Conflict sensitive journalism: Where does it fit in?

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1. Rationale and definitions
2. Caveats
3. Case studies.
4. Trends and challenges

Definitions and rationale:

For 30 years agencies of development and peace such as the UN and individual countries in the west have dedicated some attention to capacity-building of the news media in states in transition. It reflected western libertarian views of the news media as a professionally non-partisan and independent institution, enabling well-informed citizen decision-making by providing news dissemination, free expression, and government accountability.

As part of their objectivity, media workers were considered professionally disengaged from, and effectively insensitive to, the outcome of their work.

Several hundred million dollars cumulatively have been devoted to international aid for media development,1 most of it for training and education in countries in

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post-conflict transition. Two examples are the large efforts of USAID in Latin America in the 1980s and later in the former Soviet Union.\(^2\)

The words peacebuilding and conflict resolution rarely came into early descriptions of these initiatives. Democratic assistance was a commonly stated objective. News media development was not seen as a specific and integral instrument of conflict resolution.

Most journalism developers today still distance media development from peacebuilding initiatives for fear of what may be involved in those programs. A recent USIP paper on developing media in stabilization and reconstruction operations specifically recommends that “efforts to develop local media institutions should be undertaken separately from attempts to develop strategic communications.”\(^3\)

Nonetheless many media development initiatives today refer to at least indirect benefits of media development for peacebuilding. It is a logical enough assertion: a reliable, independent and diverse media would inevitably enable democratically-inclined societies to better resolve conflicts without violence.

However, by the late 1990s and prominent instances of irresponsible media inciting and directing violent conflict, as in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, turned developers’ attention to the opposite power of the media -- to define conflict issues and influence public opinion towards a well-informed response of non-violent resolution.


\(^3\) Bajaktari, Yll and Hsu, Emily, *Developing Media in Stabilization and Reconstruction Operations*, USIP. Washington. 2007.
Donors and media intervenors initially focused on the post-conflict environment of countries damaged by civil wars. And that remains the dominant mode.

Some initiatives have been launched in a number of states suffering low-level deadly conflict including Nepal and Sri Lanka and Indonesia and Afghanistan. Largely the work is conducted among media within government-held areas rather than among the insurgents.

But as Marie-Soleil Frere observes in her study of Central African conflicts, faced with multiple factions and ill-assorted militias largely dedicated to exploiting a country’s resources and people 4 most NGOs and international agencies prefer to await the reconstruction opportunity at the end of the conflict. Somalia is a case in point.

Nonetheless, within the last decade the news media has gained some recognition as a facilitator of conflict resolution.5

At least two streams of media development focus have emerged. One is an expansion of conventional journalism capacity-building but with specific reference to addressing conflict. The other employs news media techniques and technologies for programming intended to change attitudes and behaviour. I will speak about the former. I’m delighted the experts from Search for Common Ground are here to discuss the latter.

Several researchers have sketched the linkage between journalism and conflict resolution.6

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4 Frere, Marie-Soleil, *The media and conflicts in Central Africa*, Lynne Rienner. Boulder/London. 2007. Also see:
Professional media by their mere existence and practise can execute a positive influence towards peacebuilding, through:

- providing non-partisan news and reports about different opinions (including the views of the “others”),
- contributing to knowledge about politics, local issues and conflictive issues, and
- enabling consensus-building.

I call these the innate conflict-reduction roles of reliable journalism. Others have compared this journalistic work -- such as establishing communication, dispelling myths, de-objectifying “the other” - to the aims of diplomats and conflict negotiators. Paraphrasing South African researcher Hannes Baumann, reliable journalists mediate conflict whether they intend to or not.

There is also the possibility of making their work more relevant to conflict resolution, by training journalists in rudimentary conflict analysis. This involves teaching them how to identify violent conflict’s original causes such as resource inequity or unresolved grievances.

It involves identifying cultural and structural forms of violence within societies, such as hate speech, gender discrimination, and corruption.


This process also instructs journalists how to avoid manipulation by agenda-driven sources, and avoid stereotyping and inflammatory language.

