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Media: The Ultimate Power T ool

"The media is the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent... They control the minds of the masses."
-Malcolm X

As such events as the Rwandan genocide so catastrophically demonstrated, media can be a tremendously powerful mechanism to incite hated and unimaginable human brutality. Hate media has played a role in countless conflicts spanning the globe, from Bosnian state-controlled television in the early 1990s to Cote d'Ivoire radio in 2006. Media is ultimately subject to human fallibility; unless man eschews all violent impulses, it seems unlikely that hate media will disappear.

Peace media is less "sexy" than its darker counterpart (hate media and propaganda--the story practically writes itself), but as technology allows increased connections across the globe, peace media offers the prospect of a broad dialogue that bridges group divides and contributes to increased understanding. This warrants careful examination.

I plan to write my master's thesis on the potential for participatory new media--specifically discussion forums and blogs--to increase access to public platforms and, in so doing, encourage dialogue that could advance post-conflict reconciliation. Over the course of several blogs, I will explore how expanded access, and therefore augmented opportunities for participation, could offer both individual and collective benefits related to reconciliation. This first post will discuss some of the shortcomings--and indeed dangers--of mainstream media in conflict situations, touch upon fledging peace media efforts including community radio, and introduce the potential for new media to build upon such efforts.

Short of hate media, mainstream media may itself be an impediment to peace, as it focuses more on the drama and intrigue of conflict than the relative monotony of peace. The framing impulse and commercial drive that define mainstream media block lower power parties from media access and prevent a holistic picture of critical issues. Scholar Gadi Wolfsfeld argues that structural and cultural barriers to the Palestinian narrative led to the Israeli narrative being seen by global civil society as the dominant and "right" one. More profoundly, media framing can create context and exert an enormous impact on public opinion and, by extension, public policy.

Piers Robinson coined the "CNN effect" to describe situations in which media coverage can influence official policy outcomes. Mainstream media's "ancient ethnic hatred" explanation of the Rwandan genocide, for example, played a critical role in U.S. policymakers' decision not to intervene in the early stages of violence.

Mainstream media's commercial drive requires it to report on thousands of stories each day. This sheer velocity fosters a climate of news-related attention deficit disorder and reduces complex events to sound bites and slapdash digests that almost certainly lack the context necessary for true understanding of the issues. Communications professor Mark Alleyne argues that this amounts to structural propaganda, which entrenches a perverted view of the world and prevents balance in the global news flow. Tim Allen and Jean Seaton describe mainstream media as "othering," owing to its reliance on black and white explanations of conflict situations. This is not only unhelpful in the midst of conflict but serves to retard potential post-conflict reconciliation by entrenching enemy images and deepening the gulf between parties.

Despite these massive shortcomings, I believe that media holds as much inherent potential to promote peace as hatred; it would be irrational to dismiss all media as antagonistic. If media can mobilize hatred and disseminate stereotypes, it can also mobilize moderates by enabling them to identify common ground and thus to increase inter-group understanding. As Ellen Gardner (2001) argues, media can both promote peaceful conditions and counter hate media by offering more context and supplying alternative information that transcends simplistic Manichean narratives about the "other."

Contemporary peace media is perhaps best represented by Search for Common Ground (SFCG), which among its other activities has demonstrated the power of community radio programming to bridge group divisions. SFCG's seventeen projects span four continents and its website (http://www.sfcg.org/resources/resources_home.html) offers extensive practical resources for peace media in the field. The common thread throughout SFCG's programming is its emphasis on providing balanced information "as a way of building (or re-building) a sense of common identity" by highlighting common "problems and challenges." The universality--and lack of a literacy threshold--of radio has made it a particularly successful medium in Africa, which is home to the majority of SFCG's programming. Such programs as Burundi's Studio Ijambo seek to unite previously warring parties by identifying common ground on multiple levels.

Despite its success, however, acute limits on participation in radio-based peace media make new media an attractive alternative to such efforts. For example, radio deejays--with human biases of their own, however latent--control participation by selecting which callers to air and which to ignore. A further limit on participation is availability. As with conventional media's issue selection, peace media too can potentially perpetuate power asymmetries and implicitly block less dominant narratives from being heard. For example, if an individual is engaged in manual labor when a particular show is aired, he or she is essentially deprived of the opportunity to participate, whereas an office worker could pause to place a call to the radio station from the comfort of his or her desk. By eliminating these considerations, and obviating scarcity issues given the infinity of Internet "bandwidth," new media opens the door to anyone with access to an Internet connection and thus vastly expands the range of possible participants.

By applying the best practices gleaned from community radio, where available, new media can catalyze a movement toward participatory journalism with a dual focus on restorative individual benefits and, more distantly, increased inter-group understanding. Compared to mainstream media, and even to traditional peace media, new media more broadly empowers individuals to voice their unique narratives in post-conflict environments. Because individuals are liberated from having to mold their experiences into pre-established media frames that likely favor

the higher power party, new media has the potential to overcome power asymmetry and enable individuals from all positions in the power relations matrix to tell his or her own truth.

Any reconciliation and healing process should be seen on a continuum--as should the balance between low- and high-tech media--and approached with significant patience. Restorative dialogue will not appear overnight but new media as a tool for peace is worth pursuing. Despite potential risks, new media is here to stay and peacebuilders should dedicate themselves to further research on how best to leverage new media to effect peace and dialogue. My next postings will explore the subtleties of new media as peace promotion and examine the technical options for comment moderation, the relative value of dialogue forums versus blogs, and consider the potential roles for third parties. As Malcolm X declared, the media is massively powerful. It's up to us to understand this power and do our utmost to harness it for peaceful means.

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