The New York Times Forum on Bosnia: An Attempt in On-line Mediation

by Igor Shnurenko
School of Journalism
University of Missouri-Columbia
301 Campus View Dr. #112
Columbia MO 65201
tel. (573) 449-8255
E-mail: c676928@showme.missouri.edu

Conflict and News

Conflicts are created, developed and resolved through the exchange of messages. Communication and conflict, therefore, are intimately related. With regard to international conflicts, the news media are among the most important of the communication channels. In a basic sense, conflict is news (Arno, 1984).

Nonconflictual topics also exist in the media, but when the media do not provide people with information about conflicts and problems, people start seeking the information from unconventional sources (for instance, in the Soviet Union before *perestroika*, the media did not provide enough material about conflicts so people turned to jammed foreign radio stations for information).

But the news media never serve as only passive channels. They do not merely transmit, but also frame and interpret messages, turning the reality of conflicts into stories, which, in their turn, become a part of reality. Being social actors, they share certain meanings and operate with certain symbols within culture. Therefore, when it comes to conflict or its ultimate expression, war, they tend to follow certain cultural patterns and stereotypes reinforcing confrontational attitudes (Lippmann, 1922). Mowlana (1984) notes that a sense of crisis makes people look for information justifying their fears.

The news media play an increasingly important role in crisis reporting. They formulate and label attitudes toward what is happening, and they play a vital role in affirming, reaffirming, or subverting people's "peace of mind" (Nimmo & Combs, 1985).

The news media can actually intensify, or even create, conflict as well as assist in its solution. Mowlana (1984) points out that a major function of the media is to help ensure that each side is truly familiar with the other's position and to issue reminders that mechanisms for peaceful solutions are available. What the media very often do instead is to create a crisis "mood", which promotes polarization of attitudes.

The news media in the United Stated usually describes themselves as "unbiased", assuming an "objective" position when it comes to national or community-level conflicts. The conflicts, mostly expressed in confrontational ways, are often dramatized to attract the readers and viewers attention and earn commercial profit. In the process of coverage, however, proponents of each side expect to have equal access to the media. Conflicts often take the form of a sports competition with only two main rivals being covered. Still, journalists, at least in elite publications, try to cover accurately both sides in order to boost the publication's credibility as a source of accurate news. As a result, even small minorities or eccentric groups and individuals are allowed to access the media, usually through the staging of pseudo-events or "media events" (Boorstin, 1971).

Not so with international conflicts. Autonomy of the "fourth estate" significantly decreases when the US government is involved in conflict with another country, or if US national or business interests are being touched. In such cases, the media place national interests above journalistic ones ("objectivity", "truth-telling"), and become restrained and , in fact, muffled by a political situation in which they operate.

"Following the flag," the media tend to report on foreign affairs in accordance with the priorities of the U.S. government. Moreover, the government sometimes uses the media as an effective conduit for intergovernmental messages or in disinformation campaigns (Davis, 1992).

New Approaches in Communication

In the past few years, new approaches have been tried to prevent the media from losing their credibility, independence and, subsequently, their influence on society and the judging power of the "fourth estate".

One of the approaches, the civic journalism movement, suggests using discussion and mediation techniques to ascertain real problems concerning a given local community. The assumption is that readers and viewers are citizens first, and, with good will and a little help from editors, they can become actively involved in the communication process. To promote the citizens' civic activity, the new journalistic approach aims at organizing town meetings, living-room conversations, public debates and focus groups (Fouhy and Shaffer, 1995).

Rosen and Gartner (1996) view the newspaper op-ed page, revived by *The New York Times,* as a perfect example of civic journalism and argue that the practice may lead journalism away from its true function to satisfy the public need to know the facts.

In the 1990s, civic journalism techniques have been tried in many local communities throughout the United States, and brought about mixed results. The movement's followers say that the efforts have had an impact on readers, both in terms of their civic awareness and the raised credibility of the community media outlets (Fouhy and Shaffer, 1995).

