

Workshop on Conflict Sensitive Journalism

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Pros and Cons of Conflict Sensitive Reporting

Dr Ishtiaq Ahmad

Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI) and Regional Centre
for Strategic Studies (RCSS), Sri Lanka

Introduction

The role of mass media in resolving conflicts, especially those involving religiously - inspired terrorist activity as in the case of Pakistan, is extremely crucial. The task of a reporter is to narrate the facts as they are, impartially, accurately and responsibly, and not as one or anyone else would wish them to be reported, in order to help the readers and viewers to create an informed public opinion. For journalism is essentially a public service profession. This important reporting task can be performed relatively easier when a society is at peace. The real challenge for reporting accurately , impartially and responsibly comes when a society is in a state of conflict, especially violent conflict.

A violent conflict may be caused by material, religious or ethnic factors, or such conflict may be short-lived or protracted, it always has social consequences, including widespread deaths and displacements. Given that, when it comes to violent conflict, reporters have an additional social responsibility regarding what to report, what not to report, and how to report. The social consequences of reporting inaccurately and partially during a conflict are grave. Such lack of social responsibility on the part of media, print or electronic, may exacerbate violence, transform a non-violent conflict into a violent one, and may conflagrate an already violent conflict.

It is for this reason that professional reporting during a conflict should involve much more than what is required of it normally at peace time. In an age of information, the role of journalists in resolving a violent conflict is as crucial as that of contending parties or mediating entities. At present, mass media is perhaps the most important means of generating civil society/grass-root public momentum for resolving a conflict by encouraging or forcing the contending parties to appreciate each other's legitimate concerns and needs, and arrive at an amicable resolution of their differences, with or without any mediation.

A conflict-sensitive reporter is not merely reporting who said what, what happened, or how many people died and were displaced. Rather, conflict -sensitive journalism

involves tracing the root-causes of a conflict, unearthing the myths behind a conflict, removing mutual misperceptions of the contending parties, placing their respective legitimate concerns and interests in proper perspective, explaining what needs to be done to create a win-win situation for the contending parties, and, finally, highlighting the potential benefits of conflict resolution for each of them.

Conflict Resolution in Theory

There are a number of micro and macro theories of conflict resolution. But most of them are premised on Western political thought that power is based and exercised through elites who establish norms of behaviour. Therefore, the role of state parties, bilateral or multilateral diplomacy, and mediation by third parties, states or international organizations, is traditionally considered crucial for conflict resolution. Over time, however, alternative discourses of conflict resolution have also evolved, underlying the significance of other social forces like mass media and civil society in creating an informed public opinion and generating public pressure conducive for the resolution of a violent conflict.

One such theory is advanced by John Burton, who offers a holistic approach to conflict resolution. According to Burton, “conflict avoidance is not conflict resolution...Conflict resolution means terminating conflict by methods that are analytical and that get to the root of the problem. Conflict resolution, as opposed to mere management or settlement, points to an outcome that, in the view of the parties involved, is a permanent solution to a problem.¹ Burton suggests that there is a need for a paradigm shift away from power politics and towards the 'reality of individual power'.² In other words, individuals, as members of their identity groups, will strive for their needs within their environment. If they are prevented from this pursuit by elites, other identity groups, institutions and other forms of authority, there will inevitably be conflict. The only solution is for the groups to work out their problems in an analytical way, supported by

¹ John Burton, “Conflict Resolution as a Political System,” in Vamik Volkan, et al, eds., *The Psychodynamics of International Relationships: Volume II: Unofficial Diplomacy at Work* (Lexington, MA, Lexington Books, 1991), p. 82-3.

² Ibid., p. 84.

third parties who act as facilitators and not authorities. A conflict sensitive reporter is one such facilitator.

