# Regional Media In Conflict

*Case studies in local war reporting*

**May 2000**

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# Regional Media in Conflict

*Introduction*
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The idea behind this book and the studies it contains can be traced back to events in early September 1991, beginning in a bar on the outskirts of Bac Palanka, 60 miles north-west of Belgrade in the Former Yugoslavia. Close by, a handful of Yugoslav Federal Army (JNA) soldiers were bivouacked on the road leading to a long single span bridge that crossed the Danube. On this side, the Serbian side, two T54 tanks sat with their guns pointing into what was then an independent but as yet unrecognised Croatia. Despite there having already been killings committed by militia groups on both sides, the war between Serbia and Croatia was barely lukewarm. A bus service of sorts still ran between Bac Palanka and Illok, a Croatian village just across the river – its driver merely changed down two gears when he drove by the tanks.

The bar looked new and its clientele was young and affluent. A colleague and I were looking to talk to the town's young people about the growing tensions in this part of Yugoslavia. But that evening, instead of MTV playing on the hi-tech video system, we found a dozen youngsters transfixed by World War II footage of the Jasenovac death camp being liberated by Partisan forces.

Thousands of Serbs, along with Jews and Roma, were killed in Jasenovac by the Croatian fascist Ustashe government allied to the Nazis. The

documentary was broadcast by *Radio Television Srpska* (RTS) in Belgrade and you could almost sense the spittle of the narrator as he spat out the words accompanying film of the captured Croatian guards. You didn't need Serbo-Croatian to know this was a none-too-subtle lesson in hate. Footage from the end of one war was being used to precipitate the start of another.

Screened at such a time and narrated with such vehemence, it no doubt had an effect on the people who lived and drank there, as it did on the JNA soldiers camped outside. If the soldiers hadn't seen that particular documentary, they all appeared to have watched or read something very similar. They were not against Croatia or Croatians, they told us, but they were frightened of a resurgence of Ustashe fascism. What would happen to those unprotected Serbs who happened to live across the river, they asked? With Croatia declaring independence and being supported once again by a strong and united Germany, what would happen to them?

One week later in Croatian-held Vukovar, with dozens of road blocks, checkpoints and tank traps having been thrown up across Eastern Slavonia, the raw emotive power of the media was being harnessed just as effectively by the Croatian authorities. Vukovar, which had boasted a substantial Serb minority before the shooting started, was already cut off from the rest of Croatia. The only way in or out was to creep through the cornfields at night, or walk up to and past the federal tanks, hoping that neither they nor the Croatian militia further up the road would open fire. From the basement of the Hotel Dunaev which was being hit by shellfire, we watched *HTV*, the state-owned television station in Zagreb, broadcast news and well-crafted patriotic spots every hour. In their way, these slots, which included images of burning houses and young Croatian volunteers crawling through the fields, to the strains of "Brothers In Arms," were as powerful as the *RTS* broadcasts I'd seen back in Bac Palanka. While the dubbing of a Dire Straits song over frontline footage does not fully qualify as hate speech, given the context, it was certainly understood by all who saw it as a direct call to arms.

From 1998 until the start of the air strikes on Yugoslavia, the Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR) in London, a media development and training charity, had been running an extensive in-country media-monitoring project that analysed hate-speech and journalistic professionalism within the Yugoslav media. Examining and assessing the coverage of the Kosovo conflict was, from the start, by far the biggest component of the work. Until

March 1999, when the start of the air campaign sent our people underground or overseas, our team of 17 local monitors, analysts and editors digested the news as put out by the country's media outlets. In so doing, we were able to document the excesses of the media as well as record instances of fair and objective reporting. As expected, there were far more cases of the former. The information war fought between the official Serbian media and the Albanian press proved as vicious as the one fought between Belgrade and Zagreb eight years earlier. Hate-speech broadcast from Belgrade during the Kosovo crisis was used by Western leaders to justify the air strikes launched against the *RTS* building, transmitters and the relay stations.