On the other hand, the reaction of the media establishment, especially the elite press of New York and Washington, has been mostly critical of the movement (Lambeth, 1996).

However successful civic journalism became in the United States, its techniques have never been tried on international topics, simply because other countries have never been a subject of the U.S. local communities' major concern -- an attitude that has been reinforced by the media themselves.

The Internet, a powerful new means of communication, suggests, however, a new definition of community, which now is virtual and encompasses ever-changing and ever-exchanging strangers throughout the world.

Being a site of mediated action, modern society is characterized by a gradual ascendance of communication skills to extrapersonal, socially supplied tools (Bauman, 1991).

Pavlic (1996) describes interactivity, multimedia packages, full service networks and news on demand as the features that will create an absolutely new media landscape in the near future.

The Internet has become, perhaps, the last escape of an individual from the tyrannical power of experts in modern society. Its role, however, is quite ironic: its users, enticed to cyberspace by its blue ribbons of freedom, are easy trophies for the new mediators and experts, who eagerly offer their gladly accepted services.

The first big international media experiment undertaken by *The New York Times* has brought a new level of mediation and expertise, while revealing the ambiguity of the new means of communication.

Why Bosnia?

The situation in Bosnia presented an extraordinary opportunity to examine how some of the new approaches would work. On the eve of the general elections, which the Dayton agreements had scheduled to be held in September 1996, the attention of international organizations was drawn to the role of mass media in creating and reinforcing confrontational patterns that contributed largely to the start and development of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia.

The survey of the media situation in Bosnia undertaken by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (London) with Media Plan (Sarajevo) drew a bleak picture of the Bosnian political and media environment:

"...The war has totally destroyed Bosnia's formerly integrated information system. In its place, three completely separate and mutually antagonistic systems have been created. There is no free flow of information. The distribution both of the press and of radio-television signals is limited by areas of military control. Not a single one of the essential elements for a common media market exists. The regulatory frameworks remain distinct and broadcast frequencies are disputed. The investment of private capital is either restricted or, as is the case in Republika Srpska in regard to television, effectively prohibited..." (*Sarajevo Media Launch, 1996*)

International media organizations, as well as governmental and private foundations, sought ways to straighten up the situation and conciliate the warring parties. The opening of all communications, especially the media, the reconstruction of local social networks and the construction and/or legitimization of existing political communities in a democratic spirit were regarded as the basic steps towards normalization. (Puhovski, 1996).

Since the mass media in the former Yugoslavia were still under governmental and sometimes even military control, international media outlets enjoyed more credulity in the region than the local ones. Therefore, it became possible for the international media to get directly involved in the normalization process in Bosnia.

Yet noble and urgent, reconciliation of Bosnia probably wasn't the only objective the *New York Times* pursued by launching its on-line project. Kevin McKenna, editorial director for the New York Times Electronic Media Company set up the aim of the project as an attempt to "combine the journalistic mission of the *New York Times,* the visual impact of a magazine and a forum for opinion and debate, in a way unique to this medium." *(The press release of The New York Times Electronic Media Company*, May 30, 1996).

Besides testing the promising technical and communications capabilities of the new medium, the project took the issue into realms of both international and domestic importance.

For years considered only an international topic, the crisis in Bosnia was quickly obtaining domestic relevance in the United States as a result of the Dayton accords. In 1996, thousands of American troops were sent to the Balkans; the issue of the military and economic aid sent to Bosnia has triggered wider debates about U.S. foreign policy objectives that involved the media and the political elite. More importantly for attracting the media's attention, Bosnia came out as one of the issues in the ongoing presidential campaign.

All objective and subjective factors summed up, the project has been undertaken as an attempt to test new communication approaches on a new type of community in a still unknown new media environment.

