


Media and Peacebuilding: Mapping the Possibilities

BY ROSS HOWARD

Since 1998, IMPACS has been exploring and developing media as a peacebuilding tool in regions such as South-East Asia. Now, under contract to CIDA and with European partners, IMPACS is assembling the first “framework” or wide-ranging description of policies and strategies for media in peacebuilding. The project aims to define the types of media, the conflict situations and entry points for media interventions, the key questions to determine the scope of intervention, the best techniques to evaluate the progress and outcome, and to identify the lessons already learned. The project outcome, aimed at NGOs, funders, media, policy makers, academics and the public, will be released by summer 2001. For more information about the Framework, contact IMPACS at media@impacs.org.

The good news is that the media can be highly effective in reducing conflict in strife-ridden societies. International agencies and non-government organizations (NGOs) are increasingly convinced that an unbiased and diverse media ranks almost as high as emergency relief in countries facing or active in war. Reliable information – such as where to get food, when is it safe to return, what common ground exists among all sides – is an essential element of stabilizing a society. In countries moving towards democratic government, a free and accountable media, one that monitors rights abuses and promotes divergent opinions, helps deter a return to violence. A biased or hate-mongering media can sabotage almost any other peacebuilding effort.

But the role of media in conflict resolution is still evolving and is deceptively complex. The definition of media, the Western traditions of journalistic neutrality and commercial imperatives, the distinction between peace programming and propaganda, all need clarification. And the potential – consider the reach of a single transmitter – deserves far greater recognition in the field of conflict resolution.

One useful tool for mapping out the potential is to view the media as several stages in a continuum of intervention. The continuum can help NGOs determine how to approach and effectively use the media. It is also useful to conventional journalists in examining their work and the potential impact of that work, beyond traditional limitations. 

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Stage One is conventional journalism as we know it in Western countries. In this “as we see it” style, reporters practice what is called objective or neutral journalism, reporting just the facts and suppressing biases and taking no responsibility for consumer reactions. The potential for peacebuilding here lies in promoting the basics of journalism skills and ethics, through training, and in fostering the democratic institutions – legislated media freedoms, broadcast standards, etc.

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Stage Two requires higher standards and a sense of journalistic responsibility. It requires consciously avoiding Western or cultural stereotypes, sensationalization, and recklessness such as exposing interviewees to persecution. For peacebuilders, the opportunity lies in sensitizing journalists and advancing the infrastructure of a free media, including independent diverse sources and modern technology.

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Stage Three is journalism struggling with the consequences of neutrality which can become complicity. This new journalism assumes a responsibility for what comes of the reporting of events; it seeks stories which maximize the chance for peacebuilding. It can be advocacy and still be objective. There are war correspondents; why not peace correspondents? Peacebuilders’ intervention here can help journalists fulfill the role of reconciliation – by training in conflict resolution – rather than ripping a society apart.

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Stage Four is beyond conventional journalism driven by competitive, commercial or political advantage-seeking, and into constructive media for the express purposes of peacebuilding. Sometimes it includes having journalists play the role of facilitators, bringing divergent perspectives to the table. Often it is program-based, using purchased time or independently-established outlets including publications, television studios, radio transmitters or the internet to supply education, health, resettlement or other practical information. The UN now builds this programming into every peace-making intervention. NGOs are building a track record in working with local communities to use this media constructively.

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Stage Five is directly interventionist media programming, which includes and extends beyond conventional techniques to use soap operas, street theatre, videos and comic books – in other words, whatever it takes to get out a message crafted to foster peaceful resolution of conflict. It includes cartoon programming aimed at former child soldiers in Angola and Sierra Leone, multilingual advice for refugees from Rwanda, and a soap opera for hostile neighborhoods in Kosovo. It is programming with an intended outcome in mind, to foster society “as we’d like it.” It is a long way from conventional “as we see it” journalism. It is creative, effective and a rapidly expanding opportunity for peacebuilders.

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