

Mediatizing peace

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It all started in 1997. The Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines in recognition of the power of the Internet in mobilising and enlisting worldwide support. From the small town of Putney, Vermont, Jody Williams used her e-mail account to coordinate the more than 700 organisations in over 60 countries that make up the coalition. The same year at a conference in Brussels, Nicholas Negraponte was arguing that the 'Internet will bring world peace by breaking down national borders.'

I had just moved to Brussels myself that year, to work as an EU and NATO correspondent for the Greek State Radio and to finish my PhD in international communication. It was my first major post abroad and I was determined and enthusiastic. I believed in my job and I was very proud of the function of journalism in society. But soon I was very disappointed. Consecutive crises between Greece and Turkey turned me and my Greek colleagues into government spin doctors at a European level. Again and again we would agree with our Turkish colleagues in Brussels that 'our' government propaganda was one-sided, but we nonetheless continued to broadcast it almost unquestionably. Like Don Quixotes we would pretend to fight for our independence but were 'forced' to self-censorship and wished to be like our Anglo-Saxon colleagues.

Ten years later, two World Trade Centre towers down, and two mass scale wars still raging, the use of mass media by state and non-state actors even in the Anglo-Saxon world seems quite different. The majority of the U.S. and U.K. journalists were the first to become 'patriotic' at the end of 2001, at the expense of their professional identity and performance. And although truly objective journalism has never existed outside the elitist minds of a few media professors and policy makers, the current state of affairs in the journalism world portrays a very unbalanced and indeed nationalistic picture, many steps backwards from our position in 1997.

At the same time, politicians around the world were given a free hand to pass legislation to abolish journalists' rights, under the excuse of 'anti-terrorism' measures, and they also got a free hand to attack the media when they did not follow the official government line. A prominent U.S. Republican Congressman has called on the Bush Administration to seek criminal charges against The New York Times for publishing details of a secret programme to monitor the financial transactions of thousands of Americans.

Peter King, chairman of the House of Representatives' Committee on Homeland Security, said that he was asking the attorney general to prosecute the reporters, editors and the publisher of the paper. 'We're at war, and for the Times to release information about secret operations and methods is treasonous,' he said. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that even the best

U.S. newspapers and major television networks self-censored [and still do] their coverage of the war in Iraq.

Media and ethno-political conflict

The causes of the eruption of ethnic conflicts are numerous. Alexander Costy and Stefan Gilbert observed that the main causes are: 'structural factors,' including economic, social, and political issues relating to wealth distribution and inter-ethnic relations; 'facilitating factors,' including the degree of politicisation and ethnic consciousness; and 'triggering factors,' including sharp economic shocks, intergroup tension and the collapse of central authority.

The media play a central role in the negotiation of all these factors. Although ethnic and national media cannot be blamed [at least not directly] for the creation of ethno-political conflicts, one can easily argue that they play an important role in their conduct. Daniel Goldhagen pointed out the historical function that the media had for the German nation in shaping the 'Other' (Jews) into an evil figure that needed to be exterminated. Recently, the conflicts in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, have generated significant literature regarding the media's role. In former Yugoslavia, the national media distinguished among the population the abusers – members of one ethnic group – and the victims – member of the other.

The Hutu-led Radio Television Mille Collines became one of the instruments for the escalation of the bloody conflict by broadcasting extreme messages of hatred against the Tutsi population and informing Hutus where they could find Tutsis to kill them during the genocide in Rwanda. These messages included threats along the lines of, 'You cockroaches must know you are made of flesh. We won't let you kill. We will kill you.'

Media and peace

Given the above discussion, what can journalists themselves actually do? The former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan himself stated: 'By giving voice and visibility to all people – including and especially the poor, the marginalised and members of minorities – the media can help remedy the inequalities, the corruption, the ethnic tensions and the human rights abuses that form the root causes of so many conflicts.'

For many journalists, though, the very idea of media-based intervention in situations of conflict is against the ethos of 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' fundamental to their profession. However, as

argued by Hans Van de Veen, the issue is not about taking sides in reporting conflict, since journalists are already a third party in any conflict they are covering. Constant subjective decisions that are necessarily made at every stage of a journalist's work make it apparent that assumptions of objectivity need to be taken with serious criticism and scepticism.

These decisions include how one chooses the topics to be reported, the particular elements of the story that 'ought' to be stressed, which interviewees are chosen and the particular parts of interviews quoted, the photographs to accompany the text, the overall presentation of the text, and finally the editorial decisions themselves.

All of these point to the ways in which journalists can only subjectively report events, and the fact that this subjectivity will be partly defined by their perceived role and stance in the conflict in question. Even by choosing to report or not report a particular situation, journalists may impact its outcome.

The immense human toll caused by conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Haiti, Chechnya, and northeast India are among the 'top ten' most under-reported humanitarian stories of 2005, according to the international humanitarian medical aid organisation Médecins Sans Frontières.

The eighth annual list also highlights the lack of media attention paid to the plight of people trapped by chronic wars in Colombia, northern Uganda, Ivory Coast, and the unrelenting crises in Somalia and southern Sudan.

