

By John Marks

Wherever and whenever violent conflict looms, the media – television, radio, newspapers, and websites – have a crucial role to play. They can inflame the situation; or they can use their considerable power to defuse tension. In other words, they can be part of the problem; or they can be part of the solution. In practice, they are usually both.

In every conflict, media activities can be placed along a broad spectrum. At one extreme, there is *hate media*, which can directly incite a population toward genocide or ethnic cleansing, as *Radio Mille Collines* did in Rwanda in 1994, and Serbian and Bosnian Serb media did during the early 1990s. At the other end of the spectrum, the press can play an active, positive role in peacebuilding. For example, in 1977, Walter Cronkite, the anchorman for America's CBS network, conducted satellite interviews with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Cronkite asked Sadat whether he would be willing to travel to Jerusalem to meet Begin. Sadat agreed, and then Cronkite inquired of Begin whether he would welcome Sadat. Begin also consented.

Cronkite apparently had been tipped off in advance that Egypt's and Israel's leaders were prepared to meet. By questioning them directly, he scored a major scoop and helped launch the peace process that led to Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem, the first Camp David negotiations, and the signing of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty.

Consider another example in which two non-governmental organisations (NGOs) played the lead role. In 1982, the Esalen Institute of Big Sur, California launched a series of *spacebridges* (live, two-way satellite TV transmissions) to promote better understanding between Soviets and Americans. The first *spacebridge* linked a huge outdoor rock concert in San Bernardino, California with a studio audience in Moscow. Between sets performed by the *Talking Heads* and the *Police*, a rather bizarre programme took place. It included music, a travelogue from Moscow, and lots of waving back-and-forth. On the American side, Esalen was the main organizer, and it commissioned Internews, a start-up NGO, to manage the technical aspects of the broadcast. (Some of Internews' more recent activities in Central Asia and Indonesia are described in this book)

By 1986, the *spacebridge* enterprise had grown to the point where Internews and Soviet colleagues were able to broker an agreement between America's ABC-TV network and Soviet state television to produce a series of joint programmes on substantive issues. Called *Capitol to Capitol*, these programmes were hosted by ABC anchor Peter Jennings and seen on late night, national TV in the US. The host in Moscow was Vladimir Pozner, and the Soviet audience numbered tens of millions across 11 time zones. While well received in America, the broadcasts broke new ground in the Soviet Union where unrehearsed interplay with Americans – on television or anywhere else – represented a conceptual shift. This was heady stuff at the time of *glasnost* and *perestroika*.

By producing the *spacebridges*, Esalen and Internews were pioneers in the establishment of what became a whole new field involving media and peacebuilding. These two small NGOs

had a large vision: Namely, that media programmes could be used to reduce tensions between so-called *enemy* countries and that such programmes would lessen the threat of war.

Two decades later, the media/peacebuilding field has expanded considerably, as this book documents. Still, the *modus operandi* that Esalen and Internews developed remains as relevant today as it was then. They operated from vision, which underpinned everything they did – even when they were not sure how to move forward. They created imaginative projects and enrolled credible supporters who were able to make things happen in both media and political circles. They crafted a series of propositions to which broadcasting giants in both the private and state-controlled sectors were willing to say “yes.”* They found enough funding to support their activities. And in the end, their work almost certainly made a difference.

In 1982, the same year that Internews and Esalen launched the *spacebridges*, I founded an NGO in Washington, called Search for Common Ground. Like Internews, much of my inspiration came from Esalen’s Soviet-American project. Search for Common Ground took on the mega-mission of transforming how the world deals with conflict – away from adversarial, *win-lose* approaches toward cooperative, *win-win* solutions. To achieve this lofty vision of global transformation, it was clear that the organisation needed to be able to make constructive use of media. There was simply no other way to reach the millions – indeed, billions – of people with whom my colleagues and I wanted to communicate about peaceful alternatives to deadly conflict.

In 1985, when Search for Common Ground only had three employees, we created Common Ground Productions to be our TV and radio production division. While we had virtually no resources or track record, we had enough *chutzpah* – or *culot* – to have cards printed, saying we were in the media production business. The next year, in cooperation with Esalen and Internews, we produced our first broadcast programme, *Chernobyl and Three Mile Island: A Spacebridge*. The show aired on US public television stations and featured Soviets and Americans grappling with the issue of how best to deal with nuclear accidents. Instead of facing each other as adversaries, the US and Soviet participants tried to resolve shared problems. The idea was to demonstrate to a mass audience that even highly contentious issues could be dealt with in ways that encourage cooperative solutions. This same idea still underlies the work of Search for Common Ground and the European Centre for Common Ground, our Brussels partner organisation.

Since those first *spacebridges* took place, many other NGOs and media organisations have become involved in the media/peacebuilding field. This book chronicles the activities of some of the most prominent – including the African Women and Child Information Network, the BBC, IMPACS, Media for Peace, Radio Okapi, and Radio Netherlands – along with Internews and Search for Common Ground.