Conflict, according to Burton, refers to a situation in which there is a breakdown in relationships and a challenge to norms and to authorities....It is a frustration based protest against lack of opportunities for development and against lack of recognition and identity. Whether the tension, conflict, or violence has origins in class, status, ethnicity, sex, religion, or nationalism, we are dealing with the same fundamental issues.³ If the participants in the conflict can begin to recognize their conflict as a breakdown of relationships, and that there are fundamental similarities between the antagonists, then the process of abstraction will enhance their objectivity. The purpose of this process is to enable the participants to come to the understanding that all the participants have legitimate needs that must be satisfied in order to resolve the conflict, a goal that cannot be realized through traditional approaches to conflict management alone. One of the practical methods and processes to realize this goal is through what is called as Track Two Diplomacy, which helps official diplomatic or mediatory processes to resolve the conflict and involves “an unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversary groups or nations that aims to develop strategies, influence public opinion, and organize human and material resources in ways that might help resolve their conflict.”⁴

Track Two Diplomacy is considered particularly useful for resolving protracted social conflicts revolving around identity related needs of ethno-national or communal groups, such as Palestine and Kashmir.⁵ The processes it involves facilitate a non-violent solution to the conflict, by paving the way for official negotiations by initiating attitude changes in public opinion and decision makers. It is here that the crucial role of conflict sensitive media comes in. Reporters as facilitators do not seek to impose or even offer solutions to the conflict. Their purpose is to facilitate communication between the contending parties, to transform their perceptions about the conflict from zero-sum to win-win. Mass media is a great tool to influence public opinion and to change the

³ Ibid., p. 20.

⁴ Joseph V. Montville, “The Arrow and the Olive Branch: A Case for Track Two Diplomacy,” in Volkan, *ibid.*, p. 162.

⁵ Edward E. Azar, “The Analysis and Management of Protracted Conflict,” in *ibid.*, p. 91.

attitudes and perceptions of the protagonist communities. For a lasting resolution of a conflict, such a perceptual change is essential, whereby each contending side is eventually able to understand “that there are potential negotiating partners on the other side and negotiable issues to consider, to recognize the occurrence of change and the possibility of further change, and to develop the sense of guarded optimism that is required for movement toward conflict resolution.”⁶

How Media Can Make a Difference

The power of the media has no doubt grown enormously in the present age of information. If this power is employed positively, it may act as a powerful facilitator of conflict resolution process; but if this power is employed negatively, it may turn a non-violent conflict into a violent one, or conflagrate an already violent conflict.

Whenever national or international cable or satellite news channels broadcast images of a deadly conflict as a breaking news or round the clock coverage, millions of people are glued to TV screens. So, what is reported and the manner in which it is reported gains enormous significance. If the Gulf war of 1991 introduced the CNN effect, the current conflict in Pakistan’s frontier regions may be producing the GEO-effect or the DAWN effect. People form their opinions from such instant coverage of the conflict by reporters on the ground and how it is analyzed by TV anchors and media analysts.

Reporters are human beings, and, therefore, not value-free. There are frequent cases where ethno-religious, regional or nationalistic preferences may come in the way of professional reporting during a conflict. For instance, in the case of Kashmir, the Indian reporting or media analysis generally reflects considerable similarity to India’s official position on the dispute. Likewise, in Pakistan, while religiously-inspired terrorism has emerged as the most potent national security threat, those reporting and analyzing it, or offering their opinions in the media, do so only in a reactive manner. Consequently, if in the first case, the conflict has become protracted because of the absence of an informed public opinion in India and its consequent impact on the country’s official policy not

⁶ Herbert C. Kelman, “Interactive Problem Solving: The Uses and Limits of a Therapeutic Model for the Resolution of International Conflicts”, in Volkan, *ibid.*, p. 146.

conducive to conflict resolution in Kashmir; in the second case, the conflict has conflagrated partly due to journalistic insensitivity to understanding the roots of the conflict, their inability to pinpoint the factors responsible for its continually worsening nature, and failure to proactively facilitate its resolution through professional conflict sensitive reporting and analysis.

One would not describe them as 'cons' of conflict sensitive reporting, which are none if the basic concept of conflict sensitive reporting is kept in mind, whereby conflict is a social process in which a reporter is an important social actor, acting as one of the principal facilitators of a conflict.