As with any big story, the reporting of it eventually becomes a news item in itself. So it has been that a small but significant part of the international media's reporting on the Balkans – up to and including the conflict in Kosovo – has

focused on the style and manner of the reporting. As in Vietnam, this debate was launched by the journalists on the ground. Debate over the Balkan coverage quickly widened into a broad-church discussion on the nature of Western media coverage of conflicts in the age of the rolling news show, when complex issues have to be swiftly packaged into three-minute spots.

Martin Bell MP, formerly of the BBC, Tom Geltjen of National Public Radio and Nik Gowing, now of BBC World Television, are just three former front line reporters from the Balkans who have subsequently initiated their own studies into examining the role and impact of the international news media in conflict zones.

But while it was trumpeted as being something of a new development in the media, in coining the term "journalism of attachment," Martin Bell was criticised for promoting a style of journalism that has in fact long been in existence – and best exemplified by the likes of Martha Gellhorn, Wilfred Burchett, James Cameron, John Pilger and others. These are reporters who have been accused of straying off the beaten track of objectivity into the land of the polemical and partisan. Others have praised them for being far more interested in the victims of war than in the mere mechanics of waging it. Their defenders have argued that the convention that Western journalists have to remain clinically neutral as if they were reporting a football match, is wrong. There, they say, is neither reason nor merit in trying to provide a balanced view on what is invariably a chaotic situation. And they might conclude by asking whether such artifice does not become immoral in wars where ethnic cleansing is deployed?

While interesting in its own right, the debate

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becomes much more relevant when it focuses upon regional media and on the local journalists. This was the starting point of a study IWPR undertook a few years ago. Quite obviously, neither the visiting "fireman" nor even the resident foreign correspondent will have the same level of understanding as the local reporter. As non-stakeholders in that society, they will moreover lack the level of commitment the local journalist has. Finally, from a strictly news perspective, by their very definition, the local media will always beat international organisations in spotting the potential for crises and reporting on a developing conflict. Only when the story is judged big enough – perhaps when the shooting has started – will it make the international news.

In an attempt to encourage greater professional awareness among local journalists who may find themselves reporting conflict in the course of their future work, IWPR decided to make a comparative study of recent media behaviour in four conflict areas – Georgia, Cambodia, Bosnia and South Africa. We also wanted to see if any common patterns emerged. Using journalists/researchers from each country, we sought to examine local perception of media behaviour. It was obviously important to speak to members of the public as well as to journalists and editors. Quite simply, the former comprise the audience and are thus potential combatants as well as potential victims. The benefit was also that as non-practitioners, members of the public are disinterested recipients of information who only want the media to help make sense of events around them.

We invited our four researchers to London in 1998 and during a long weekend's workshop at IWPR's offices, thrashed out a common methodology for the onsite research. Each researcher would take up to three months each looking at how their own media community had reported conflict in their countries over recent years.

It was important that none of the researchers had any personal agenda to promote peace through the media. If anything, while agreed on the media's potential to promote violence, we were not convinced that the media could ever have a role in conflict resolution. It was argued, the idea of propagandising for peace was seen as a risk equal to that of propagandising for war. Deliberate manipulation of information was wrong, irrespective of the reason for it.

Yet as explained by our South African researcher, Dr Jannie Botes, a former presenter with the *South African Broadcasting Television Company* who had moved on to teach peace studies and political studies in the United States, the fact is that all reporters – cameramen and photographers included – unconsciously manipulate every story they work. This they do through their choice of

the frame. This "frame" is the angle on every story filed or picture taken. Each decision over the choice of subject matter, who to speak to, what quotes to include and what order to put them in – all are subjective. When the report is an electronic broadcast, the issue of "reality" is just one more point to consider. Images and sounds captured on tape may be strong enough to encourage journalists to build stories around them despite the fact that they may not accurately reflect the wider story.

**Vokovar, September 1991, Croatian militia defend the road out of town. Credit: Alan Davis**

We agreed that research methodology would focus in part on encouraging journalists to discuss and acknowledge the subconscious choices they were continually making in their choice and presentation of stories. We also wanted them to think more about how their stories were perceived and understood by the public, and what the reaction might be to be reporting rumour – even when it was clearly presented as such.

