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The Media's Role in Preventing and Moderating Conflict

by Robert Karl Manoff

Our century has been characterized by organized group violence on an extraordinary scale. The figures are slippery, but it is safe to say that the human race has seen fit to engage in something like 250 significant armed conflicts in the course of this century, during which over 110 million people have been killed, and many times that number wounded, crippled, and mutilated.

The scale of this slaughter is something new in human history. Only 19 million people died in the 211 major conflicts of the Nineteenth Century; 7 million were killed in the Eighteenth, which was marked by a mere 55 significant wars. In fact, there have probably been as many casualties from mass violence in our century as in the rest of human history combined.

We have become sufficiently used to these numbers and the human suffering they represent that we forget how much more social violence we live with than did our ancestors, and how much more deadly it has become. Indeed, mass violence on a previously unimaginable scale has become universalized, industrialized, and routinized. Ours is the age of "ammunition affluence," in the words of John Keegan, the military historian, who noted in the midst of the Lebanese civil war that a typical small building in Beirut carried two or three thousand bullet holes. Large structures might have been hit up to two or three million times. "This is not just the nuclear age," he wrote. "It is also the age that has made ammunition junk, a throwaway commodity, like popcorn or wedding rice."

According to Ted Robert Gurr, who has done the most ambitious data gathering, every form of ethnopolitical conflict has increased dramatically since the 1950's: violent communal protests and open rebellion are both four times what they were a half century ago. Social violence, in other words, is now more likely to occur than at any other time in human history, and to be devastating in its consequences when it does so.

With this in mind, and for realpolitik, humanitarian, and moral reasons, we cannot avoid asking ourselves what more can be done in the common interest to reduce and prevent such

conflict and the suffering that attends it, with this proposition, few would disagree. But why invoke the media in this context? Because it is clear that, taken together, mass media technologies, institutions, professionals, norms and practices constitute one of the fundamental forces now shaping the lives of individuals and the fate of peoples and nations. To be sure, media influence is not evenly distributed in space or time and varies with circumstance. But, overall, media influence is significant, and increasingly so, and as a result the media constitute a major human resource whose potential to help prevent and moderate social violence begs to be discussed, evaluated, and, where appropriate, mobilized.

Over the past several years the NYU Center for War, Peace, and the News Media has been developing a program to explore related issues. In the course of doing so, we have begun to inventory media-based initiatives that have already been undertaken to minimize conflict or promote other prosocial ends. We are interested in journalism, but also in soap operas, public affairs programming, sitcoms, advertising, public-interest public relations, and social marketing. We are also exploring what governments can do through the policy process to promote the utilization of media resources for preventive purposes; and we are curious about how (through such prosaic means as professional exchanges and international fellowships) journalists and media professionals can enhance their own understanding of the potential of their medium and the obligations (if any) that derive from them.

The Center has an inventory of 100 initiatives, but given the scale of intergroup conflict, the complexities of the issues that underlie it, and the power of the mass media, these initiatives represent a tiny fraction of what potentially could be brought to bear if there were the interest and the will to do so.

As arresting as some of them may be individually, these initiatives represent a largely intuitive response to the challenge posed by conflict, based on little or no analysis of the media's potential roles or their actual capabilities, and produced on an ad hoc basis by a diverse and changing constellation of private enterprises, NGOs, governmental agencies, and multilateral institutions which communicate little and have had few opportunities to learn from one another.

Nevertheless, there are underlying strategies at work in each of these cases, and it may be worth tickling out some of them briefly prior to sampling a more systematic and comprehensive agenda for the media to pursue in situations where conflict looms or has already occurred.

"Capitol to Capitol," for example, the live, interactive broadcast between lawmakers in Washington and Moscow that was aired in 1986, a time of considerable superpower tension. "Capitol-to-Capitol" was notable for the way it placed leaders from the two countries in direct touch with each other in a non-confrontational setting, allowing them to respond as individuals and to experience their opposite numbers as individuals. By virtue of witnessing this humanizing exchange, the large audiences in each country were, like their leaders, expected to understand more about their country's adversaries and presumably come away from the spectacle both better informed and less antagonistic.

