



# Media between warmongers and peacemakers

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## ABSTRACT

This article addresses key assumptions about the role of media in conflict prevention and proposes to be deeply skeptical about these assumptions which project onto information and communication unrealistic expectations about their impact on human relations. Although there may be doubts about the media's peacemaking potential, it can be demonstrated that news media can make matters a lot worse and can certainly contribute to the escalation of group conflicts into mass killings. This is especially so when media workers become agents for the dissemination of the 'elimination belief' and when media are intentionally used as weapons to incite people to commit crimes against humanity. It is therefore of utmost importance that public expressions of elimination beliefs are spotted – and subsequently exposed! – as early as possible. An International Media Alert System (IMAS) is needed to monitor media contents in areas of conflict. This system would provide an 'early warning' where and when media set the climate for crimes against humanity and begin to motivate people to kill others.

KEY WORDS • early warning • elimination belief • genocide • pictures of war

## The permanence of war and conflict

Most probably most people prefer peace over war. Yet most of human history is filled with the horror of war and lethal conflict. A rough count would tell us that after the Second World War and the solemn pledge by the international community that it would not allow this barbarism to happen again, the world has known fewer than 40 days during which nowhere in the world was a war fought.

In the 5th century BC, Greek philosopher Heraclitus wrote that 'War is the father of all things', and in the 20th century Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95) phrased this thought as 'We are locked into war'. Human history can be written as a permanent succession of war and peace, whereby in times of peace war

continues in different forms such as propaganda and perception wars. War is so internalized into humanity's collective consciousness that even socially constructive efforts are called wars, like 'war on drugs', or 'war on poverty'. When the US administration had to decide the modality of the pursuit of the 9/11 perpetrators this could have been a criminal prosecution, but it became a war – the 'war on terror'.

Little wonder that this perplexing paradox of humans as 'war-mongering peace-lovers' has inspired an impressive library of studies on war and conflict. Many studies about conflict focus on the prevention of conflict. Taking the notion of 'conflict prevention' at face value, it seems to make sense. However, upon reflection it does not make sense. The essence of living is conflict. Conflict between life and death. Conflict between who we are and who we would want to be. Conflict between expectations and realities.

Conflict is the source of creativity, growth, and productivity. Conflict is at the core of a democratic society. The prevention of conflict is an unrealistic proposition and most likely also a very undesirable enterprise. What needs prevention is the escalation of conflict into lethal violence or forms of 'deep damage' to human relations. We need to learn de-escalating behavior! I would hope that this journal's agenda will share my concern with the exploration of de-escalating modes of communicating in human relations and the contributions that the media can make to this.

### **Flawed assumptions**

Since the new journal singles out the media for special attention in connection with war and conflict, this connection deserves some critical footnotes. It is widely held that:

- more and better information is essential for the prevention of escalation;
- more and open communication contributes to the prevention of escalation;
- once people know more about each other, they will understand each other and be less inclined towards violent behavior;
- peace-building messages are essential to the de-escalation of conflict.

We have to be deeply skeptical about these assumptions that project onto information and communication unrealistic expectations about their impact on human relations. Such expectations are essential only if one believes that conflicts and their escalation into violence are primarily caused by insufficient and adequate information. From this reasoning it follows that conflicts can be controlled once adversaries have correct information about each other. This suggests that if adversaries knew more about each other, it would be easier

to reach agreement. It is, however, difficult to find empirical evidence for this suggestion and one can equally well propound the view that social harmony is largely due to the degree of ignorance that people have about each other. As a matter of fact, many societies maintain levels of stability because they employ rituals, customs and conventions that enable their members to engage in social interactions without having detailed information about who they really are.

The expectations about information and communication neglect the fact that conflicts often address very real points of contention and may be based upon antagonistic interests of fundamentally disagreeing individuals or groups. There may indeed be a dangerous conflict precisely because adversaries have full information about each other's aims and motives. If disputes are about competing claims to scarce resources (as often is the case), it is unlikely that distorted information and failed communication are the crucial variables or that their correction would make the conflict less dangerous.