* To use Roger Fisher’s and William Ury’s term, Esalen and Internews made “yes-able propositions,” a phrase coined in their seminal book, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

All our groups are committed to using the power of media to help make the world a more peaceful place. We encourage objective reporting at the same time that we promote peacebuilding, and we see the two as complementary. We believe our work embodies responsible journalism.

Journalists have choices to make regarding what they report and how they report it. For media professionals to publish or produce stories that lack context and/or inflame conflict is, to us, irresponsible. We are proud of our role in trying to defuse and prevent violence.

Traditional journalism usually stresses conflict – and often exploits it for its entertainment value. Editors seem to work from the premise that conflict is interesting and agreement is dull. Consequently, discordant behaviour tends to be rewarded with airtime and newspaper space, while efforts to build consensus and solve problems are penalized – by being either ignored or discounted. A conflict-centred approach may attract viewers or sell papers, but it definitely has a negative impact on larger issues of war and peace. Moreover, it does not reflect what most people have learned in their individual lives: namely, that successful relationships – in families, communities, and businesses – are usually based on finding ways of working together, to the mutual benefit of everyone involved. Indeed, if the human species is going to handle its ever-growing list of problems, ways must be found to reduce polarization and to be inclusive rather than exclusive.

The media can make a substantial contribution to this process. There clearly is a need for a problem-solving, peacebuilding approach to journalism. The following components would seem to contribute to that approach:

- **Ask different questions, so that different answers emerge.** The core question asked by most reporters tends to be, “Where do you disagree?” In fact, from a peacebuilding perspective, the question might rather be, “Where do you agree?” From a purely journalistic standpoint, however, both questions seem equally valid. Reporters who ask about possible areas of agreement are, in essence, helping reframe the conflict. This was what Walter Cronkite did when he queried Sadat and Begin about the possibility that the two men might meet.
- **“Understand the differences; act on the commonalities.”*** Unquestionably, good journalism probes deeply into the divisions that separate enemy groups and nations. At the same time, peace is not likely to emerge until parties in conflict find ways to act on the basis of shared interests and concerns. A TV series that delves into the major disagreements between parties in conflict, but also shows areas of agreement, is more likely to advance the cause of peace than a series that only focuses on the differences.
- **Outside initiatives can help things turn around.** In most conflicts, opposing ethnic and national groups have their own media, which are highly segregated. As a result, the two sides live in information ghettos. While well-meaning media executives, editors, and journalists may exist within a community, they usually lack the resources and/or the

* Andrew Masondo, former Political Commissar of the African National Congress’ military wing, the Spear of the Nation, stated these words at a 1993 workshop in Johannesburg.

inclination to understand other perspectives or search for solutions. Well-targeted initiatives, coming from the international community, can help close the divide and build trust between opposing groups.

- **The attitudes of the reporters and producers are very important, and those attitudes can change.** The perspective of media professionals – where they come from, both psychologically and intellectually – has a direct impact on the nature of the programming they produce. When they realize that positive alternatives exist and that an adversarial approach is not inevitable, they are more likely to write and produce material that contributes to peacebuilding. Training programmes for journalists can have substantial impact, and this is one reason why all the organisations profiled in this book carry out training projects.
- **All media and most formats can be used to produce programming that contributes to peacebuilding.** All forms of print and electronic media are potential tools for peacebuilding. Moreover, virtually any format – including chat shows, roundtables, documentaries, soap opera, children’s drama, and sports – can be adapted to convey ideas that support tolerance and peaceful resolution of conflict.
- **Programming should be entertaining, informative, and persuasive.** Positive journalism need not be boring. Indeed, it should challenge and engage the audience. Good writing is vital. As much as possible, compelling stories that model the desired behaviour should be brought to life. Soap opera of the sort produced by the BBC in Afghanistan, Panos in West Africa, and Common Ground Productions in seven countries is particularly useful for communicating messages with social content.
- **Programming should be rooted in the conflict.** What works in one country does not necessarily work in another, and expertise often does not transfer from place to place. In every instance, there needs to be profound cross-cultural adaptation – coupled with humility. While it is probably true that every culture places a high value on good story telling, there are also significant differences, regarding both content and structure. While outsiders can bring fresh approaches and insights, they should work in close cooperation with insiders who have deep roots in the culture.
- **Understand the media landscape.** There needs to be a thorough understanding of the local media landscape and recognition of the advantages and disadvantages involved in working with specific partners. For example, there are large variations in the ability of particular media and media outlets to communicate ideas effectively to a local population. Also, co-productions with governmental broadcasters – as opposed to independent ones – can present problems of credibility and censorship
- **Research and evaluation enhance the process.** Media programming can be made more effective by comprehensive research into the nature of the conflict, the tastes and habits of the viewing audience, and the *intended outcomes* that the programming aims to achieve. Research should combine state-of-the-art, social science methodologies with local cultural norms and attitudes.

- **Keep hope alive.** The media can play a crucial role in informing the public that violent conflict is not inevitable and that peaceful solutions really are achievable. It is easy to despair and to forget that virtually all peace processes have huge ups and downs. As former US Senator George Mitchell, the lead mediator for Northern Ireland, has said, “There is no conflict that cannot be resolved. Violent conflict is created and sustained by human beings, and it can be ended by human beings.”

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