Something like this is also at work in the "Ism Project," which is making small video cameras available to college students to enable them to express their own perspectives on the intergroup conflicts often roiling their campuses. The personal "video diaries" that result will be broadcast to wider audiences, which is where the parallel to the spacebridge occurs. But the strategy of the video diary differs from that of the spacebridge in two respects. First, it involves grassroots participants in an active role and not merely as spectators. Second, the video diary has what might be called an "expressive dimension" that involves the projection of feelings and emotions not engaged in the formal discursive format of the spacebridge.

The video diary, then, is presumed to have a therapeutic dimension for those directly taking part, who can express feelings of denial or frustration that can contribute to the exacerbation of intergroup conflict. Moreover, this is something that the viewer of the edited, broadcast version senses, which arguably makes such a viewer's secondary experience all the more powerful.

Contrast both of these initiatives to "Radio Boat," which operated according to an entirely different strategic model. An initiative of a European NGO undertaken with financing from the European Union, Radio Boat was stationed in the Adriatic in 1993-1994, where it attempted to counteract the xenophobic propaganda being circulated in the former Yugoslavia with objective news and public affairs programming. Judged unsuccessful for a number of reasons (among them: the ship's signal couldn't be heard on the other side of the mountains that line the coast), Radio Boat nevertheless applied another, basically journalistic, approach to preventing conflict, counteracting assumedly false and incendiary information with what was deemed to be the "truth."

This was a dramatically different strategy from that being pursued by the Voice of America, whose radio series was also grouped under the "programming" rubric above, because VOA has determined that understanding the phenomenon of conflict and the conflict resolution process itself (rather than the facts of any particular case) can help its listeners manage individual and intergroup conflicts to which they may be a party. Both Radio Boat and VOA are pursuing information strategies, in other words, but the former attempted, to put it crudely, to counteract lies with the truth, while the latter is educating listeners to a process that will enable them to seek out truth about their antagonists or at least question lies about them on their own.

Aspects of several of the above initiatives have been combined in the Center's own project in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The Center was asked to design a pilot program for journalists that could help to minimize interethnic tension. We developed the "Inter-Ethnic Team Reporting Project" to bring together journalists from different ethnic news organizations (all news organizations there are de facto ethnic news organizations) to work together on stories concerning the country as a whole that were then published in identical form in each of the newspapers. The project proved to be a powerful experience for the journalists involved, none of whom had ever worked with their ethnic opposite numbers, and for their editors and fellow reporters. More important, the readers of the stories were exposed to material that took the "imagined community" of their common country as the important unit, instead of the ethnic communities of which it was composed.

Finally, several of the initiatives involved the media in some form of mediation between parties, a form of direct intervention that is practiced surprisingly often by the media but which is controversial among journalists when their attention is drawn to the practice, even though they may be engaged in it. For example, Walter Cronkite's on-the-air negotiation between Sadat and Begin led to the breakthrough trip by Sadat to Israel. Upon Nelson's Mandela's release from prison, Ted Koppel hosted a "Nightline" during which the newsman mediated between the newly free black leader and the prime minister of South Africa.

Ted Koppel mediated between whole communities in the Middle East, in a process in which his newsman's persona clearly establishes his authority to be undertaking his audacious mission. His goal here is the same as that of a mediator: to achieve agreement between contending parties.

This was also the goal of the "video dialogue" broadcast on "Peace Cafe," but in this case the parties to the communal conflict in the community of Crossroads, South Africa, were not even willing to come to the table themselves. Members of both groups spoke

independently to the cameras, and edited versions of each group's case were shown to the other group in a process that eventually spiraled into direct engagement of the parties through the mediating power of the video image.

For its part, the *Akron Beacon Journal's* Race Relations Project first undertook some striking reporting of racial issues in the city, using computer-assisted reporting techniques to provide arresting new information on the situation of the races in Akron to help explain the experience of Blacks and Whites to each other. In and of itself, such reporting fulfills certain conflict management roles by providing information to the parties. However, the paper took further extraordinary steps: It solicited the participation of community groups around the city in the process of reducing racial tension, organized meetings, collected 22,000 citizen pledges to work for racial harmony, and even hired professional facilitators to work with the 100 community groups it selected to carry on the work begun by the series. It is striking to note that the newspaper's actions in clearly overstepping the profession's nominal models of journalistic detachment were rewarded with a Pulitzer Prize.