While necessary to give the overall research some semblance of unity, the comparative component of our research caused us problems until we found a structure which combined the researchers' own investigation of the specific relationship between local media and conflict in their country, with ten specific questions to be put to separate groups of journalists and members of the public. Answers would help us measure both beliefs and perceptions, while also providing suggestions for future change.

Though much maligned in the West, the decision to use focus groups appeared sound for two reasons. Firstly, very little testing of public opinion has ever been done in places like Phnom Penh or Tbilisi. Members of the public are not used to being asked for their opinions since they are not yet considered important enough. Secondly, they

enabled us to measure the extent to which journalists' perceptions of the impact they had on conflict, matched up with their own. If there was too great a divide between what the two groups thought, there would be obvious need for improvement.

The ten questions listed below may appear straightforward and simple– and yet it took a good half day to agree ones that would be neutral and non-leading as well as illuminating. The same questions were put to groups of journalists and to members of the public. The answers from one group were then relayed to the other.

**1** Are you satisfied with the way that journalists have reported on violent conflict situations in recent years?
**2** Has the way journalists reported the conflicts improved the situation or made it worse?
**3** How should journalists have reported conflicts over the past few years?
**4** What then, in your view, are the roles and responsibilities of journalists in conflict situations?
**5** Do you think that the political/social situation in our country helps or hinders journalists from carrying out their roles and responsibilities?
**6** Can or should journalists have a role in ending conflicts? (supplementary question if the answer is positive): How?
**7** Can or should journalists play a role in preventing conflicts? (supplementary question if the answer is positive): How?
**8** Should the media contribute to national reconciliation of conflicting parties?
**9** Should the media act as a go-between or peace-builder between conflicting parties?
**10** Are there any other issues surrounding the media and their role in reporting conflict that you want to talk about?

While each of the four following studies do make recommendations – recommendations mostly from those people we interviewed, it is important to note that we did not set out to propose solutions, rather to throw up questions and to hopefully encourage debate on the past, current and possible future relationship between local media and conflict and to shift the emphasis away from the international media perspective.

Our thanks at IWPR go out to the Unites States Institute For Peace in Washington and the Freedom Forum in London for their financing of this study

and their prolonged patience in its production. Our thanks too, for the substantial work put in by our team of four researchers; Giorgi Topouria, Dr Jannie Botes, Khuy Sokhoeun and Ahmed Buric, without whom this project would never have got off the ground. The research was difficult, and for Jannie Botes, a little dangerous, since some of the media professionals were being targeted and worked behind bullet-proof glass as a consequence. Unfortunately, the security situation in the Cape Flats at the time when our research was undertaken, meant we could not assemble our focus groups as intended.

The reports were largely commissioned and written in late 1998 and early 1999. Events on the ground in the Balkans in 1999, obliged us to update the Bosnia chapter, but the other material has been left largely as it was originally written and edited here in London. ❍

*Alan Davis is Director of Programmes at IWPR.*
*May 2000*

# Media and Civil Conflicts in Georgia

*By Giorgi Topouria, IWPR Caucasus Project Director in Tbilisi*

## Introduction

How did the media promote or reflect political and ethnic upheaval in Georgia following the collapse of the former Soviet Union? By speaking to consumers of media as well as journalists, academics and politicians, we sought to measure the extent to which ordinary citizens believe that the media have influenced political developments and public opinion.

Interviews and focus-group discussions were designed to reveal public attitudes towards the Georgian media, to invite journalists to critique their performance and to provide an opportunity to match the reality of media coverage against the expectations of "consumers."

The first part of the report describes the development of the new (post-Soviet) Georgian mass media and the political context surrounding it, including chronologies of the wars. For this, interviews were conducted with independent journalists, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), political scientists, philosophy scholars, psychologists and newspaper editors.

The second section describes the current state of the Georgian media, noting progress but also major issues that have yet to be addressed. This section also examines how journalists and the public view the media's performance in times of war and political upheaval in Georgia.

The third and final part of the report, based on focus group sessions, draws conclusions about the media's role and provides some initial recommendations as to what might be done to strengthen the editorial independence of the Georgian media and to help journalists improve the quality of their reporting in a way that contributes to peaceful, pluralistic dialogue.