The Constitution of the United Nations' specialized agency for education, science and culture (UNESCO) states that war begins in people's minds. The implied suggestion is that the minds of people need to be influenced (through the mass media) in order to develop a culture of peace. However, the idea that war begins in the minds of people is misleading. Wars among members of the human species start with the material, physical fact of their bodies. The human life form – like other life forms – is constantly involved in a struggle for life. Inevitable components of that struggle are aggression and violence. In the struggle for life, most animals are restrained by their instincts. The human animal, however, has very inadequate instincts and must hope that rational considerations put limits to their violent conduct. Humans often fail in this effort and their aggression tends to be exercised with a violence that knows little or no restraint.

The most lethal conflict in the 21st century is likely to be about access to drinking water: information campaigns directed at people's hearts and minds will do little to make this conflict less dangerous.

### **Incitement to genocide**

Does this imply that the media do not matter when it comes to war and conflict? One may have doubts about the media's de-escalating or peacemaking potential, but at the same time it can be demonstrated that news media can make matters a lot worse and can certainly contribute to the escalation of group conflicts into mass killings. This is especially so when media workers become agents for the dissemination of the 'elimination belief' and when

media are intentionally used as weapons to incite people to commit crimes against humanity.

After the Second World War the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg created an important legal precedent by sentencing the editor of *Der Stuermer*, Julius Streicher, to hang. According to the judges he committed crimes against humanity through his media work since he incited others to commit such crimes. The court condemned racist propaganda as a crime against humanity. This led to Articles 3 and 4 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948), which provide that public incitement to commit genocide is a crime and that all persons committing this crime shall be punished.

As was already clear at the Nuremberg trial, the implementation of these provisions is not without difficulties. The court also dealt with the case against Hans Fritzsche, a high officer in the propaganda department responsible for the broadcasting of anti-Semitic messages. With the exception of the Soviet judge, the court did not find him guilty of incitement to genocide. His statements were anti-Semitic but did not call for the elimination of Jews. A bizarre aspect of the case was that Fritzsche did support the goals of Nazi policy and these included the persecution and elimination of Jews.

Articles 3 and 4 of the Genocide Convention were more recently used in the conviction of the leaders of the Rwandan station Radio-Television Libre des Mille Collines (RTML). In 1994, in the space of just a few months, some 500,000 to 1 million Tutsis were killed by Hutus. Radio Television Mille Collines (the RTML Hutu extremist radio and TV station) played an essential role in the massacre by repeatedly broadcasting messages in which Tutsis were slandered and ridiculed and depicted as despicable. The Hutu militia were informed by RTML where Tutsis (who were referred to as 'cockroaches') were hiding so that they could be murdered. The Hutus were made to believe that the Tutsis deserved to be eliminated, and this resulted in a horrifying bloodbath.

The hate propaganda was so effective that neighbours who had been living in peace together for many years were killed by people they considered to be friends. Ordinary people turned into crazed killing machines – because they were made to believe that a dangerous and hideous enemy lived next door.

These precedents are important because we can observe today a new rise of incitements to genocidal killings through various media in different countries, such as the Ivory Coast and the Democratic Republic of Congo. What is most troublesome in today's rise of ethnic conflicts is that most of these conflicts are characterized by the exercise of gross violence against civil populations. Contrary to classical warfare between armies, violence now increasingly targets civilians of the fighting parties.

At the dramatic core of ethnic conflicts is the grand scale perpetration of crimes against humanity. As the term suggests, these are criminal acts that render their perpetrators enemies of the human species. Crimes against humanity transgress taboos that apply in most cultures, such as the murder or torture of defenceless men and women, and the killing of children.

Among the crimes against humanity – as defined by international law – are murder and extermination of civilian populations, genocide and apartheid. Although crimes can be committed without apparent motivation, the exercise of gross violence on a grand scale – as in crimes against humanity – needs motivating beliefs. In order to get people to commit such crimes, they need to believe that the violent acts are right. In situations where crimes against humanity are committed one usually finds a systematic distribution of hate propaganda and disinformation.