To understand the significance of these initiatives we need to begin to unpack the role that they have played in a complex process of conflict prevention and management. These brief descriptions merely scratch the surface of what such an analysis might reveal inasmuch as the process of conflict intervention involves a complex set of psychological, social, political, and economic factors.

The point I would like to underline today is that nowhere in the media, diplomatic, or NGO communities is there now a clear, systematic sense of precisely what strategies ought to be pursued with what media means, or to what ends, in which kinds of conflict situations. These initiatives are undertaken for a wide variety of reasons, some of which are not even primarily those of conflict prevention. They are also undertaken with varying degrees of sophistication regarding both the process of conflict prevention and the potential of media-based initiatives.

In an effort to work toward understanding such issues, the Center has been developing a typology of the roles that the media could potentially play, drawing on conflict management theories of various stripes, negotiating theory in the diplomatic context, and on a wide range of other approaches to the prevention and management of conflict at the international and sub-state level. Such a typology is the starting point for the consideration of potential media roles, a way of thinking our way into the question, "What media-based initiatives would it be possible and appropriate to undertake in particular conflict situations?" In order to provide a flavor of how this work might proceed, a preview of potential and existing media roles follows. I should emphasize again that we are talking about all forms of media-related activity in any medium, at the local, national, international or transnational levels. The media could:

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- Promote and help enforce national or international norms regarding human rights, the conduct of war, the treatment of minorities, or other issues.

- Relay negotiating signals between parties that have no formal communication or require another way to signal.

- Focus the attention of the international community on a developing conflict, and by

doing so bring pressure on the parties to resolve it or on the international community to intervene.

- Establish the transparency of one conflict party to another.
- Engage in confidence building measures.
- Support international peacekeeping operations in countries where they are active and in countries contributing military contingents.
- Educate parties and communities involved in conflict, thereby changing the information environments of disputes, which is critical to the conflict resolution process.
- Identify the underlying interests of each party to a conflict for the other.
- Prevent the circulation of incendiary rumors and counteract them when they surface.
- Identify the core values of disputants, something that is often critical to helping them understand their own priorities and those of their opposite number.
- Identify and explain underlying material and psychological needs of parties to a conflict, clarifying the structural issues that are perceived to be at stake.
- Frame the issues involved in conflict in such a way that they become more susceptible to management.
- Identify resources that may be available to help resolve conflicts, or to mobilize outside assistance in doing so.
- Establish networks to circulate information concerning conflict prevention and management activities that have been successful elsewhere.

- Publicize what should be public and privatize what is best left private in any negotiating process, although the definitions in each case are likely to be highly contested and should not be taken for granted.
- De-objectify and rehumanize conflict parties to each other. Avoid stereotyping;
- Provide an outlet for the emotions of parties, the expression of which may be therapeutic in and of itself.
- Bring to bear international pressure on media organizations that promote xenophobia, racism, or other forms of social hatred;
- Encourage a balance of power among unequal parties where appropriate, or, where the claims of parties are not equally just, strengthen the hand of the party with the more compelling moral claim.
- Enable the parties to formulate and articulate proposed solutions by serving as a non-antagonistic interlocutor.
- Provide early warning of impending conflicts.
- Help leaders who are negotiating maintain credibility with their own constituents.
- Participate in the process of healing, reconciliation and social reconstruction following conflicts.
- Signal the importance of accords that end conflicts by historicizing them as important public occasions in order to embed the resolution process in shared social memories.

This is but a partial account of potential media roles. A fuller account would describe a complex set of activities undertaken by a great variety of factors operating from institutional bases in independent, multilateral, and governmental institutions in conflict situations of great diversity. Elaborating such a full account will require, over time, the combined efforts of media professionals, diplomats, conflict resolvers and diverse protagonists, among

others.

The process by which this could be done would be one of "social invention" in which the spontaneous, largely uncoordinated, but not random activities of diverse actors could create new institutions and behaviors. Journalism itself, in fact, is a product of precisely this process over time, as is the sitcom, soap opera, rap song, the portable radio and the Op-Ed page. It would be folly to believe that the history of the media has ended here, and that should a need be identified there does not exist the social imagination to meet it.

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