"Bosnia: Uncertain Paths to Peace" Overview of the Forum

The Internet forum, which *The New York Times* launched on June 10 and maintained for about a month, had been conceived as a means to promote an international discussion on war, justice, nationalism and the possibility of reconciliation in Bosnia. The Internet site contained an interactive photo essay by Gilles Peress, a photo journalist whose compelling series of images from war, fear and hatred-torn Bosnia was a visual reference point in generating the discussion. To provide the historical and geographical background for the discussion, the *Times* took full advantage of the multimedia environment. Viewers and participants were able to access such materials as color maps, audio clips and the *Times* archival articles on the subject .

The organizers of the project tried to utilize the supposedly unlimited informational and interactive possibilities of the medium. In order to level the gap between the Internet haves and have nots, computer terminals have been installed by IBM at Sarajevo University as well as at the United Nations Headquarters in New York and at the International Court of Justice in the Hague. For the discussion, fourteen forums were established, with topic areas ranging from photography on the Internet to consequences of the Dayton agreements. Experts in each field have been asked to mediate in the forums. Two international high-profile figures, Madeleine Albright and Christiane Amanpour, were announced as the hosts of key forums discussing the role of the United States and the international community in the conflict, and its coverage by the media. Bernard Gwertzman, senior editor

of the *Times*, administered the monitoring and overview of the forums. He tried to keep the disputes civil by occasionally offering chilling commentary after extremely heated meassages.

Naturally, as one of the first attempts to develop a serious discussion in a multimedia environment, the project had some shortcomings in its set up and implementation. It succeeded, however, in launching and maintaining the discussion that continued without much propping up by the hosts and editors. It has to be noted, though, that quite often the discussion moved beyond the framework designed for it by the *Times*.

Overall, 2119 messages have been posted during the discussion (139 of them by Gwertzman and hosts of the forums).*

* The figures here and below are approximate. Sometimes the same messages had been posted on more than one forum billboard at the same time. These were counted as separate messages. Also, the Times had announced the end of the discussion as of July 7, but in fact it went on after the date and at the moment of summing up these figures was still occurring. The figures below are counted as of July 26. It should also be mentioned that the exact number of messages, due to the nature of the medium, is difficult to calculate.

Table 1. Number of Messages Posted in Each Forum

FORUM/HOST	MESSAGES BY HOST (Msgs. by other host shown after +)	MESSAGES BY EDITOR	MESSAGES TOTAL
Healing and Reconciliation Ervin Staub	4	9	229
Will Bosnia Survive Dayton? Stephen Walker	8	5	147
Religion and War Michael Sells	11	2	114

U.S. Interests, U.S. Achievements Madeleine Albright	2	10	365
International Justice Avril McDonald	3	2	131
War Crimes Arieh Neier	5	-	175
Nationality and Nationalism Manuela Dobos	1+1	-	111
Will History Teach Us Nothing? Christina Amanpour	2+1	1	271
Bosnian Cultural Heritage Andras Riedlmayer	19+5	1	93
Genocide: How Should We Respond? Sheri Fink	8+4	-	181
The Irony of Media Coverage Bill Carter	4+2	3	88
Truisms Jenny Holzer	7+1	-	81

The Photo Essay Gilles Peress	4	-	27
Bosnia: Uncertain Paths to Peace (Comments on the site)	8	3	93

Participants and observers

A special note should be made about the participants and observers in the project. The interactive nature of the Internet suggests a free exchange of information, ideas and opinions. Some of the messages posted, however, have displayed, by Gwertzman's definition, "unnecessary invective." The organizers have failed, or purposely refused, to focus the discussion on a conceivable number of clearly formulated questions, so sometimes the authors of the most angry tirades took over the dispute.

However, during the dispute spectators have had much greater access to the various viewpoints than they usually have in the so-called "mainstream media", so in the sense of broadening their scope the project certainly succeeded (a point that was reflected in a number of postings).

