

In March, the CPRF addressed the role of Media in Conflict. Our speakers were Elizabeth Becker, International Trade Correspondent for the New York Times, Karen DeYoung, from the Washington Post and currently on sabbatical at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Susan Collin Marks, Executive Vice President of Search for Common Ground.

There are different kinds of conflict, including violent conflict and political conflict. Many journalists don't see themselves as having a role in conflict. They don't care who wins or loses; they are just there to report the facts. However, because they are human beings, reporting on conflicts is often hard, frightening, and depressing. Many journalists believe that the most dangerous thing they can do is to see themselves as having a role in helping iron out the differences between the sides. These journalists generally believe that their role is to get as close as they can to reality: be the eyes and ears for those who can't be there.

It is helpful to understand the history and background of a conflict. When this isn't possible, a journalist needs to fall back on technique and craft. When journalists are dropped into countries where they have never been, it is important for them to ask themselves, "What is important? Whom do I talk to? Whom do I believe?" There is always the fear that a journalist will talk to 100 people, and they will all be wrong, and the 101st person would have been right. Objectivity does not mean that the same amount of print space is given to both sides. Everyone has biases. Everyone has opinions on who's right and who's wrong. A journalist's job is not to eliminate bias, but to recognize biases and to fall back on technique. Those who cannot do that will not last long as journalists. Many people believe that journalists who do their jobs right are not active players in the conflict, but have an impact by providing information that imposes reality on policy makers. Many believe that a reporter's job is to figure out what is going on and to report as honestly as possible, not only for career reasons, but sometimes just to stay alive in a conflict situation.

Making a commitment to a story is not the same as saying what is right and what is wrong. It means staying in touch with people to know what is going on, and keeping an open mind. The more ideological the conflict, the more open-mindedness is necessary. It is important to write about what the important questions are, and to keep the focus on what is important. After a while, what's important becomes instinctive. Journalists don't come up with solutions; they just help people focus on what's important.

A different kind of media is used in a conflict transformation organization. Media can be used as a force for reconciliation or as a force for exasperating a conflict. Organizations work with media because it is powerful and can reach many people. "Common ground" media asks different questions: not only what the differences are, but what people agree on, too. It values peace and reconciliation over other values, such as having as much of a story as possible told, even though it may be detrimental to peace efforts. Common ground media tries to write truthfully from people's perspectives, so it employs local journalists who agree to leave their ethnic shoes at the door and work together to get all sides of a story. Common Ground journalism is also reflected in the choices of programs that are made.

In summary, there are different kinds of media with different purposes, and producers and journalists face difficult choices when working in situations of conflict.