## Background – The Soviet Shadow

For years, the Soviet regime exercised comprehensive political control over the Georgian media. The state used propaganda to stifle discussion and dissent while ignoring the grievances of ethnic minorities. Then, at one moment, state censorship faded as the Soviet Union collapsed and Georgia moved towards independence. During this time of upheaval, revived nationalist sentiment, political uncertainty and economic chaos, the new Georgian mass media – ill-equipped and vulnerable – was born. Aspiring journalists had no democratic tradition as a guide, no legal guarantees to protect their tenuous freedoms, no knowledge of the diverse ethnic communities inside Georgia and no economic reforms to provide an element of financial independence for their media organisations or for themselves.

In his study entitled *Media and Intra-State Conflict*[1], Dusan Reljic writes that Georgia had no experience of a free press or the open, pluralistic debate that accompanies it in Western societies:

> "For [Western] journalists, reporting on conflict is not a special situation with its own set of rules. Quite the reverse, reporting on political, economic and other clashes within society is very much part of the everyday routine of journalism. Conflicts are part of

*1 Killing Scenes: Medien in Zeiten von Konflikten, 1998 Dreste Verlag, Dusseldorf*

everyday life in a democracy. The absence of conflicts would, if anything, suggest that democracy itself was absent."

Indeed, the authoritarian Soviet regime devoted much effort to covering up conflicts and presenting the appearance of ideological and ethnic harmony. The Soviet mass media – a predecessor of the new Georgian media – represented a powerful propaganda tool that formed an integral part of the communist system. Soviet journalists worked under the strong pressure of the extremely well-organised and refined censorship apparatus of the multi-cultural Soviet state. As a result, the media had no experience or knowledge of ethnic or civic conflict save for those which took place in the West.

The ethnic conflicts in Georgian Abkhazia and Ossetia that developed during the Soviet era were neglected and received little, if any, coverage in the Soviet media. While the new Georgian media can be criticised for its many shortcomings and for its poor and harmful coverage of civic and ethnic conflicts, one cannot underestimate the effect of the long shadow cast by the former Soviet regime. Given this backdrop, it is not surprising that the post-Soviet Georgian journalist had no experience of working with ethnic communities or reporting about their status (especially with the threat of an armed conflict looming). Nor did he have any suitable reference point that would have allowed them to examine these issues professionally and impartially. After all, the new Georgian media had no clear concept of international standards regarding journalistic ethics or responsibilities.

For many people from the Soviet bloc, the communist ideology was *a priori* immoral and unacceptable. Anything in opposition to communism was therefore accepted by many as a superior truth. Replacing communism with nationalism provided a simple, logical answer for the future. As a result, the relative "free speech" which accompanied the collapse of the old Soviet order did not strengthen civic values or democratic debate, but was instead exploited by the leaders of numerous nationalist movements. In Georgia, as elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the fledgling non-communist media fell easily into the disastrous trap of reporting through an exclusively nationalist prism.

The media, as Dusan Reljic points out, "cannot be viewed in isolation." To analyse media coverage of the tensions and armed conflicts that erupted in Georgia since 1988, it is worth describing the political and social climate that prevailed.

The Georgian independence movement first emerged in the late 1980s and grew in strength rapidly. For the vast majority of citizens, the campaign for independence represented the fulfilment of a long-cherished dream. As the old order crumbled, mass demonstrations and street protests were seen in Georgia for the first time since the beginning of the Soviet era. Although the communist media were collapsing and losing all credibility with the public, no alternative media could be constructed promptly enough to exploit the moment. In the resulting vacuum, word of mouth was the favoured medium for demonstrators and their supporters.

***...one cannot underestimate the effect of the long shadow cast by the former Soviet regime...***

The tension peaked on April 9, 1989, when Soviet troops broke up a rally, causing the death of 20 protesters. The bloodshed that day proved to be a turning point, for Georgian politics as well as for the media. According to the study *Georgian Media in the Nineties: a Step to Liberty* by Giga Bokeria, Givi Targamadze and Levan Ramishvili, the deaths:

> "...produced a great upheaval which gave a start to new publications and political organisations. It was a period of uncertainty, with communism crumbling, and the nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia about to take the reins of power."