This kind of specialized awareness is sometimes called conflict sensitive reporting.

Researcher Jake Lynch suggests the conflict-sensitive journalist tends to:

- Take an analytical approach to conflict, seeking opportunities to identify parties, goals, needs and interests.
- Project a multiparty conflict model rather than a Manichean “tug-of-war.”
- Find room for perspectives from beyond the usual official sources.
- Seek out peace initiatives as well as opportunities to report on them.

Lynch has authored a number of works on what he calls Peace Journalism. Some interpret him as going beyond journalistic neutrality to peace advocacy, but that issue may be more a question of framing.

In my own view conflict-sensitized reporting does not turn journalists into intentional advocates for peace. That would exceed professional standards of independent reporting. But undeniably, conflict resolution is given new prominence in the trained journalists’ minds and in their work, as an equally legitimate subject of inquiry,

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10 Spurk, Christoph, Media, Peacebuilding and Civil Society, presented to the International Studies Association annual convention. San Francisco. 2008. Available at:
along with the conventional reporting of conflict symptoms such as body counts, victimized citizens and traditional focus on elites.

Conflict sensitive journalism fits within a framework of media development initiatives. It more specifically addresses the media’s role in conflict resolution than do conventional training and support programs. It remains informational programming which can enable cognitive change, or perhaps attitudinal change.

2. So what does it look like? What is working?

First, a caveat. Confirming the value of conflict sensitive reporting is difficult.

To cite a recent overall assessment of the 10 years and some hundred million dollars worth of media work in the Balkans -- based partially on 37 other assessments and evaluations: almost all of the 37 reports claimed success, improvement and progress. But “no reliable statistical information is available on media interventions in the region.” The claim of success is usually based on the straightforward completion of the intended activities, such as training 40 reporters or extending newscasts to 60 minutes per day. But the impact that had on journalistic quality, let alone on public attitudes, remains unknown. “Evaluations employing more complex, expensive and time-consuming impact assessment techniques exceptionally rare,” says the report.

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This problem of substantive evaluations of what works in media interventions is not unique to the Balkans.\textsuperscript{14} The US Government Accounting Office has similarly noted that, globally, the tools cited as performance indicators, such as the Media Sustainability Index and the Freedom House rankings, simply measure the status of the affected media but “are of limited utility in measuring the specific contributions’ of the programs.\textsuperscript{15}

That said, what case studies or at least examples, of conflict-oriented media interventions, or conflict sensitive journalism development for peacebuilding, can we consider?

Case studies:


The post-election violence that erupted last December in Africa’s most prosperous and formerly stable democracy gave most Kenyan journalists their first experience in reporting on a devastating political crisis. At least 1,000 people were killed in civil violence, many more were injured and hundreds of thousands of Kenyans were displaced.

Within the media there was extensive self-censorship, government suppression, and violent attacks on media personnel, and exceptionally weak and sometimes inflammatory coverage of the crisis. Many Kenyan journalists have since concluded that they were badly unprepared and made serious mistakes which


extended the violence. 16 The current coalition government is considered extremely fragile and widespread violence could easily resume. 17

With the objective of reducing inflammatory media reporting, a group of international media developers quickly convened workshops among Kenyan journalists and managers to first address their trauma, and then develop journalism training sensitive to the violence-prone environment. 18

Since January 2008, the strategy has lead to safety training of Kenyan, conflict sensitive journalism and conflict trauma counselling, prioritises for longer-term support for media in Kenya and possibly reform of Kenya’s media regulatory environment.

Outcomes?
This is a very concise initiative. Although international funders have underwritten the cost, it is basically devised and delivered by self-interested parties – the media in Kenya and international media developers. Their self-interest reflects their belief in the media as a public service, to inform, enable free speech and monitor government. The media practitioners see a strong link between their performance and the likelihood of renewed violence in Kenya’s post-election environment. They are, effectively, being conflict-sensitive.


18 Focus on Kenya, International Media Support. Copenhagen. 2007. Available at: http://www.i-m-s.dk/?q=node/260
The initiative does not yet include any formal monitoring or evaluation of its effect. Anecdotal evidence indicates a general reduction in the amount of inflammatory reporting, especially in Nairobi.

