Humanitarian actors and the media: An agenda-setting role in conflicts

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In debates on the role of the media in times of conflict and humanitarian crises, peace analysts have highlighted their contribution to diffusing tension, preventing or moderating conflicts, and bringing peace. The broadcast, print, social, and other media can play a significant positive role in conflict situations, but they can also act as a force that can cause the situation to escalate.1-2

The heightened occurrence of social violence, either in the form of communal protest or open rebellion, has increased the role of the media. These types of conflict are more susceptible to being influenced by the media, making it increasingly important for humanitarian actors to know how to influence these actors to play a positive role for vulnerable communities.

Conflict, the media, and humanitarian actors: Theoretical perspectives

The different components that make up civil society, such as social movements, trade unions, NGOs, and the media, often interact in a way that generates or motivates actions or reactions that impact the state of a conflict. For example, NGOs engaged in humanitarian assistance will normally work closely with communities and can in that way function as entry points for the media to get information. Organizations providing humanitarian aid are usually already present before the media arrive in the conflict area and can provide background information as well as eyewitness accounts highlighting the plights of affected populations.

This concept of “peace journalism” emphasizes that the power of the media lies beyond the “watcher” function that is limited to providing information. The mediating potential of the media can be more easily understood by thinking of peace as a relationship between two or more parties rather than just a state of affairs.2 Media mediation can be an important instrument for resolving parties’ differences and promoting discussion, allowing the parties to communicate indirectly and even to educate in- and outsiders about the different actors involved.2 Those interested in other theoretical approaches to understanding the social influence of the media should learn about the cultivation5 and the agenda-setting theories6, which are instrumental to understanding how media can be useful in resolving conflict, preventing violence, and building sustainable peace.

The agenda-setting power of the media – their ability to bring certain subjects to the public’s attention – is crucial and can have both positive and negative consequences, depending on their motivations. Depending on the situation, the information filter employed by certain media outlets might be politically or more economically motivated.

Opposing actors in any conflict will often try to influence the media to provide different kinds of coverage, depending on their relative power. The weaker party will normally seek media attention, to “socialize” the conflict, as a means to mobilize allies for their cause. Those in power, however, will seek to minimize the extent of knowledge of the conflict, to “privatize” the information in order to limit awareness of the situation.2 Herein lies an important responsibility for the media: finding a balance between the two or more sides of a conflict and not being manipulated by any one party, in order to use their conflict resolving potential to the fullest.
How can the media play a positive role in conflict situations?

Media can function as a mediator and bring conflicting parties together in several different ways. The following is a list of some of the more important ways in which media actors can have a significant positive effect, inspired by a list prepared by Robert Karl Manoff. Keeping these in mind can be useful for humanitarian actors who find themselves interacting with local and international media outlets, in order to make sure that they do not inadvertently have a negative impact on the conflict.

- Changing attitudes and perceptions of disputants and allowing them to absorb new information and engage in a process of creative problem-solving through reviewing or "reframing" of the conflict situation with the use of "controlled" communication. This is based on the premise that resolving conflicts is possible by bringing about altered perceptions through drawing attention to options not previously considered.
- Identifying the core values of disputants, which is often critical to helping them understand their own priorities and those of their adversaries. Related means include pointing out underlying material and psychological needs of parties to a conflict and clarifying the structural issues that are perceived to be at stake.
- Relaying negotiating signals between parties that are unwilling to meet, have no formal communication, or require an alternative way to communicate.
- Enabling the parties to formulate and articulate proposed solutions by serving as a non-antagonistic interlocutor.
- Mobilizing the international community to take action and help resolve an emerging conflict. The goal of this type of mobilization is to exert pressure on the conflicting parties. Media can also help identify external resources that may be available to help resolve the conflict.
- Generating perceptions, false or true, by highlighting certain origins of the conflict such as justice and (perceived) injustice, feelings of fear and threat, denial of participation rights, and failures to meet expectations.
- Providing a true depiction of the conflict to the conflicting parties and communities, to displace an existing atmosphere of misinformation regarding disputes on a local level. Truthful and transparent coverage of the affected communities and the warring parties themselves is critical to the conflict resolution process, as it can help inspire mutual confidence. This includes preventing circulation of incendiary rumors and counteracting them when they surface.
- Publicizing humanitarian principles, international humanitarian and human rights law, as well as other legal and moral norms, and acting to enforce those norms by publicizing violations.
- Helping to undermine harmful stereotypes and promote re-humanization of the parties.
- Reinforcing the importance of settlements by publicizing them as important, shared historical events, while respecting the need for privacy and confidentiality in negotiation processes.

This list can hopefully serve as a starting point when considering how to best engage with the media in a conflict situation. It is important for professionals in the humanitarian sector to acknowledge the significant role that the media play, in order to be able to understand related mechanisms and to employ certain types of influence to the advantage of the communities they strive to protect.

About the author

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Notes

1 Davison, W. Phillips (1974), *Mass Communication and Conflict Resolution*, Praeger Publishers, New York, p. 7. Davison believes that the media, if employed properly as one of the many tools of conflict resolution, have the potential to hasten the resolution of conflicts, giving the example of the Israel-Palestine conflict.
Johan Galtung (28 April 1996), *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*, SAGE. Galtung emphasizes the dynamic character of peace as a relation between two or more parties, making clearer the role that the media can play in mediation. Peace is not a property of one party alone, which in no sense underestimates the significance of each party’s intent and capability to contribute to peaceful relations. This view of peace as a relation between the parties is essential to understanding the potential of the media in peace building.

For an example of the media playing such a role, the "Capitol to Capitol" broadcast in 1986 brought together American and Soviet lawmakers in a live interactive program. Both the lawmakers and the audience were able to see the other side as simply other human beings.

Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (1986), "Living with television: The dynamics of the cultivation process," *Perspectives on media effects*, 17-40. Gerbner began the 'Cultural Indicators' research project in the mid-1960s, to study whether and how watching television may influence viewers' ideas of what the everyday world is like. The significant influence that visual media have on individuals forms the basis of the cultivation theory. Cultivation theorists argue that television has long-term effects, which are gradual and indirect but cumulative and significant. They emphasize the effects of television viewing on the attitudes rather than the behavior of viewers. In the case of violence, this would mean that, rather than inducing violent behavior, the way that a violent conflict is portrayed on television influences viewers’ (especially frequent viewers’) general mindsets towards violence and conflict. According to the cultivation theory, this is especially true for subjects that viewers do not have first-hand experience with.

Agenda Setting was an early theory given to us by Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz. They believed that content in the media set the agenda for public discussions. They believed that the media did not specifically tell us what to think about a particular subject, just which subjects we should be forming an opinion on. The Agenda-Setting Theory is based on the premise that we are given our "agenda" of daily information for discussion based on what the media want us to be talking about. The positive aspect of this phenomenon is that the media put information out there; forcing the public to acknowledge the existence of certain issues and conflicts. The downside is that the media function as a kind of filter, creating a biased selection of news items, choosing our information for us.

International media such as BBC, CNN, al Arabiya, and al Jazeera have global reach, and as such have an agenda-setting effect. They have the potential to influence governments and international organizations. Their reports, however, are not always the most accurate reflection of the relative severity and risk of a particular conflict. This effect, as Steven Livingston explained, revolves around the ideological components of political disagreements, and more specifically the way key actors in conflict seek to manipulate public perceptions of the disagreement.

Adapted from Manoff, Robert Karl (1997), *The Media’s Role in Preventing and Moderating Conflict*. Prepared for Virtual Diplomacy conference hosted by the United States Institute of Peace, Washington D.C.