



THE HUMANITARIAN ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN CONFLICT

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There are compelling examples of how the mass media has played a positive role in peace-building. For instance, Radio Duwanza is situated in a remote region south west of Timbuktu in Mali and broadcasts to an estimated 126,000 people. The station is run by a local NGO with a staff of six. Education is important, with series on health, farming, literacy, the environment and women's rights –all approached from a local perspective. In an area devoid of other local information sources, Radio Duwanza fulfils a key role as an outlet for self-expression and local culture.

But a local conflict between farmers and herders has been getting worse over the past 20 years, as drought has hit grazing land and populations have expanded. Competition over the available viable agricultural and pastoral land has grown intense, with the annual flashpoint being harvest time when the herders often attempt to drive their animals across the arable land before the crops have been harvested. Traditionally, farmers and herders have been interdependent, exchanging grazing land for the benefit of animal manure.

Concerned by the escalation of the conflict, the Radio Duwanza staff decided to use their influence to damp down the conflict in the following ways.

1. They developed a series of public service announcements reminding the farmers and herders about their traditional collaboration and advising restraint. The spots started using a local proverb: 'If the yolk and the white of an egg do not agree, the eggshell breaks! Farmers and herders are both worried etc. etc.' In other words, everyone is a loser if there is fighting.
2. They reported any incidents very promptly so that the local administration could intervene before the conflict got out of hand
3. The simplest and most effective ploy: they encouraged farmers to post messages on the radio as to when they would be finished harvesting. The herders were listening to Radio Duwanza, and they knew when they could safely move across these particular fields.

What emerges here is the importance of the radio journalist's local

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knowledge. A key to a successful media intervention in conflict is understanding the complexities of the situation. This is also vital for the safety of the staff involved. Understanding is valid for both outside providers and for indigenous media, whose perception of the conflict is likely to be conditioned by their own experiences and loyalties.

For outside organisations, rapid research has to be carried out, and reliable informants and partners recruited. Some of the key areas which conflict analyst Mary Anderson believes need to be identified, she calls “connectors”: in every society at war, the groups that are divided and fighting also remain connected to each other in some ways¹. Very often people continue to trade with each other across warring lines. Sometimes, they share and agree to maintain infrastructure. Sometimes, people from different sides of a conflict form groups intended to overcome the divisions of warfare. Mary Anderson contends it is important for the peace-builders to understand what these connectors are, as they are positive aspects of society that can be built on. For instance, if there is a tradition in one part of the country of women brokering peace, then perhaps this is an example which can be highlighted by the media and emulated elsewhere. It is also important to identify inequality and oppression, gauge the population’s attitude towards them, and identify culturally appropriate frameworks with which to question them.

Anderson suggests that peace-builders should work to open alternative “mental and physical spaces” to allow this questioning to occur. This could involve thought-provoking newspaper articles, personal testimonies of civilians caught up in a conflict beyond their control, or the use of a radio “soap opera”. The objective of all of them is the same: to raise contentious issues in a way that stimulates constructive debate, and begin to question the “status quo”.

The “connector” in the case of the Duwanza dispute was the interdependence between the farmers and herders, and it was the emphasis on keeping this collaboration going in the face of the stresses of drought that led to the resolution of the conflict.

An example of the media in Afghanistan using “connectors” is through a collaboration with health agencies which as UNICEF and WHO –the World Health Organisation– over NIDs –National Immunisations Days. The deal offered by the international agencies to the warlords was: enforce a ceasefire for a day or two and we will immunise your children.

About ten years ago, the BBC played a significant role in facilitating this. Through interviews with health agency staff, ordinary people whose children were at risk, Afghan opinion formers such as religious leaders and so on, the moral pressure mounted on the warlords to the extent that they agreed to the ceasefire. This was a remarkable achievement –the first ceasefire in 15 years of war, and there have been a number of other NIDs since then.

A similar non-confrontational approach is also taken by the American

NGO *Search for Common Ground*. They have operated for some years now in Burundi, where they have started Studio Ijambo, which employs both Hutu and Tutsi journalists in order to present a balanced view of the war to listeners. The journalists are paired –a Hutu and a Tutsi– when reporting ethnic violence. They produce programmes for broadcast on the national radio station RTNB. Over the years they have had a considerable impact through pushing the boundaries of government censorship, which moved from banning all quotes of rebel leaders to allowing them to speak on the national radio station. Significantly, once rebel leaders realised that they were being given airtime in Burundi, they began to soften the content of their public statements, making them less inflammatory.

Studio Ijambo believes it is important to avoid stereotyping the other ethnicity. Another programme, *Inkingi Y'Ubuntu*, or 'Pillars of Wisdom', is about Hutus who saved Tutsis, and Tutsis who saved Hutus during the years of crisis.

Mary Anderson thinks that that the staffs of international agencies who work in conflict areas are very often unaware of such connectors. In the midst of overwhelming and constant inter-group violence, there is a tendency to overlook the range of structures by which warring people retain some connection. There is, she believes, always a "zone of order" in a chaotic situation, which will facilitate an understanding of the overall conflict.

For instance, in South Africa, progressive journalists have learned they can create neutral spaces for mediation by stepping out of the "warrior-culture" paradigm, and adopting instead the African philosophical concept of "ubuntu", or humanity. Folklore and human courage stories can be re-framed within the "ubuntu" concept.

