Communication and Conflict:
A Commentary on the Role of the Media

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Abstract

In this commentary, the author argues that conflict is irresistible to the mass media. The editorial content of both print and electronic media, she says, demonstrate this strong appetite. However, while media practitioners have a duty to report conflict situations as they see them, the author insists that they also have a responsibility to enhance the opportunities for peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Résumé

Dans cette présentation, l'auteur soutient que les conflits présentent un attrait irrésistible pour les mass media. Selon elle, le contenu rédactionnel de la presse écrite et électronique est la parfaite illustration de ce grand appétit. Mais même si les praticiens du monde des médias ont le devoir de restituer les situations de conflit tel qu'elles se présentent, l'auteur insiste sur le fait qu'ils doivent également améliorer les chances de résolution pacifique de ces conflits.

Introduction

Quite often, whenever the word 'conflict' is mentioned, our minds dwell on 'hot' wars or armed conflict and images of physical destruction of life and property flash through our minds' eyes. This narrow conceptualization of conflict has the tendency to make us lose sight of the other types of conflict that strain human relationships at local, national and international levels. One such type of conflict takes place daily in the field of politics, particularly in a democracy where people have the right to voice contending and conflicting opinions, some of which create sharp divisions among people.

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As defined by BBC *English Dictionary*, a conflict is a "disagreement and argument". The same dictionary also defines conflict as a "war or battle". Writing about the two different definitions of conflict, Thomas and Lee (1996:2) refer to conflict as:

> clashes over economic and political principles that are debated and fought over in the corridors of power in local, national and international arenas, and the real bloody battles in the cause of God and country, nation and ethnic group in the killing fields.

In whatever way the term is defined, conflict is of intense interest to mass media practitioners who must report events from conflict situations. Thus in a conflict-ridden world, conflicting reporting is a very important aspect of journalism practice. Thomas and Lee (1996) are right in their observation that "conflict is the bread and butter of journalism." This is to be expected, because conflict sells. Take up any newspaper, listen to any news broadcast, watch any documentary on television and one is confronted by stories of conflict.

This view of the ubiquity of conflict in the media is echoed in Tehranian's (1996:3) statement that "Conflict attracts the media as powerfully as flies gather around sweets." In explaining this media interest in conflict, Tehranian refers to the age-old journalistic dictum that the news media concentrate particularly on bad news. Such human and natural disasters as wars, terrorism, and earthquakes are undoubtedly vintage bad news!

Role of media in conflict

Any meaningful discussion of the role of the media in conflict therefore should look at a number of issues and/or questions. Consider the following questions, for instance, as raised by Thomas and Lee (1996:2):

1. How should those responsible for public communication and education respond to potential and actual conflict?

2. What role should journalists play in covering conflicts?

3. Should such professionals merely report, comment on and interpret it, or should they be actors in the resolution – or, more importantly, the prevention of conflict?

4. In a mass-mediated world, what are the moral and social responsibilities of journalists involved in reporting conflict situations?

The role of the media in conflict could be distilled from these and similar questions. This role should revolve around clearly defined responsibilities, which require the media to do the following eight tasks:

Provide truthful information

Truth is arguably the most fundamental of the universal ethical values in journalism. As Traber and Davies (1991:7) point out in their discussion of the ethics of war reporting, journalists have a commitment to telling the truth. Generally, in their coverage of conflict, the media should be guided by the fundamental principle of truth-telling and be perceived as armor against the avalanche of propaganda and disinformation usually churned out by opponents in a conflict. In this type of situation, the exhortation to journalists is: "Ignore the propaganda of either side and tell the truth. You are not a partisan for either" (Siddiqui 2002:5). Sadly, this exhortation is not always heeded, and truth is often the first casualty in conflict. In this context, communication scholars and practitioners must seriously engage the following question: What causes the media to abandon the cherished ethical value of truthfulness when they cover conflicts? How can this abandonment be prevented?

Avoid sensationalism

In journalism, 'sensationalism' is a word used to show disapproval for a newspaper/magazine report or television/radio broadcast that presents facts in a way that is intended to produce strong feelings of shock, anger or excitement, by making a situation more shocking or worse than it really is. Conflicts, particularly armed conflicts, are situations that ordinarily produce shock, anger and excitement. We can all, therefore, appreciate the havoc that could be caused by sensationalist reporting of conflicts. Here, communication scholars and practitioners must engage the following question:

What factors cause the sensationalization of issues in conflict situations? How can the media guard against this deplorable conduct?