During this period of transition, activists from the independence movement and the humanities entered journalism along with young people who were driven by what might be best described as "romantic nationalism."

These people brought with them ideas, values and attitudes that dominated the national independence movement, but no working experience as journalists. They also carried the same animosities

and rivalries that prevailed among the various factions comprising the movement. State control over the media was replaced by *de facto* control exerted by the leaders of the independence movement, who relied heavily on populist appeals to nationalist mythology. This proved to be equally devastating for the media, which started to pander to the demagoguery demanded by the demonstrators on the streets.

Among those interviewed for this report, there was unanimous agreement that state television played an especially damaging role during this period. Surprisingly, the role of state radio was not mentioned at all, suggesting that it had no significant impact upon events either way.

Commenting upon those members of the "intelligentsia" and the young nationalists who stepped into the vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet media, journalist Vasil Maglaperidze, writes that "what was presented to society as a historic truth, in reality was just a mere chronology of events, devoid of any kind of objective analysis". The opinions conveyed by the nationalist "intelligentsia," which were mostly based on historic or literary myths, often served as affirmation and reinforcement of vague and unsupported versions of history. This led to the promotion of mythology, stereotypes and intolerant, over-simplistic views, which later influenced the conflicts that ignited in Georgia.

As a result, the majority of ethnic Georgians believed that the country's ethnic minorities represented a serious threat to Georgia's independence. This view naturally led to a reaction from representatives of these ethnic communities, who felt themselves to be under threat.

In summary, certain key characteristics of the political situation helped determine how the new Georgian media evolved:

**1** Neither the criteria for historical analysis of events, nor the mechanisms and experience to disseminate such analysis to a wide audience existed.

**2** There were no impartial experts from within society who would have been able to offer a balanced view of what was happening.

**3** The new reporters and editors who came into journalism from various other disciplines or vocations were inexperienced and conducted themselves without regard for basic journalistic standards or professionalism.

**4** Georgian society was unaware of the importance of the media's role and its possibilities.

**5** Georgian society did not wish to question in any serious way the nature of the events that were taking place. During the independence movement and later during the first stages of armed conflict, any manifestation of

criticism or an opposing viewpoint was widely regarded as traitorous.
**6** The new Georgian media was not yet financially independent.
**7** There was little established political direction or leadership at the time.

The volatile, unstable situation in the country, coupled with a media delivering emotive, nationalist appeals, created ideal conditions for the outbreak of crises and violence. Between 1990 and 1993, ethnic wars erupted in the regions of Abkhazia and Ossetia along with a wider civil conflict.

We asked an independent Georgian expert and philosopher, Dr Kakha Katsitadze, to summarise the chronology of the main events that shaped these wars.

## Stages of war in the autonomous Republic of Abkhazia

Latent confrontation between the parties that occasionally manifested itself in minor incidents.

In 1988, Abkhaz intellectuals addressed the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, demanding secession from Georgia. Reaction from the Georgian media was extremely negative and gave rise to a media war between Georgia and Abkhazia.

In 1989-1991, the independence movement grew apace in Georgia and the fall of communism was followed by further confrontation between ethnic Georgians and Abkhazians. Zviad Gamsakhurdia was elected the first president of an independent Georgia in 1991.

In 1992 and 1993, armed confrontation escalated into open hostilities in Abkhazia. Georgian troops were finally defeated and withdrew from

Abkhazia in late 1993. This coincided with the civil war in Georgia, which ran between December 1991 and early 1992.

Tensions persist in the post-conflict setting. Russian peacekeeping forces control the *de facto* Georgia-Abkhazia border. Unsuccessful negotiations have continued against the background of a low-level guerrilla war.

## Stages of war in the autonomous region of South Ossetia

Latent confrontation, similar to the first phase of the conflict in Abkhazia.

In 1988, Ossetian scientist Alan Chochiev wrote a letter of support to the above-mentioned meeting of Abkhaz intellectuals, expressing solidarity on behalf of the Ossetian population of Georgia. The letter, published in a Georgian newspaper, triggered widespread condemnation in the Georgian community.

