

# **MEDIA AND THE PROMOTION OF PEACE AND RECONCILIATION: A CHALLENGE UNMET**

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## **Introduction**

Few things are more powerful than the media. No. Let me correct myself. No thing, I believe, is stronger than the media. The media hold humanity captive in their embrace. People have an insatiable thirst for news. They must have it. They cannot live without information, without some idea of what is happening around them and to them. The media is there to satisfy this most basic of humanity's needs.

The media impact directly on the mind and the emotions. They shape perceptions, evoke sentiments and condition behaviour. What they headline determine the agenda for discourse. What they relegate to the back pages or filter out get little or no public attention. Their interpretation and analysis of the information they gather influences views and attitudes. What the most powerful media choose to glorify, and what they chose to vilify, can set the trend.

The advent of globalisation and instantaneous, real-time communication have further empowered the media. The most prominent media are now truly global forces, reaching us in our offices and homes at all hours of the day and night.

With such profound and pervasive power in their hands, one would have expected the media to have been able to do more in the service of the good. This expectation is well placed and only proper, for beyond the core business of collecting, processing and communicating information, responsible and respected media everywhere have dedicated themselves to highlighting and promoting issues that make for a better world. Indeed, in many areas they have. But in the field of promoting peace, the media have been able to do less than little.

## **Reasons why the media have not been able to meet the challenge of peace**

The reasons for this are many, and some of them are clearly no fault of the media's. I would like to dwell a little on some of these reasons – five to be specific – for they will be relevant to the proposals I will make about how the media can play a more active role in promoting peace.

The media's primary function is to report things as they are, and as developments unfold. The reports may have a negative effect on the prospects for peace, and for any negotiations underway, but the media cannot refrain from reporting just to protect the potential for peace. Similarly, images of the carnage caused by bombs dropped from Israeli aircraft or bombs delivered in person by Palestinian suicide bombers may further enrage the other side and sharpen hostilities, but they nevertheless need to be aired even in sanitised form.

The media must also keep an eye on circulation, advertisements and revenue. In a highly commercialised world, the owners and shareholders demand ever increasing profits. It is no surprise therefore if the media pander to popular preference and taste, are prone to sensationalism, focus on the “bad” news rather than the bland positives, and give much more space and prominence to incidents of violence and conflict rather than initiatives for peace and reconciliation. The need to keep up with the competition and respond to community preferences cannot be over-emphasised. CNN Atlanta for instance was once more like CNN London and CNN Hong Kong. Its coverage of American policies and action in West Asia was more balanced and occasionally highly critical. Now it has been obliged to be more like Fox News. I like to believe that the motive was purely economic and there was no political persuasion.

Third, the media are often wooed or coerced into service by conflicting parties, or they are used by the contending sides to flay their adversaries in pursuit of their cause. The power of the media make them primary targets for conversion or

coercion by the dominant side. The media thus end up becoming a vehicle of war rather than a vehicle for peace. Soon the media begin to adopt the language, dialectics and imagery of the powers they serve. The media begin to deify that which the dominant power deifies, and demonise that which the dominant power demonises. The captions we see at the bottom of our television screen when a conflict is being covered for instance, sometimes become a faithful replica of the virtuous name given to the military operation by the dominant force. Obviously, media such as this will not be regarded as neutral, and they will lack the credibility for engaging in the reporting and making of peace.

Fourth, it is difficult to sustain public interest in peace processes that tend to be extended over several years and are often dull and not very news-worthy. The public tends to have a morbid interest in news of war rather than in news of peace.

I would like to mention one other factor. Despite impressive archives of material and many quality analyses accumulated by outstanding media like the BBC, media in general lack the specialised and in-depth knowledge and skills that effective reporting and advocacy for peace demands. Reporting and advocacy for peace also requires journalists that can appreciate the other point of view, and rise above the confines of narrow national interest, ethnicity, religion and culture, as well as the prejudices and biases they can engender when analyzing conflicts and adversaries. This is often not easy.

### **Meeting the challenge of reporting for peace**

How can the media play a more active and effective role in the making of peace? There are of course, many things interested media can do. I will mention just three, but they all begin with acceptance of one singular premise. We must be pragmatic. The weak cannot demand too much. They cannot be too choosy. In the end they will in all likelihood be obliged to accept a settlement that is not exactly balanced. But I believe that the peace that the media should advocate must at heart be a just peace, peace with dignity.

This is not just a cliché. Peace can be imposed by the gun of a dictator. It can be enforced by the occupying force of a far more powerful foreign or neighbouring power in flagrant violation of international law. Peace can be achieved by simply decimating all resistance. But such peace will not last, because the oppressed and the vanquished will always nurse powerful grievances, and they will eventually rise to fight again. Such peace is also not a worthy cause for responsible media, because it is founded on coercion, illegitimacy and the violation of a people's inalienable rights, rights which we ourselves would be prepared to fight and die for, with whatever meager means we have at our disposal, if we were in their place.