They also have a much greater means to be heard than on any Op-Ed page in a newspaper. Thus during the discussion, it has been difficult to draw a line between "active" participants and "passive" observers. Some postings have been striking first-hand accounts that gave the "events in the former Yugoslavia" a human dimension which can usually be found only in personal diaries or letters.

For example, a letter from Sgt. Roy McDonald, a U.S. Army civil affairs specialist serving in Vlasenica, the Republic of Srpska, disclosed not only the desperate condition of the Serb refugees and the deficiency of international relief to civilians. The letter also called for any possible help and assistance from around the globe, and the nature of the medium made it possible to address the appeal directly to the people who may acknowledge the problem and respond without delay. Thus, the interactive nature of the medium can make a real difference in such a ruined and forgotten place as Vlasenica.

Gatekeepers

It may seem that on the Internet, hosts and editors are deprived of their most-treasured gatekeeping function. Granted, one can not keep anybody from posting a message on an electronic billboard even when some moral restrictions are agreed upon. One effect of that is that self-censorship becomes more important than old-fashioned censorship from a gatekeeper. In other words, everybody is his or her own gatekeeper nowadays.

But from the experience of the Bosnia discussion, we could see that some moderate moral

regulation may still be performed even on the Internet. To prevent the participants from excessive abuse of the medium, the *Times* editor Bernard Gwertzman sometimes interfered and intelligently reprimanded the most notorious violators of the dispute's code of behavior.The *Times* has also posted a call to behave on the site.

Selecting the hosts has turned out to be one of the key factors in launching and maintaining the discussion. The importance of hosts in this kind of dispute may be compared to the importance of the selection of jurors in the courtroom.

Apparently, it was decided that some high-profile public figures would be needed to attract the attention of the audience and keep the discussion going. But the specifics of an Internet discussion seems not to have been taken into account. This caused, or added to, serious communication and understanding problems. The analysis of hosts' performance during the dispute shows that the more high-profile and important the hosts are, the less the goal of objective and unbiased discussion may be achieved.

Shown below is the table which deals with the "*responsiveness*" of the hosts. *Host's responsiveness* is a ratio of the messages posted by a given host to all messages posted at his or her forum. Conversely, *host's indifference* is a ratio of the messages a host has gotten from participants to messages posted by the host himself or herself in response. In Table 2, the right column shows the total editorial indifference at each host's forum. It was measured as a ratio of the messages posted by participants to all editorial messages including messages from the host of a forum, hosts of other forums and the editor.

Table 2. Gatekeepers' Responsiveness

HOST	HOST'S INDIFFERENCE	TOTAL EDITORIAL INDIFFERENCE AT EACH HOST'S FORUM
Staub	54	16.6
Walker	16.8	10.3
Sells	9.2	7.8
Albright	176.5	29.4
McDonald	42	25.2

Neier	35	35
Dobos	109	54.5
Amanpour	133	66.5
Riedlmayer	3.6	2.7
Fink	21.1	15.1
Carter	19.8	8.8
Holtzer	10.4	9.1
Peress	5.8	5.8
Site Comments	-	7.5

We can see from Table 2 that Manuela Dobos, Christina Amanpour and Madeleine Albright were particularly *indifferent* during the discussion, while Andras Riedlemayer, Gilles Peress and Michael Sells were the most *responsive* of all the hosts (it should be noted that Mr. Peress interfered rather voluntarily, in the absence of a "proper" photography critic from the staff of the *Times*).

With the help of Bernard Gwertzman, who submitted 10 of his comments to the most popular (with 365 messages) and controversial forum *U.S. Interests, U.S. Achievements,* it was saved from being absolutely neglected by the host, Madeleine Albright. Yet, the assigned manpower of the *Times* was not enough to save some other sites, in particular that of Ms. Amanpour.

Good for TV prime-time talk shows, where the questions from audience may be selected or even ignored, the "host stars" approach has not worked out in cyberspace. Although there were some serious questions raised by participants, a number of comments regarding the stars' role in the Bosnian conflict has been insulting and unacceptable. So it is no wonder that both Albright and Amanpour chose to exclude themselves proudly from the dispute, diminishing the discussion level by doing so.