As Gamsakhurdia took power, the Ossetian regional parliament – encouraged and backed by Moscow – declared its independence from Georgia. The Georgian government reacted by abolishing Ossetia's autonomous status and by deploying Soviet troops stationed inside Georgia, as well as the Georgian National Guard, to the Ossetia region. Fighting erupted.

Gamsakhurdia's successor, Edward Shevardnadze, then chairman of the State Council, withdrew Georgian military forces from Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia. Russian peacekeepers replaced them.

Post-conflict tension is gradually receding but a lasting political settlement has yet to be agreed.

## Stages of civil war in Georgia

Confrontation escalated between the independence movement and the Communist regime. (This period was also marked by latent confrontation and rivalries within the independence movement itself.) On April 9, 1989, the Georgian Communist Party used Russian troops to break up violently a peaceful rally, causing casualties. The intervention discredited the Communist regime. The independence movement became the major political force in Georgia.

Confrontation among various factions within the nationalist independence worsened. Gamsakhurdia and his supporters won parliamentary elections, escalating tensions between the rival factions.

Cashes erupted between Gamsakhurdia's loyalists and opposition forces. The National Guard, formerly loyal to Gamsakhurdia, joined the opposition. On January 7, 1992 Gamsakhurdia fled and a Military Council assumed power.

Fighting between the supporters of the ousted president and the supporters of

the Military Council continued. The new government started to prosecute Gamsakhurdia's supporters, first in Tbilisi and later in Samegrelo, Gamsakhurdia's home base and a former stronghold. The Military Council later handed power over to a newly-created body, the State Council, headed by Edward Shevardnadze, the former Foreign Minister of the USSR, who had returned from Russia to lead the country.

Fighting continued between Shevardnadze and Gamsakhurdia supporters. Elections were held which were judged to be "partially" democratic.

A new phase of the civil war began. With the defeat of government forces (loyal to Shevardnadze) in Abkhazia, Gamsakhurdia returned from sanctuary in Chechnya and his forces launched an offensive against the government in Tbilisi. Shevardnadze appealed to the Russian Federation for help. Intervention by the Russian Black Sea Fleet proved decisive.

## The Georgian Media in Wartime

Before political tension gave way to violence, the Georgian media failed to seize the opportunity to analyse the causes of the latent confrontations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Instead of sending an "early warning" about the approaching storm and how opposing sides might be reconciled, the Georgian media whipped up the worst type of intolerance and nationalist mythology. For the Georgian media, the perceived or imagined historical roots and origins of the two ethnic groups appeared to be far more important than any attempt to report upon or analyse what was actually unfolding on the ground at the time. As one of our interviewees put it, the problem with the media was its total inability to understand that the issue of critical importance at

that time was "not what mistakes have been made by the parties in the past or who was guilty, but whether and how we can live together in the future." These vital questions were never addressed.

We spoke to several Georgian psychologists who conducted content analysis of the media coverage before and during the ethnic and civil conflicts. They found that the media employed an aggressive form of communication. Numerous attempts to present historic events in an ideological context left the public unable to distinguish historical fact from fiction. As Reljic states in his study *Media and Intra-State Conflict*:

> "Through the media, ideas about the past can be very quickly produced, sharpened or reconstructed. These are processes of utmost significance for the re-shaping of national identities and transforming these into aggressive nationalism in situations of ethnic unrest."

The Georgian media became preoccupied with reconstructing a simplified, aggressive national identity and with identifying the supposed enemies of this national identity.

One of the most influential newspapers of that time, *Literaturuli Sakartvelo* (Literary Georgia – a publication of the Union of Writers of Georgia), was a leader in this regard. Many of our interviewees referred to this bi-weekly newspaper as a "mouthpiece of xenophobia." It regularly published "explanatory" articles regarding the origins of the Abkhaz and Ossetian peoples and the settlement of the Abkhaz and Ossetian tribes in Georgia. These reports were accompanied with numerous "recommendations" by the same authors as to how the Georgian government ought to deal with the these regions. The abolition of the autonomous status of both Abkhazia and Ossetia and the possibility of withholding Georgian citizenship and therefore ownership of land from both groups were frequently cited as the best solutions to the "problem."

