

## THE CRITICAL ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA IN RESOLVING CONFLICTS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores (1) the nature of media in reduction of conflicts, (2) media's potential in conflicts transformation. The premises are that, unlike other institutions, media is a powerful tool that can steer peaceful coexistence among citizens during conflicts besides promoting other national development agendas. In addition, media plays a significant role in conciliation and transformation processes of conflicts which are the most desirable outcomes. This article suggests that while conflicts are destructive, the media is fundamental in transmuting them to enhance mutual understanding between the contending parties. To achieve national progress, there is need for media to bring together the warring factions and/or reduce any forms of volatility.

**Key words:** Conflict reduction, conflict transformation, reconciliation

## 1. Introduction

Conflicts and peaceful coexistence share the same stand in media conversations considering that reporting on conflict may also entail seeking for another productive resolution to the impediment. Conflict is defined as a tussle amongst individuals over a myriad of issues including values, claims, ranks, power and minimum resources where in most cases the goals of the differing parties are contrary to those of the others (Goodhand and Humle, 1999).

While the debate rages on whether the media perpetrates conflicts or not, few communication experts and scholars suggest that as a powerful tool, media can still be used in the resolution of unending conflicts. In the events of chaotic situations, it is highly anticipated that an audience's and media's relationship should be enhanced so as to avoid and/or reduce foreseen and unforeseen tensions (Kuusik, 2010). Unfortunately, as conflicts accelerate, communication remains to be a vital component and the media is expected to inform individuals at all times.

Conveyance of information is important because lack of it brings about restlessness among the citizens as well as making them anxious and susceptible to manipulation. The citizens from the conflict hit regions are expected to make prudent and informed decisions which are strongly needed for the strengthening of their societies. In spite of these conflicts, some of these decisions may become handy in improving the economy of that particular nation, solidify the nation's democracy and enable the citizens to have an optimistic glance at the future despite the acrimony bedeviling them at that instance. Therefore, in the face of these turbulent times, the media should not shy away from conveying information because an audience will certainly require communication on probable problematic situations and how those challenges can be surmounted (ibid).

During these conflicts, many non-governmental and international bodies often come in to offer help and humanitarian assistance in the conflict hit areas. Most of these organizations in their quest of containing the situation need support from the media establishments. The media becomes instrumental in supporting the organizations' peace initiatives because besides educating, entertaining and passing information, the media can still convince and control the minds of its audiences (Van Dijk, 1992). It is argued that the media has the capacity of offering invaluable contribution on the peace initiatives by conveying information and playing the surveillance role (Himelfar and Chabalowski, 2008). Given that many queries on how the media can achieve these are bound to arise, it should be noted that the media can attain these by successfully disseminating content focusing on peace and cohesion alongside encouraging positive discussions, insights and feedbacks from the citizens.

According to Wolsfeld (2004), media has the capacity of conveying interactive programmes as well as prompting positive discussions from their audience. This being the case, there is an urgent need for the media to desist from disseminating conflict-type content but rather endeavor to transmit many peace building programmes prior and during the conflicts period (Howard, 2002)

## **2. The problem statement**

It is argued that as a powerful tool, media is susceptible to play a significant role in this era's conflicts. Ideally, the media assumes two noticeable and differing forms as far as conflicts are concerned. The first form is where the media assumes a more central and an active role in a given conflict by accelerating hostility between two contending parties. On the other hand, media may choose to remain independent and absolutely out of any form of acrimony. Communication

experts suggest that media is indeed complex in nature and thus the need for testing the approaches that can be put into arresting conflicts by these communication systems (Andrew Puddephatt, 2006)

Conflicts have however become a common problem in today's societies. The growth in the number of conflicts is overwhelming with majority of these hostilities affecting how the states execute their mandate. Unfortunately, many nations succumb to the prolonged conflicts by failing to administer many of their duties efficiently. The results of such conflicts include displacement of citizens, destruction of properties and absence in the rule of law. Due to these conflicts, lots of citizens become poor, colossal suffering of the affected nations' citizens is witnessed, destruction of environment and gigantic setbacks for the international community. It is regrettable that many media experts and policy makers have failed to interrogate further the roles that a communication system can play in creating the required conditions for peace in a volatile environment. In view of this problem, the article examines how the media plays a constructive role in the resolution of conflicts (ibid).