Sensitize people by providing full information

The public's right to be informed should include their being provided with relevant details about the horrors of conflict. There is merit in the argument that if the media provide such details, they will help to sensitize people to the intensity of the conflict and this could play a positive role in the search for peace. Making this point in the context of media coverage of ethnic conflict in Nigeria, Iyare and Ojielo (2001:40) say: "… you have to be able to understand that you give people enough so that they

can understand the intensity of that report or what is happening. … If 500 people were killed in Kaduna in an ethnic crisis and then you come and say it's only 50, or only 10, what you have done is to perhaps underplay that crisis and to also underplay the intensity of the ethnic crisis confronting us because we have refused to address our mind in all these issues in the past and that is why the thing has heightened."

Presenting the same argument from a general perspective, Thomas and Lee (1996) point out that the media's "role is one of telling the stories of the victims of war so that ordinary citizens are sensitized to its horrors." Nevertheless, providing full information, in terms of giving details of the horrors of conflict, should be handled with caution and a sense of decorum. How best the media can do this must forms part of the discourse among communication scholars and practitioners.

Observe balance/fairness in coverage

Another journalistic value that should condition the role of the media in conflict is balance or fairness. In this regard, journalists are urged to report conflict fairly, without bias and offer balanced coverage of all sides of the conflict. The guidelines which Dunsky (2002:9) prescribes for fair media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian war are relevant to the role that the media should play in conflict in general: "Consider both sides of the story as equally valid and give them balanced representation and voice, not only in direct quotations but also in characterization and analysis." Here again, communication scholars and practitioners must address the following question: What forces compel the media to sacrifice balance or fairness on the altar of bias in the coverage of conflict?

Have a full understanding of the context of the conflict

It is necessary for the media to fully understand the context of the conflict being reported. To effectively cover any conflict, journalists should be knowledgeable about the historical, political and other aspects of the context of the conflict, so they can explain to the audience the basic reasons why both sides are engaging in the conflict. Conflict reporters will do well to keep in close contact with the environment of the conflict, learning as much as possible about the people and their environment. Journalists who plunge into coverage of a conflict in ignorance of the context of the conflict, are described as "parachute journalists" (Thomas and Lee 2003:2). For such journalists, their brief and aloof appearance in the location of the conflict does not provide them with enough background knowledge

of the conflict or of the local culture and cultural practices – knowledge that is necessary for proper contextualization and interpretation of events.

Overall, conflict reporters are urged to always "be aware of relevant context – be it historical or recent – and include it even briefly via a parenthetical phrase or a few paragraphs" (Dunsky 2003:9).

De-emphasize the profit motive

As a business enterprise the media must make money, and conflict is one good way of doing this because conflict sells. Nevertheless, the profit motive should not be allowed to upstage ethical considerations in conflict reporting. In the bid to garner the huge audiences to be delivered to advertisers, many journalists often resort to unethical practices. The media should guard against the tendency to 'commercialize' conflict for their own financial gain.

Play the role of peacemaker

The media should not merely report, comment on or interpret conflict; they should also play a role in enhancing the process of conflict resolution. Ekwo (2001:6) voices this view when he advises that "we must be conscious of evolving a conflict-resolving media." After presenting a catalogue of conflicts of different dimensions in virtually every part of Nigeria in the first year of the Obasanjo presidency, Ekwo makes the point about the need for the media to also play the role of peacemaker:

> It is true that media practitioners may not have handled the coverage of these crises in the best manner. Editors and reporters owe this young civil- ian government a duty to save it from possible collapse. It is part of our duty to achieve systemic balance in society.

How best can the media balance their responsibility to report conflict with the need to contribute positively to the resolution of such conflict? To begin with, journalists who are assigned to cover conflict should be people who are genuinely committed to peace, both in the context of the particular conflict they are assigned to cover, and in the context of conflicts generally.

Conclusion

Conflict reporting is a fairly specialized activity and should never be seen as an all comers field. Consequently, media practitioners who cover conflict should be properly prepared for the job. After basic journalistic education in a school of journalism, conflict reporters should undergo additional training – either within an institution or through workshops, seminar or

similar activities. The training of conflict reporters should provide them with a style sheet of conflict reporting; it should also make them knowledgeable about the theory and practice of conflict resolution. In addition, the curriculum for such training should include instruction on propaganda, disinformation and mind management techniques typically employed by either side of the conflict episode. Through such specialized training, media practitioners are better prepared to more fully appreciate their unique role in the maintenance of stability, at the same time as they perform their role of reporting the truth.

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