The purpose of this is the promotion and justification of the social and/or physical elimination of certain social groups. Members of such groups are often first targeted as ‘socially undesirable’; they are publicly ridiculed, insulted and provoked (often in the media), and when words are put into action the victims are beaten up and killed. In the propagation of ‘elimination beliefs’ the ‘others’ are dehumanized, whereas the superiority of one’s own group is emphasized. The propagandists convincingly suggest to their audiences that the ‘others’ pose fundamental threats to the security and well-being of society and that the only effective means of escaping this threat is the elimination of this great danger. The use of violence in this process is presented as inevitable and thus not only acceptable but absolutely necessary.

The elimination beliefs that motivate people to kill each other are not part of the human genetic constitution. They are social constructs, which need social institutions for their dissemination. Such institutions include religious communities, schools, families and the mass media. Because crimes against humanity are unthinkable without elimination beliefs, the institutional carriers of such beliefs should be seen as enemies of the human species. This implies that all those who propagate beliefs in support of genocide, through whatever media, have to be treated as perpetrators of crimes against humanity.

### **Early warning**

Although impunity is characteristic of the treatment of those who commit violations of human rights, under international law there is an obligation to prosecute crimes against humanity. War crimes and crimes against humanity including the incitement to these criminal acts wherever committed must be punished.

In 1996 the international community began – finally – to take this matter seriously and the General Assembly of the UN decided upon a concrete agenda for the establishment of an international criminal court. In July 1998 an international diplomatic conference that was convened by the United Nations (in Rome) produced a treaty establishing the permanent international criminal court (ICC). The ICC deals with war crimes and crimes against humanity. In accordance with existing treaties the court has the mandate to prosecute those who incite to genocide by propagating elimination beliefs. Moreover, Article 25 of the Statute of the ICC provides that the crime of genocide includes the incitement to genocide.

Once the perpetrators of crimes against humanity are brought to justice, it usually is too late for the victims. It is therefore of utmost importance that public expressions of elimination beliefs are spotted – and exposed! – as early as possible. An International Media Alert System (IMAS) is needed to monitor media contents in areas of conflict. This system would provide an ‘early warning’ where and when media set the climate for crimes against humanity and begin to motivate people to kill others.

In conflict areas a systematic media (newspapers, broadcast media) monitoring could take place by small teams of researchers/analysts on the basis of a mode of text and image analysis that identifies contents that incite to violence, genocide, and ethnic violence. Such local teams could produce regular reports of findings that would be sent to international news media and to the office of the public prosecutor for the International Criminal Court.

On the agenda of this new journal should be issues such as how to identify media contents as incitement to genocide and how to organize news media so as to create protective shields against complicity in murder. An important question is also what the professional associations (like the International Federation of Journalists) can do, and what academic associations like the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), the International Communication Association (ICA) or the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) can do.

### **Regarding the pain of others**

Susan Sontag writes in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) that the horrendous pictures of war should haunt us because they tell us this is what people do to each other and we should never forget this. I agree and would want worldwide TV audiences to regularly watch the painful images of wounded and maimed children in the hospitals of south Iraq, for example. We might otherwise

forget that they are the victims of a Western military choice to use depleted uranium that has poisoned the south of Iraq for many years already.

This raises the question as to whether showing the suffering of people will make audiences realize the insanity and the disgrace of the war, or whether instead this would motivate people to more violence and revenge. It is not certain what the effects would be. Perhaps this is the wrong question all together. We should probably ask what would be the effect if we did not permanently and realistically show the horrors of warfare.

If we do not demonstrate to each other what we are capable of, this 'obscuration' would make it easier for those who initiate and want war to get away with it and contend that they are necessary and legitimate. The masquerade would provide politicians and military ample space to distort the truth about their wars. Although shocking images and stories may not change the human propensity to lethal conflict, it can be seen as a minimal morality that we have to daily confront human-made damage. The least we can do is not to forget the victims.

When Elie Wiesel received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, he said,

What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone, that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled, we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs.

On this issue of regarding the pain of others in connection with war and conflict, the new journal could also play a leading role. In conclusion, the journal offers a unique and very promising forum for research and reflection on some of the most urgent issues in our times.

## Reference

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## Biographical note

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