An excellent example of this was the Cape Town organisation *The Media Peace Centre's* use of community video to reduce tensions in the township of Thokosa, near Johannesburg, where over two thousand people died between 1990 and 1994 in clashes between the ANC and Inkatha loyalists. The two main peace builders within the process were two commanders who were former rivals, Thabo Kwaza of the ANC and Wiseman Ndebele of Inkatha. After consulting with the community, it was decided to use video as a tool to open a space for dialogue between those in conflict. Though the reconciliation process was initially fraught, the Thokoza community came to the conclusion after watching the video and discussing it, that it was largely political rhetoric that was dividing their community and that everyone longed for peace. After this process, cross-community groups were set up to mediate on some of the key problems that had divided them, including housing provision. A community newspaper, *Simunye News*, was set up. Simunye translates roughly as "we are one".

There is a trend with these projects –they are not simply broadcasting campaigns using a message-based approach to persuade people to be

more reasonable to each other and stop fighting. They are all very subtle, well-researched projects, involving the close participation of the community, and making significant contributions to the community over the long term.

For example, another *Search for Common Ground* radio project in Sierra Leone called “Talking Drum Studio” (TDS) undertakes a number of activities to fulfil its overall goal to: “strengthen communities to participate in building a tolerant, inclusive society for sustainable peace”. They include setting up 5 community radio stations, equipping them and training staff, forging close links with community groups –not just strong ones, but weaker ones as well- and creating good working relationship with the Chiefs, the Army and the Police as well as community groups.

Less than two years into the project, an evaluation² concluded that its impact had been considerable.

In terms of Law and Order, radio programmes publicised police efforts to gain trust of the people. According to Chris Charley, Assistant Commissioner of Sierra Leone Police in Freetown, “TDS helps the police in our new community policing role. We have partnership boards all over the country now. Before, we were masters over the people, but now one of the cardinal changes is that we’re trying to come closer to people.” There is a connector here –radio coverage is supporting the new community role of the police and helps increase crime reporting. Also, TDS carries regular personal messages from soldiers to their families –and so it is well liked by the army as well.

Service Provision: local radio is increasingly able to hold government officials and other public figures to account. In Makeni, Radio Mankneh runs a popular phone-in programme where local functionaries and representatives of Government of Sierra Leone Departments and Services are invited to the studio to answer such questions as: ‘Why haven’t the roads been mended?’, ‘Why isn’t the market rehabilitated yet?’, ‘Why do patients have to wait so long to be seen at the hospital?’, and ‘Why have all the doctors gone to Freetown?’. The evaluation commented that radio has “contributed significantly towards changes in officials’ behaviour, if not their attitudes.” It also noted a reduction in petty corruption –for instance, overcharging fishing permits, hospital staff demanding unlawful payments, because the correct procedures were better known through radio broadcasts.

Extending discourse: rape victims have spoken live on-air, something considered very bold in Sierra Leonean society. Other taboo subjects such as sex and polygamy are now being discussed openly by ordinary people in towns and villages -something unheard of a few years ago.

There was also an impact on good governance: according to Doris Bengie of the Sierra Leone Women’s Forum in Kailahun, “8 women emerged victorious in the local council elections, in a predominantly male dominated society; this has come about as a result of persistent sensitisation on women’s role in politics and related issues; women of

Kailahun district now have a voice and recognition since they can now speak out more confidently in public, which they never did before”. The evaluation commented: “there has been an undisputed and significant improvement in women’s participation in the political processes and their representation in leadership and decision-making positions as a result of a combination of information disseminated through various radio strands”.

So, why has “Talking Drum Studio” been so successful? One important factor, according to the evaluation team, was the partnerships that *Search* linked into or motivated in order to bring about change. People’s attitudes and behaviours do not generally change because of media campaigns alone –they need to be supported by the authorities and community organisations in the host countries. A second reason is that their definition of “peace-building” is very wide –less corruption, increased participation in community affairs, greater gender awareness, HIV/AIDS, domestic violence, post-conflict trauma are all legitimate topics if your aim is to reduce violence and the causes of violence.

These imaginative initiatives illustrate a number of pointers to successful media peace-building interventions:

They were pro-active, not reactive, which is the media norm.

They took on attainable objectives –in both cases, to reduce tension within a specific community– “doing the do-able” in the words of the veteran conflict resolver, Dudley Weeks.

They were local, well researched and jointly mounted by trusted representatives of the warring communities.

Where required, there was a partnership with an outside specialist mediation organisation.

They provided communication tools to promote dialogue, to examine the root causes of the conflict, to “humanise” the opposing sides and thereby to help the reconciliation process.

The video in Thokosa served as an emotional catharsis for a highly traumatised community.

The interventions were not short term –it was not just a matter of making a voyeuristic video and then walking away and moving on to the next conflict that needed resolving. In all cases there was extensive follow up, to see the reconciliation process through.

These are some principles behind the creative thinking by broadcasters on how to use their skills as communicators to ameliorate conflict, if not always to resolve it.

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1 Anderson, Mary: *Do no Harm; how Aid can support Peace – or War*.
Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999.

2 *Evaluation of search for common ground activities in Sierra Leone*
Undertaken for Search for Common Ground and DFID, Paul Everett,
Tennyson Williams & Mary Myers, August 2004.

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