*Literaturuli Sakartvelo* and many like-minded publications were so subjective and prejudiced, according to one of our interviewees, that "one had the impression that the atmosphere was artificially created by some external third force." Dr Kakha Katsitadze disagrees, maintaining that "the writers, poets and historians were sincere in their belief that exposure in the media was an essential requirement for the resolution of the conflict. Moreover, [by writing in such publications,] these authors acquired an opportunity to introduce or remind society that they were great patriots."

The period between 1989 and 1992 marked the establishment and wide

acceptance of a style of arrogant vocabulary and phrasing by the Georgian media. One of our interviewees alleged that: "[Not even] Goebbels said the kind of things that were being published by the Georgian media at that time."

It is worth noting that "hate speech" was not aimed at the Abkaz and Ossetian ethnic communities as a whole, but toward certain radical groupings within them. The term "separatists" which was skillfully introduced by politicians, was immediately adopted by the media and had the effect of dividing the population in the minds of Georgians, into "good" and "bad," patriotic and secessionist.

Media hostility was directed against the "separatists," while those judged to be "friendly" were addressed in a conciliatory manner. It can be argued that such language only contributed to mistrust and to the consolidation of opinion amongst the Abkhaz and Ossetian communities against the Georgian state. At the same time, nationalist sentiment exploded in the two regions. In such a climate, few people in Abkhazia or Ossetia wished to be portrayed as friends of Georgia, since this would mean being labelled a "traitor."

During this period, unchecked rumours appeared frequently in media reports. Instead of real news and information, these incessant rumours emphasised divisions and suspicions between opposing sides. These wild, unconfirmed reports thus helped to kill off any attempt at reconciliation until it was too late.

There are many examples of rumours spreading like wildfire. One such rumour, widely reported, concerned an Ossetian man who supposedly murdered a Georgian baby in her cradle. Georgian society reacted with fury and demanded action. Only later did it become apparent that the baby was

***...incessant rumours emphasised divisions and suspicions between opposing sides...***

born to Georgian-Ossetian parents and that the Ossetian was the baby's father, and that he had accidentally killed his daughter while cleaning a loaded gun.

Up until April 9, 1989, the media had avoided reporting on the wider civil conflict, except for a single incident when Georgian state television broadcast footage of an argument between two different wings of the independence movement. All this changed with Communist Party's violent intervention against the independence demonstration, which left 20 people dead. The action sparked the creation of many publications that condemned communist collaborators while celebrating Georgia's "glorious past" and its long struggle for independence.

Tensions behind the scenes among rival factions within the independence movement soon spilled out into the open and into the media. At the same time, the "crusade" against Abkhazians and Ossetians continued and was portrayed as part of the struggle for independence and against communist rule. This presentation helped establish a degree of consensus and unity among otherwise irreconcilable forces.

Following Gamsakhurdia's victory in parliamentary elections, the state-owned media fell under the control of his supporters and promoted only pro-Gamsakhurdia reports. The only difference from the old communist media was that the Georgian state media were now promoting ultra-nationalism instead of communism. The state media condemned the opposition for their "cosmopolitanism" and, instead of blaming the "agents of capitalism and imperialism," it charged the opposition with betraying the "national interest." The *Literaturuli Sakartvelo* again led the charge, combining nationalistic attacks on Abkhazians and Ossetians with lyrical and bombastic praise for President Gamsakhurdia. His political opponents, meanwhile, were accused of working for Russia and the "enemies of Georgia."

When Gamsakhurdia deployed troops to South Ossetia after its leaders announced their intention to secede and join Russia, the Georgian media praised the move as a restoration of long-delayed justice.

Gamsakhurdia sought to assert control over the media, particularly the state radio and television network. According to Bokeria, Targamadze and Ramishvili, "the winter of 1991 saw a wave of repression fall on party publications from Gamsakhurdia's authoritarian administration." The new head of state television carried out a purge of the staff, appointing new people from the ranks of Gamsakhurdia's supporters. Angry television staff reacted with protests and strikes.