Thus, the two forums and host stars who were supposed to draw people to the discussion,

in fact, alienated and averted serious participants. Even if we could agree that getting big names can rouse the public interest, we should admit that one has to be cautious using them for keeping a serious discussion going. Unlike a talk show, a discussion on the Internet may last for weeks and even months -- for 24 hours a day. Few stars, if any, may be willing to dedicate themselves to such a marathon. Even if such devoted stars may be found, they should not have a controversial background, personally or in a manner related to the object of discussion. Otherwise, the dispute will unavoidably be reduced to these personal matters.

Most people who have found the site entered it through Gilles Peress' photo essay and were exposed to his compelling images. The essay, perhaps the first attempt of its kind, was definitely a landmark and a major success of the site. "Congratulations on excellent Web presentation that goes far beyond cute tricks to offer real communication of ideas and grim reality," wrote one of the spectators. Moreover, Gilles Peress, who wrote "I can barely type, and after all I'm a frog," also found time to really respond to spectators' questions and comments. The forum "with no host at all," but with Gilles Peress as a moderator by default, was the most successful one in the whole project.

Objectivity and Sensation at War

Apart from this and a few other forums at the site, the dispute basically evolved around the theme: "who's to blame." This negative approach, reinforced by existing stereotypes of the conflict in American mass media, sometimes created a deadlock in the discussion. As one of the participants wrote, "politicians are compelled to make decisions based on public opinion; public opinion of foreign wars is determined by news coverage; news coverage is sensationalized and simplified to maximize viewers." When the word combination "media war" attains its literal meaning, an attempt to resolve the conflict and reconcile the parties involved is greatly dependent on the objectivity of the media. In the project, the *Times* tried to combine objectivity and sensation, two things that are almost impossible to mix.

Perhaps, the best solution for coming projects like this would be, as one of the participants has suggested, to create a panel representing various perspectives that could answer questions posted by the public. It may be added that, in doing so, the "star factor" should be taken into consideration. In other words, the hosts selected for a dispute should have (or be perceived as having) as little bias as possible and be able to maintain dispassionate, objective discussion. To combine objectivity with human involvement, though, may seem almost impossible to achieve.

Conclusion

New media brought about new means of almost instant and border-free communication. Under these conditions of seemingly unlimited free access to information and its dissemination, chances are that the news media could find a way to increase its potential as mediators in international conflicts.

Yet being restrained by a political situation in which they operate, the media still fall under the concept of *tertius gaudens*, the third who rejoices (Arno, 1984). News organizations mostly profit from conflict of any kind. Were it not for conflict, they would not even exist. In order to function as news media, they need the conflict of others.

This fact alone makes the media a third party with a potential to resolve conflicts. There are many examples showing that, the more independent from two parties the *tertius gaudens* is, the more power it has. This fact is continually checked in internal U.S. conflicts only when the media had become financially independent from politicians could it express popular

opinion and, subsequently, serve as an arbiter for ever-conflicting political parties and movements.

In the *New York Times* project, the hosts who were suspected, rightfully or not, in an affiliation with one or another party in the conflict got frustrated over not-always-friendly mail, abandoned the discussion and, finally, made bad mediators themselves. On the other hand, the most successful forums were those in which the hosts were perceived as neutral and unbiased.

To be a third party in the conflict and be able to exert some degree of control over events, the media must carefully look at their representation before the audience.

In Internet forums, when ideas or opinions are perceived rather than images of anchors, new approaches should be tried to improve credibility of the news media and, consequently, their *tertius gaudens*' power of mediation in conflicts.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate particular policies.

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United States Institute of Peace -- 1200 17th Street NW -- Washington, DC 20036
(202) 457-1700 (phone) -- (202) 429-6063 (fax)
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