Cyprus-Greece-Turkey and peace media intervention

Turkish, Greek and Cypriot relations have long suffered from chronic tension. This tension has intermittently increased in reaction to internal instability and/or external issues including territorial disputes in the Aegean, questions of minorities in both countries, and the military occupation of Cyprus. In addition to larger issues, smaller everyday incidents continue to embitter relations.

Considering the fact that 95% of Turkish people feel that Greeks are not to be trusted, although 93% have never actually met a Greek and that, at the same time, 73% of the Greek people feel that Turks are not to be trusted, although 70% of the Greeks have never actually met a Turk, it is obvious that much of the tension lies in mutual suspicion and fear, promulgated through social institutions such as education, religious communities, schools, families and – last but not least –

the mass media.

To address this problem of distrust, the NGO that I was working with, Search for Common Ground, realised four different programmes to facilitate improved communication between the two sides through the media. One of the programmes focused on the creation of specific radio and TV documentaries. Several issues pertinent to the conflict were explored.

One documentary dealt with the so-called 'children of Lausanne,' third generation refugees. After the ratification of the Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations of July 1923, the first generation, who underwent the 'exchange of populations,' was trying to survive and the second generation was occupied with settling and building up a decent life. The documentary took a closer look at the third generation and their ways of life in Greece and Turkey. The extent of adaptation, the notion of being immigrants and their future perspectives and expectations were the central subjects of the film.

Another film examined the everyday lives and human rights of women among the minorities of Cyprus, Greece and Turkey. This production aimed to investigate into the daily lives of a Cypriot, a Greek and a Turkish woman belonging to the minorities of the 'other.' Their position in the family and public life, their role as mothers, the idyllic side of their lives, as well as moments of inner family brutality that they usually suffer, their ways of spending free time in small villages without facilities of entertainment or leisure activities, wedding ceremonies and the system of dowries, were all considered.

Yet another subject of scrutiny was school history textbooks. Biased, or purportedly biased, history textbooks in these countries have been a reason for friction in the past. Today there is an effort in both Greece and Turkey to revise these books. Reporting and thus publicising widely these efforts was our main goal.

Three documentaries dealt with cultural activities and representations. We considered the common musical traditions of the two countries from the Byzantine and Ottoman times until today. A mixed group of Greeks, Armenians and Turks based in Istanbul 'travelled' with the audience through the centuries of musical influences and developments in the region. We also looked at important religious festivals and modes of celebration in Cyprus, Greece and Turkey. The project showed various festivals in the three countries and then moved on to habits and festivity days that have also been adopted by 'the other'.

One example was the celebration of St. George day in Turkey that is attended by some 40,000 Muslims every year. Also shown were the Eastern Sacrifice, and the Christian liturgy in Turkish in the Italian Church in Istanbul. Finally, the Patriarch in Istanbul and the religious leaders of Turkey

were invited to discuss issues of the past conflicts as well as possible ways for religious tolerance today.

In addition, we presented a portrait of mixed Greek-Turkish and Greek and Turkish Cypriot marriages and their families. The project dealt with the lives and experiences of mixed Turkish-Greek families in both countries: the prejudices and stereotypes they meet, their difficulties in giving their children a bilingual education, acceptance of their lives by their families, friends and authorities.

Overall, our experience showed that the 'design' of media content toward constructive communication, breaking the cyclical nature of communication prevalent in ethnic conflicts, could be summarised in ANC leader Andrew Masondo's words: 'Understand the differences; act on the commonalities.' For this to materialise through the media content we followed two general principles.

First, in order to understand differences, individuals belonging to groups in conflict need to mentally revisit those moments when wounds to self-respect occurred. According to Joseph Montville, this process helps the peoples of the 'opposing' parties reactivate the mourning process to a point of reasonable completion. It is only from that point that these peoples may become able to trust again in their relationships with former enemies and to regain some faith in their common future. Of course, there are critiques of such an approach, with scholars of international relations, history, and social psychology as well as practitioners questioning the value of revisiting the past, the definition of wounds, and the issue of trust and whether that is a necessary part of any reconciliation effort.

Second, in order to act on the commonalities, the media content should promote identities other than ethnicity. There should be an attempt to build trans-ethnic identities. Such identities can assist the audience in finding common ground and developing ties based on common interests.

Media content that reveals different groups of the societies in conflict – women and youth, environmentalists and business people, academics and ravers – can contribute significantly to the creation and strengthening of alternative identities and understanding of commonalities among the 'enemies.'

Conclusions

Cees Hamelink argues that society needs diversity to maintain itself, just like an ecosystem. With the extermination or suppression of one 'species' [e.g., peace activism], others become free to multiply too fast at the expense of some [e.g., extremists], decreasing diversity and reducing the complexity of the system, and making it less defensible against destruction. Through our experience working with the Greek and Turkish media, we noted that an apparent lack of pluralism restricted diversity and the emergence of new cultural movements, such as the peace and rapprochement movements.

Central to the existence of these cultural movements is the right to freedom and access to public communication, and the transformation of the media to a more pluralistic state. In order for such a transformation to materialize, the positive role of peace-building media interventions like our documentaries becomes imperative.

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