### **3. Objectives of the paper**

- To find out the nature of media in reduction of conflict
- To find out the media's potential in conflict transformation

### **4. Significance of this paper**

In spite of the significant roles played by the media institutions in conflict and conflict resolution, our concern is that this area of research remains ignored by many scholars and media experts. Many existing studies unfortunately center on the ills contributed by the media on the

escalation of conflicts and few focus on the media's positive role of conflict settlement (Eytan Gilboa, 2009)

Many authors have explored in in-depth the part played by the media in instigating violence (Des Forges, 1999). Wolsfeld (2004) agrees to the view that media researchers have a tendency of studying much of conflicts instead of peace initiatives which unfortunately remain subtle. In our opinion, it is prudent to concentrate more on peace processes rather than conflicts and/or violence which has been over researched. On the other hand, Galtung (1998) expounds the challenges encountered when reporting peace developments by pointing out that news and peace make strange fellows given that news is notably interested on events rather than processes.

## **5. Methodology**

This paper is a thought paper that arose from our critical review on the nature of media in conflict resolution, an area that needs more research input. This paper is critical of what has been researched on by previous scholars based on the article's objectives. Our main concern is to show insight and awareness on the media's positive role in conflict resolution. This paper is therefore concerned with relevant published works linked at all times to our main purpose which is captured herein.

## **6. Media's nature in conflict reduction**

Even before interrogating the probable positive roles of the media in conflict affected societies in part, a myriad of issues need to be made clear: Tensions often rise in circumstances where there is no communication. Conveyance of factual information, perspectives and views is thus a de-escalating measure that should be embraced. It is worth noting that media can never be neutral towards peace. In addition, media practitioners may react against the mentioned claim by

attributing to their professional objectivity over anything else. Given that individuals may insinuate that media can be used for specific purposes, even for peacebuilding, the idea that media practitioners ought to be neutral should be overcome. This is because of the fact that media is inherently involved in the conflict by the mere responsibility it has of reporting the very conflict (Melone, Terziz & Beleli, 2002).

In addition, there is a very thin line between discarding one's impartiality with a positive attitude geared at reconciliation of warring parties. Although media establishments are created to make profit, it is unfortunate that conflict sells more than cooperation. This being the scenario, the media practitioners should be overly sensitive in their reporting by being balanced as a way of preventing the rising of tensions. Conflict resolution is therefore attainable only if the media dwells on peace initiatives and choosing to counter hate speech as well as reducing all manner of negative potentials it has (ibid).

Sensitive and careful reporting of conflicts is hugely encouraged during the emergence of conflicts and disagreements. Dominant literatures indicate that there is a great difference in how the local and foreign media cover events happening in a particular locality. It is insinuated that media which reports conflict occurrences in their own countries may be compromised and manipulated to ignite, fuel and incite acrimony on the audience through being partisan and broadcasting hate speech (Spurk, 2002).

As elucidated by Wamwere (2003), there is a great role played by the media practitioners in staging divisions among people by conveying content on negative ethnicity and unfortunately developing misunderstanding among individuals. From his explanations, it is regrettable that journalists are always in the forefront in generating negative ethnicity. This trend should

however stop if peaceful co-existence is to be achieved more-so during the turbulent times. To be precise, African journalists have been accused to be the key proponents in propagating hate and negative ethnicity among the populace. It is argued that these journalists are known to give political parties ethnic outlooks and further influence people from ethnic communities on which parties to be affiliated with, and dismiss as inappropriate any party that does not have an ethnic leaning. Unfortunately, Wamwere (ibid, p.103) further add that such journalists spike multiethnic agendas as non-news in entirety. In conclusion, it should be noted that individuals prefer a media that is tolerant to divergent viewpoints, entertaining and informative as well (Botes, 1996). Such a media has a huge capacity of resolving any conflicts as they happen.

## **7. Media's potential in conflict Transformation**

It is prudent to interrogate the means through which the media can transform and end a conflict. According to McNair (1999), there are five functions of the communication media in any democratic society. Among these functions include passing awareness to citizens on what is happening around them and educating them more-so on the importance of facts. The mass media is also instrumental in establishing a platform where individuals can convey their expressions of dissent and dissatisfaction. These are potential means by which the mass media can forestall an impending conflict or stop a continuing violence all together. In the wake of conflicts, the media also has the capacity of holding all the leaders and statesmen to account which is mostly known as the watchdog role of journalism. Finally as a potential means of ending a conflict, the media has the ability of setting up a channel for the enhancement of divergent political ideologies and viewpoints (ibid)