One of the things media can do to be more actively and constructively engaged in the reporting and making of peace is to give regular and adequate air-time and print space to matters of peace. A daily one-hour Forum for Peace on 24-hour TV news channels, or a weekly page in newspaper dailies would be a beginning. The exercise will involve not just balanced and objective reporting and discourse, but also giving sufficient exposure to arguments on all sides and providing coverage and prominence to figures and movements for peace. If selected media are prepared to do this, they will discover a surprisingly large and diverse peace community eager to respond.

Second, selected media could make greater effort to become independent and credible vehicles for peace rather than being instruments of their respective security cultures and commercial and political patrons. This will not be easy, but it need not be as difficult as it seems either. Respectable journalism already has well-developed guidelines and codes of ethics to make this possible.

Members of the extensive Society of Professional Journalists for instance, have adopted a code that makes it incumbent upon them to seek the "truth", be "fair" and maintain "professional integrity". The code requires members to "test the accuracy of information"; reject and avoid "deliberate distortion"; "make sure

that headlines ... do not misrepresent”; “examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others”; “give voice to the voiceless”; “be vigilant and courageous about holding those in power accountable”; and “abide by the same high standards to which they hold others”.

If respected media adhere closely to guidelines and codes such as this, they will question for instance, how the capture of a single soldier or just two soldiers for purely prisoner swap bargaining purposes, can be used as a pretext to kidnap half the members of a democratically elected and legally appointed cabinet, and systematically pound and destroy the infrastructure of an entire people (Palestinians in Gaza) or a whole nation (Lebanon). All on the pretext of exercising “the right to self-defence.” Instead of questioning this, the media obligingly reports this farcical claim, every hour on the hour for the next few days.

The media will also raise other issues and pose other important and necessary questions too. They will question how groups that identify themselves with a religion whose very name means “peace”, can glibly call themselves Muslims even as they blow up buildings, trains and schools full of people, including women and children.

The media will marvel at the ironic spectacle of countries armed to the teeth and beyond with nuclear weapons, demonizing and threatening another nation with dire consequences for perhaps, just perhaps, aspiring to possess a nuclear weapon.

They will wonder why only groups that carry out sporadic attacks against civilians can be called “terrorists”, while states that are guilty of far more hideous crimes against hapless other countries and their peoples do not qualify. The media will be more curious about how some of them come to adopt the language of the aggressor, when they call groups (including stone-throwing children) that are fighting to liberate their land “militants”, while they call the occupying force by

the name it calls itself, a “self defense force”. Why not just call the former “freedom fighters” and the latter an “occupying force”?

Third and most importantly, the media are well placed to help foster a strong and enduring culture of peace. Their focus in this field will be to build robust foundations for such a culture. The activities could include disseminating values conducive to peace such as respect for the sanctity of life and respect for rights within and across borders. Interested media could campaign for the strict observance of international law, and the severest of sanctions for violating it, no matter who is guilty of the violation. The media can act with courage to discredit unjust war and disgrace the voices, movements and powers that counsel such war.

Above all, the media should expose and thoroughly dismantle the self-serving, self-fulfilling and destructive logic of the so-called “realist” school. The realist philosophy underpins relations between nations now. It casts international relations in adversarial terms, and we are told that this is self-evident and we should accept this as a fact of life. It has helped legitimise the use of power, emphasises the exercise of the military instrument and indirectly encourages permissiveness towards hegemony. It has been used to justify many wars and it has wreaked untold destruction on this planet. It is used to fuel the most unlikely threat perceptions so that more can be spent on enhancing military power. Obviously, the most powerful and wealthy nations and military business interests have a vested interest in promoting this ideology, because it serves their interests best.

The role of the media in this case could be to question the validity and assumptions of the realist school, and to champion an alternative model of intercourse among nations that rests essentially on cooperation, not conflict. This model will stress that security is common and indivisible, and thus can only be

attained through cooperation and not conflict. It will emphasise mutual and intertwined interests in a rapidly integrating global village, peaceful norms for international behaviour, and the strengthening of the regime of international law, for there is no other way to durable and just peace. It will not argue against the relevance of the military instrument. It will argue though, for the assumption of military capabilities sufficient only for credible deterrence and no more.

If interested media are ready to take on this role, they must be prepared for a long and tough struggle. Their case must be well-researched and well-articulated, because proponents of the so-called realist school – and they are many, they are powerful and they are influential – will be out to demolish them.

The challenge of peace is a challenge worthy of the noble aspirations of respected media. It is a challenge that has so far not been met.

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