As for the broader functions the media in general and reporters in particular can play in preventing or moderating a conflict so that its viable resolution is reached between the contending parties, with or without third party mediation, Robert Karl Manoff lists several, including:⁷ relay negotiating signals between parties that have no formal communication or require another way to signal; focus the attention of the international community on a developing conflict, and by doing so bring pressure on the parties to resolve it or on the international community to intervene; establish the transparency of one conflict party to another; educate parties and communities involved in conflict, thereby changing the information environments of disputes, which is critical to the conflict resolution process; help in confidence-building, identify the underlying interests of each party to a conflict for the other; prevent the circulation of incendiary rumors and counteract them when they surface; identify the core values of disputants, something that is often critical to helping them understand their own priorities and those of their opposite number; identify and explain underlying material and psychological needs of parties to a conflict, clarifying the structural issues that are perceived to be at stake; frame the issues involved in conflict in such a way that they become more susceptible to management; identify resources that may be available to help resolve conflicts, or to mobilize outside assistance in doing so; establish networks to circulate information concerning conflict prevention and management activities that have been successful elsewhere; de-objectify

⁷ Robert Karl Manoff, "The Media's Role in Preventing and Moderating Conflict," Speech delivered at the Colloquium on Science, Technology, and Government at New York University (April 29, 1996).

and re-humanize conflict parties to each other, and avoid stereotyping; provide early warning of impending conflicts.

As Ross Howard argues,⁸ conflict sensitive journalists “avoid reporting a conflict as consisting of two opposing sides. Find other affected interests and include their stories and goals....Avoid defining the conflict by always quoting the leaders who make familiar demands. Go beyond the elites. Report the words of ordinary people who may voice the opinions shared by many; avoid only reporting what divides the sides in conflict. Ask the opposing sides questions which may reveal common ground. Report on interests or goals which they may share.” A reporter has to be perceived by all sides as impartial. In order to ensure neutrality in reporting a conflict, Howard recommends the following: “Avoid always focusing on the suffering and fear of only one side. Treat all sides’ suffering as equally noteworthy. Avoid words like devastated, tragedy and terrorized to describe what has been done to one side....Avoid emotional and imprecise words....Avoid words like terrorist, extremist or fanatic...” Other “dos” for conflict sensitive journalism that Howard recommends include: “Avoid making an opinion into a fact. If someone claims something, state their name, so it is their opinion and not your fact. Avoid waiting for leaders on one side to offer solutions. Explore peace ideas wherever they come from. Put these ideas to leaders and report their response.”

Covering Terrorism in Pakistan

Terrorism is a violent activity, but it is motivated by the immediate purpose of creating terror in a much wider audience. If this is the case, then reporting a terrorist act with all of the graphic images of bloody scattered human limbs and broadcasting them live scores of times should certainly fall within the realm of ‘cons,’ or a better expression, ‘don’ts,’ of conflict sensitive reporting.

Obviously, one can understand that in a rush of being the first to report, or guided by the ‘if it bleeds, it leads’ dictum, private media organizations in a competitive capitalistic environment are tempted to ignore ethical requirements of reporting a conflict. But, then

⁸ Ross Howard, *Conflict Sensitive Journalism, A Handbook* (Copenhagen, Denmark: Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society/International Media Support, April 2004), p 16.

again, it is the reporter on the ground, who has to make the final decision as to what to report, what not to report, and how to report. What a conflict requires from a reporter is report an event accurately, and let the reader or the viewer to see the truth or judge the reality. For a reporter to make such a decision, a basic understanding of the conflict, the legitimate needs and interests of the contending parties, the various options for non-violent end of the conflict are essential pre-requisites. No one has a monopoly over national interest. What a government or a leader considers 'national interest' may not be popularly perceived as a 'national interest.'

Still there are some basic human values that cannot be compromised, and there are some legitimate state interests that cannot be overlooked. If extremist forces like the Taliban are unwilling to recognize Pakistan's legitimate constraints regarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity in tribal region or inviolability of its international borders such as the Durand Line, then any reportage that projects Taliban points of view may be contrary to the spirit of heightened social responsibility required from a reporter during a violent conflict. The same goes for cases involving killing of unarmed civilians, including through scores suicide bombings that have occurred in Pakistan since spring 2007. If they are covered from a purely human angle, and the opinion that is generated by the media afterwards is also from the human angle, then the wider public opinion that is created through such media coverage and opinion may go a long way in resolving a conflict.

