracy and balance. Raising awareness of democratic practices, especially election coverage, is also essential, as is technology training and protecting journalists from intimidation.

Type Two. A second type of media intervention focuses on more responsible journalism beyond basic skills such as developing investigative, explanatory and specialist reporting, and well-informed analytical reporting. Initiatives include promoting a media infrastructure that includes impartial regulators, media performance requirements, access to information, press councils, and standards to define libel and slander. Developing diverse and sustainable media outlets through management training is another tool. The intention is to create a media that serves society as a conflict resolution process and upholds democratic governance.

Type Three is located between traditional journalism and pro-active uses of media. Journalists are encouraged to consciously examine their role to recognize conflict resolution as part of that role. In this transitional journalism development, journalists redefine whom and what is newsworthy, to better inform and encourage reconciliation. Sensitized media professionals may actively seek to put two conflicting sides together for a resolution. Some professionals and theorists aptly call this type of work peace journalism, reflecting the dual nature of their work as journalists with conflict resolution as one of their recognized values.

Type Four. Distinct from conventional journalism, this is pro-active media-based intervention, designed for a specific audience and purpose. It is often the product of a peacekeeping force or a nongovernmental organization, often in a

conflict or post-conflict environment. It can be media intended to counter hate propaganda, or to provide practical information such as election and voting practices, refugee reunification, health services.

At the other end of the spectrum, Type Five. It is intended outcome programming specifically for transforming attitudes and promoting reconciliation. It is not conventional journalism. It is usually conducted by non-governmental organizations. The content is determined by its appropriateness to fostering peace. The programming and delivery can be adaptations of a popular culture such as radio and television soap operas and dramas, street theatre, wall posters, and more. The initiative and programming may be closely allied with other actors and projects. Media workers may play a role themselves as conciliators in the field.

The details of the Framework, including a large number of examples of how media is being used for conflict reduction in each of these types, are available in the report. It will be available on IMPACS website at www.impacs.org in the media section in a couple of weeks.

Undeniably, type three media work is the most contentious.

To critics who argue this is advocacy journalism going too far, I have two responses.

First, we should face facts. Journalism can be destructive of a community, or it can powerfully constitutive. But it cannot be both. As institutionalized bystanders, which is what they are, traditional journalists are contributing to the violence of the world.

And secondly, Robert Karl Manoff, the director of the Centre for War, Peace and the News Media at New York University, puts it this way: Those who profess so-called objective journalism insist they cannot intervene in events they are covering, nor take any responsibility for what happens.

But does anyone really believe that the professional norms of journalism rate higher than fundamental human, moral obligations to end conflict?

Thank-you.

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