But it is really too soon to say who to credit.


In June 2002 Denmark-based International Media Support and partners attempted to quickly strengthen media capacity in reporting the fragile ceasefire between long-time government and rebel adversaries in Sri Lanka.19

Substantially deteriorated standards and practices of journalism in both ethnic groups seriously jeopardized public understanding and acceptance of the truce process and discouraged public consideration of reconciliation. Most media reflected the political agendas of their Sinhala or Tamil owners. The state media was wholly censored. Self-censorship, sensationalistic crime reporting and ethno-political bias were widespread. Media legislation remained incomplete and regulation was corrupt and partisan; Access to Information legislation was unavailable.

**Aims of the project:** To strengthen the professional capacity of the media to accurately inform public awareness of the truce process through conflict-sensitive reporting. And secondly, to foster public support for reconciliation.

**Impacts:** Almost 70 journalists from 30 media outlets were exposed to conflict-sensitive reporting training, and brief familiarization with the truce process. The local partners carried on with occasional localized training and production of a

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19 Described in Loewenberg and Bonde, op cit.
training handbook. Truce commissioners informally perceived a brief improvement in media coverage. However, the program sought no quantifiable confirmation of change in media reporting on the truce commission, the conflict and prospects for peace.

This initiative met the best practices regimen of working with indigenous and recognized non-partisan partners; it specifically included female journalists; it included on-site training as well as classroom formats; it included co-trainers fluent in the local languages; it included a training of successor trainers and the partners were committed to continuing the program and training resources were developed to support this.

**Weaknesses:** The Sri Lanka project focused on journalist capacity-building without considering the dominant issue of media owners’ partisan control of editorial freedom. The project worked with reporters without recognition of extremist columnists and editorials which dominated much of the media. The project lacked any parallel program to address the inadequate legal and legislative support for a free press. Although implicitly linked to assisting the truce commission’s efforts at conflict resolution, there was no joint strategy between the media developers and the commission. There was no significant parallel program of peace promotion or social marketing by any actors. The program was based on an inadequate mapping which missed the critical issue of media managers’ and owners influence. There was no evaluation included in the project design.

Longer term, the initiative lent momentum to local improvements in media training, performance and self-regulation, driven by another international partner. This occurred during the extended truce. However, a later change in government and unresolved conflict issues destroyed the truce, and revived
government intimidation of media. Sri Lanka is again embroiled in deadly conflict.

3. Third example: Bosnia 96 and Liberia 03.

This final case study is a comparison of bad practices and much better practises reflecting lessons learned in immediate post-conflict environments.

The bad practices are well-known.20 In 1996, the EU, OSCE and bilateral donors led by the US provided unprecedented funds for the establishment of independent print, radio and television outlets in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The intention was to create a pluralistic, independent media industry to counter states’ media which fomented ethnic hatred within Bosnia. A large number of bilateral and non-governmental donors also participated at their own initiative.

Funds were dispensed to numerous independent start-up media outlets in the print and electronic sectors. It produced an artificial, donor-dependent industry of minimally-skilled journalists and unprofessional, poorly programmed and redundant outlets unable to compete with popular ethnocentric government outlets. Most of the new outlets were sustained almost exclusively by donor funding and faced closure without it. Local citizens and governments saw the start-up media as foreign Western interventions, distrusted them and even attempted to block them. By 2001, these initiatives contributed minimally to democratization.

In contrast, the end of civil conflict in Liberia in 2003 revealed a devastated media scene bereft of infrastructure, human resources and a media-enabling environment. Reflecting lessons from Bosnia, International Media Support of

20 See: Bajaktari and Hsu, op cit
Denmark led formation of a Partnership for Media and Conflict Prevention to facilitate collaborative media development to mitigate conflict in the region.¹ The partnership of 20 diverse media and free speech developers took a holistic approach reflecting local needs and international objectives, and recruiting specialist players to fill gaps in expertise.

Partnerships activities included media law reform, a media centre for journalists, community radio development, establishment of an independent printing press, capacity building for journalists and managers, safety training and conflict sensitive training and gender sensitivity training, and media monitoring.

