

Comedy & Conflict

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Speakers:

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A person can find humor in almost any situation. However, how can comedy interact in the most sensitive of circumstances in a conflict or post-conflict situation? The Conflict Prevention & Resolution Forum panel explored how comedy can be a tool to transform conflict and whether it can, at times, fuel it. In the field of conflict resolution and peacebuilding, challenges with various religions, cultures, and national identities may find an opportunity in the creative approaches of comedy and humor to build peace.

Comedy as a Peacebuilding Tool

How can you joke about a tragic situation? Humor indeed can help people survive in the midst of conflict. It is a way to cope with trauma and even to remain sane in the face of tragedy. A simple equation was pointed out that “tragedy + time = comedy”.

Comedy can be more powerful than many may think. It hits people at a base level where audience members will laugh naturally without requiring prolonged thought on the context. Comedy interacts with an audience that is already disarmed when they enter an atmosphere of humor where they are prepared to be entertained. It is this natural and voluntary act within comedy that has the potential to reach a large audience population.

Comedy is also powerful by looking at the absurd and showing the juxtaposition. Using humor as a tool in peacebuilding can find those absurdities and break through barriers between ethnic or religious groups.

Comedy as a Harmful Tool

The negative side of comedy shows that humor can be used to dehumanize others and legitimize abusive actions, such as making fun and demoralizing others or even committing violence. Humor can also be used to perpetuate stereotypes and conflict between groups. On the other hand, it may also subvert stereotypes and broaden minds to alternative viewpoints, specifically by showing that juxtaposition like holding up a mirror and revealing the absurdity in stereotypes.

Common Ground through Comedy

Comedy requires people to be on similar grounds in order for everyone to comprehend the same jokes. Thus, those using humor need to find the common ground between parties to make the necessary and humorous connection. Finding the common ground can involve speaking about subjects that all sides are familiar.

One specific example raised by the panel was the humanitarian organization Clowns Without Borders, which provides laughter to those affected by conflict and trauma, especially children. Through clown performances and workshops, they offer relief from suffering and teaching people to laugh again. Projects such as Clowns Without Borders are providing an added assistance to humanitarian and conflict resolution work around the world. Practices in humor therapy, such as these clown performances, can make a real impact, however research on impact and other data is gravely lacking.

Comedy and humor has been shown to have great potential in conflict resolution. Conflict resolution attempts to tear down walls, build relationships, reduce tensions, and to stay calm and cool during a crisis; all of which are exactly what comedy and humor try to achieve. In peacebuilding and conflict resolution, listening and understanding are key skills. Humor also requires these skills. Finally, Creativity is an important asset to peacebuilders, which humor embodies quite well.