Pakistan is currently at the centre of conflict fault-lines of domestic, regional and international dimensions—a potentially dangerous situation that requires news reporters and TV anchors to be more conscious of the pre-requisites of conflict-sensitive reporting. By reporting inflammatory statements of those inciting religiously-inspired terrorism, or by exaggerating their trans-nationalist terrorist ambitions, they will only conflagrate the suicide-bombing-laden security quagmire in the country. In such a serious situation, they can at least follow the "do-no-harm" principle, meaning if one cannot ameliorate the situation then at least one should prevent it from further deterioration. However, professional conflict-sensitive reporting requires them to go a step ahead. If killing innocent human beings through terrorism by state or non-state actors is unjustifiable, then

highlighting human sufferings during a conflict involving terrorist incidents should be a reporter's priority. If in such a situation reporters merely report inciting and threatening remarks of the contending sides, including the state party, then a violent conflict will only conflagrate.

Reporting a violent conflict is always a risky venture for journalists. But there are many examples of daring reporters risking their lives to make a difference. If it was not up to many American journalists to afford the risks of reporting from Sarajevo, which was under Serbian siege during the bloody conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, then we may not have seen the sort of public pressure in the United States that was instrumental in the Clinton Administration's proactive diplomatic and peace-keeping contribution to resolving the Balkan conflict.

In Pakistan's case, the risks of reporting conflict in tribal regions have been enormous. In the past eight years, some 38 journalists have died reporting conflict in the country, often in mysterious circumstances. Since reporting is a public enterprise, it was the responsibility of the government to provide due security to these reporters, even if such a conflict-ridden region is beyond the normal legal system of the state. However, in Pakistan's case, while reporting the conflict in tribal regions, the reporters are often caught between what security forces want them to report or ignore, and what militant Taliban desire them to highlight or underplay. Either way brings harm.

Furthermore, so many reporters have allegedly been killed by the very forces that are legally bound to provide them security during a conflict. If a state itself contributes to a reporter's insecurity during a conflict, then the real issue is surely broader: that of the non-existence of a democratic system. To ensure that reporters be extra-conscious while reporting a violent conflict, there is need for democratizing the country. Media is the fourth pillar of the state, and, if the other three pillars are not functioning properly, then it is obliged to hold them accountable and correct their path. However, in this case also, we cannot underscore the role media, especially the extremely vibrant electronic media, has played in bringing about the current civilian democratic assertion in Pakistan. If this

process continues, then reporters should have comparatively less security risks in covering the conflict in tribal regions.

Conflict sensitive reporting is an issue of journalistic responsibility. And this responsibility can be fulfilled in several ways. This requires a reporter not to serve any other interest but that of the wider public. Take the case of suicide bombing. It is certainly an inhuman and an irreligious act. Like any terrorist act, its chief targets are quite often innocent by-standers in a public place. No matter which factor may have compelled a person to blow oneself to kill innocent people, the act itself has no moral justification. Coupled with this, there is this widespread notion that terrorists use the media to seek publicity.

The current conflict in Pakistan is caused by regressive, militaristic ambitions of a minority of people with all of its terrorist manifestations, whose net sufferers are a majority of Pakistanis. The tragedy is that the reportage of this conflict thus far has been confined to its explanation by either state elites or those who violated state writ. In numerous cases of suicide bombing, for instance, what matters most is not who has done it, how much human loss it caused, or what the state response is; the real story to report is the social consequence of such militarism: Asking the family members of the victim as to how they feel; interviewing the religious authorities whether such violence is religiously permissible. It is only through stories like this that a mass public response against terrorism, backed by full support of religious authorities, can be generated as an effective antidote to religiously inspired terrorism. Obviously, this does not preclude reporting all of what the state elites need to do to address the legitimate political, social and economic grievances of those who have taken up arms against the state and its wider citizenry.