The largest shortcoming has been insufficient donor funding to honour commitments to the partnership, which forced the partners to seek their own funds to accomplish their objectives on smaller budgets.

The largest measure of success was the peaceful presidential and parliamentary elections of 2005 that brought president Ellen Sirleaf to office and signaled a new phase in post-conflict transition. Nonetheless, the partnership continued to 2007 and with self-sustainability of several key elements achieved, turned to long-term projects reflecting the new reality in Liberia.

Three Realities about news media development and peacebuilding.

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1. Initiatives specifically addressing the media’s coverage of conflict for the purposes of conflict resolution is a specialization. It cannot operate in a wholly untrained media environment. To attempt to do so would be to risk turning would-be journalists into unwitting peace advocates. As analyst Christoph Spurk has said, it would burden and confuse the novice media. Even veteran journalists run risks of mistakenly adopting an unbalanced pro-peace frame to their stories, which omits contradictory information, rather than applying an expanded frame. And that undermines the media’s credibility.

2. Like all media development, conflict-related initiatives must recognize and address the media-enabling environment. As Dusan Reljik points out, training will “unfortunately remain unsuccessful while authoritarian forms of rule do not allow for media autonomy.” Other analysts have also noted the interdependence of the news media and the courts, regulators, the legislature and political elites. In effect, a reliable media cannot function without a media-enabling environment.

A media-enabling environment extends beyond rights and opportunities for the media to include obligations and responsibilities such as copyright protection, respect for privacy, and avoidance of libel, sedition and obscenity. It includes civil society support for media consensus on professionalism, which includes self-regulation and public accountability.

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22 Spurk, op cit.
25 Olson, ibid.
In terms of enabling a reliable media, there is also another dimension that requires recognition:\textsuperscript{26} a sustainable economy of advertisers and consumers, or alternative sources of independent funding, to finance private and public media. The media cannot function without financing.

Reality three: Journalistic capacity-building initiatives to address conflict must be seen to be separate from social marketing or advertising initiatives.

For the participants - and for authorities in a non-permissive environment -- there is too much risk that the distinction between these two endeavours is blurred because of a mistaken assumption that both activities share the same purpose and goal. This could kill professionalism and credibility. As USAID's recent review\textsuperscript{27} of media assistance programs recommends, for strategists and funders there should be a clear distinction between media development and public diplomacy.

Trends and challenges:

Foremost, there is a concerted effort among media developers to establish criteria for evidence-based evaluations and impact assessments. It reflects practitioners’ desire to know what works and the need for documentation in approaching donors.

\textsuperscript{26} See: Craig LaMay, cited in Olson, Anne, \textit{The Role of Media-Support Organizations and Public Literacy in Strengthening Independent Media Worldwide}, Center for International Media Assistance, Washington. 2008.

\textsuperscript{27} USAID’s Media Assistance. Policy and Programmatic Lessons. PPC Evaluation Paper No. 16, USAID.Washington. 2004
Secondly, there needs to be greater clarification of the link between media development and peacebuilding, or between journalism and conflict resolution. This analysis should better inform programmers in creating peacebuilding strategies, so the media is given due attention with realistic expectations.

Thirdly, journalists and media developers need to further explore their understanding of the role of journalist, in reporting violent conflict. The western model of professional disengagement in the outcomes of media work is not the only model. There are some conflict-stressed states where media players include intentional mediation or peacebuilding facilitation as their appropriate role.

There needs to be an introduction of peacebuilding analysis into the media profession, especially at the educational level, as much in the west as elsewhere.

Finally, media development initiatives need to be longer-term and not sacrifice the project to short-term economic unsustainability. The objective of rapid commercial viability needs to be throttled back. State-owned media deserves more attention from capacity-builders. Liberalization of media should not risk exchanging authoritarian dominance for corporate priorities equally unresponsive to public concerns.

At the opposite order of magnitude, community media, especially community radio, deserves much more support from media developers. It may be the most democratic form of media that exists. New technology may be vastly expanding its potential.