In addition, media possesses a great potential for initiating conflict transformation via a variety of activities. According to Manoff (1998), media has the capacity of transforming conflicts by enabling a swift flow of constructive and accurate content through its informing and educating mandate. Since many conflicts arise due to disagreements and misperceptions, the media transforms a conflict by also establishing the underlying issues, thwarting misunderstandings and advocating for a free consensus among the differing parties (ibid). The media also expands the concept of conveying information concerning the rights of individuals coupled with the tenets of desired governance, parliamentary democracy and a free election. Uncovering the many levels of media's role in transforming conflicts, the media further offers alternative options of ending a conflict by enhancing confidence and negotiation between the disagreeing parties by encouraging communication and a need for peace. Resting on this foundation of communication, the media provides an avenue for conciliation of the parties in turmoil by providing a platform for dialogue (Siebert, 1998). As reiterated by many scholars, the media acts as a watchdog on the political leaders by monitoring them as well as ensuring transparency and accountability. In a broader sense the media transforms conflict by presenting earliest concerns and warnings on potential intensifications of the conflict. On the other hand, media has the ability of presenting and analyzing the history of the conflicts as observed from different parties' involved and creating awareness on the historical and recognized injustices. The success of reconciliation after conflicts solely depends on a process of letting go and forgiveness among the historical foes. In the present day society, the start of a successful relationship and shared acceptance is hinged on the process of forgiveness. The importance of the media lies on its potential of reaching a mass audience scattered along different regions and making them the central actors in this process of peace building (Montville, 1991). Like it has been argued, the media content should endeavor to



promote identities other than negative ethnicity that is the enemy of a cohesive society. In the event that the groups in acrimonious relationships have managed to reconcile, the media comes in handy by supporting them to develop a trans-ethnic identity. Such identities are instrumental in fostering common grounds and ties banked on the same expectations. As articulated by Sofos (1997), media content that exposes various aspects of societies in disagreements including women folks' ambitions and accomplishments, environmental problems, business projections and so on plays a major role in flourishing the non-ethnic notions of citizenship.

We observe that the roles of the media in international relations are changing by the day. In essence, the conventional roles including the media's role of collecting and getting factual information, structuring, encoding and expressing realities have undergone changes where media practitioners are not expected to convey news fairly and devoid of bias in language (Tuchman, 1978; Hall, 1980; Fowler, 1991). Our take is that the media has become so influential in setting up platforms for international conversations. In a nutshell, the media events may include meetings initiated towards the signing of peace treaties among the contending groups in conflict (Dayan and Katz, 1992)

## **8. Conclusions and Recommendations**

This work attempts to fill the gap on how the mass media can be used positively in the resolution and transformation of conflicts. According to Gilboa (2009), in today's era, many contemporary conflicts ensue at the interstate or global level, and this pattern is likely to persist in more decades to come.

The media has been labeled as a huge player in international engagements and has further promoted peace initiatives across the divides. We single out the Middle East as the case in point

where the mass media has been useful in many peace processes. There is however an urgent need for media scholars to investigate how the media climate has been since the climax of the Cold War (Dov Shinar, 2003).

Considering that many scholars have explored the role of media in fuelling of conflicts, it is also prudent to examine whether the mass media uses its power and autonomy to enhance peace. This is partly the reason as to why we interrogated the place of media in transformation and resolution of conflicts. The article concludes that as far as objectivity remains to be an important aspect of journalism more so in the promotion of peace, the media is expected to exude a high level of professional ethics, integrity and the freedom of expression. Considering that there are noticeable differences in news values of tensions and peace, it is highly anticipated that the media carries itself in accordance with the ethical considerations that among many require for its response on social variations including participation in peacemaking initiatives (ibid).

The response on peace initiatives should be embraced due to spontaneous eruption of conflicts. In this regard, the media has to initiate convincing approaches alternative to conflicts by creating the roles to be played by arch-enemies immediately they become peacemaking partners. It is prudent for the media to also act as participants in the conflict resolution, speed up the process of conciliation together with the elimination of discord and hatred among the contending parties. This conclusion argues that there is a need for the media to be prepared in handling conflicts when they emerge by creating a peaceful environment in the midst of a long term climate of violence (ibid).

From the arguments captured in this article, it is therefore crucial that;

- The media goes further than conflict resolution and support of peacebuilding initiatives by also addressing underlying issues that ignite and fuel violence
- The media advocates for peace arrangements after a planned and/or unplanned eruption of violence
- The media educates individuals on the probable causes of conflicts, the possible reasons for violence and the need for conflicts resolution.
- The media prevents a failure in conflicts resolution by ensuring that its journalists steer themselves away from ethnic prejudices.

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