From then on, the struggle for media power became one of the most impor-

tant battles of the civil war. Both sides used media as a weapon to undermine their opponents. The stronger pro-Gamsakhurdia media described his enemies as "traitors," "criminals," "agents of the Kremlin" and "KGB spies." The opposition media, which was primarily comprised of just two newspapers, *Droni* (Times) and *Sakartvelo* (Georgia), called Gamsakhurdia a "dictator" and his supporters "fascists" and "barbarians."

The action again moved on to Tbilisi's streets, with a new wave of rallies and demonstrations. The opposition started defending the striking staff at the television station and erected barricades around the building. Gamsakhurdia's supporters gathered in front of the government building and, at the same time, controlled all access to transmitters and thus prevented the opposition from broadcasting.

With dramatic events unfolding in Tbilisi, the third military phase of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict did not receive adequate attention from the Georgian media, which were now almost wholly under Gamsakhurdia's total control. The media only covered this conflict intermittently and only then to reassure Georgian society that its government was in control of the region (which it was not). The pro-Gamsakhurdia media accused the opposition of playing into the hands of Georgia's enemies – the Ossetians and Russians – by allegedly destabilising the country.

The first clashes between the government and the opposition occurred in September 1991. Two people were wounded when police broke up an opposition rally in Tbilisi. This was followed by an unsuccessful attempt to seize control of the state television station and its transmitters. By this time, state television had virtually stopped broadcasting and newspapers were publishing irregularly, print-

ing blatant pro-Gamsakhurdia propaganda. The standoff continued until mid-December 1991, when the opposition launched an armed attack on government buildings. Civil war began.

Following the ousting of Gamsakhurdia, party publications were revived and expanded and independent media voices began to emerge as well. According to Bokeria, Targamadze and Ramishvili:

> "The second climax of the party press came in January 1992 when Gamsakhurdia was overthrown, and Edward Shevardnadze returned from Moscow to lead the country. Shevardnadze proclaimed the return of democratic principles and a multi-party system. This resulted in a corresponding increase in the number of party-affiliated newspapers and magazines."

Although the number of party publications grew, their share of the market actually decreased as the first stirrings of democracy encouraged the growth of independent media outlets. Government control over "radical opposition" media did not ease until 1994 when official suppression of publications supporting Gamsakhurdia ceased.

The media, still treated as a political weapon, divided along partisan lines – the anti- and pro-Gamsakhurdia media. The former described Gamsakhurdia and his supporters as "forces of darkness," "fascists" and "enemies of democracy" who were to blame for all Georgia's misfortunes, including the war in Ossetia. The pro-Gamsakhurdia media alleged that Shevardnadze and his supporters were beholden to the Kremlin and the enemies of Georgia.

The Georgian government tried to bring an end to the war in Ossetia by replacing its own troops with Russian peacekeepers. This was virtually the only time during these wars when some media struck a somewhat conciliatory tone. At the same time, the Georgian government attempted to strengthen its weakened hand in Abkhazia. This led to a fresh wave of fighting and revived hostile, anti-Abkhaz reports in the media, including allegations of repression of the Georgian population in Abkhazia.

During the war in Abkhazia, the Georgian media actively sought to create the "image of the enemy." According to the results of media content analysis conducted by the group of psychologists, the Abkhaz media was conducting a similar hate campaign.

Displaying no initiative of their own, the vast majority of journalists pandered to perceived public opinion and the chauvinism of politicians. The

"enemy" was demonised. The media painted a horrifying picture of how Abkhazians allegedly were conducting the war. Stories included Abkhazians playing soccer with the heads of murdered Georgians, stories of murdered children and women, images of beheaded or burned bodies of innocent Georgians rotting in the streets or floating in the sea, etc. The media appealed to patriotic feelings among Georgian men, urging them to join the heroic fight against their common enemy, "liberate" ancestral Georgian land from the Abkhaz enemies and end the alleged "atrocities."

Interviews became the most widely-used form of reporting by Georgian journalists. During the war and especially during the periods of temporary ceasefires, numerous interviews appeared quoting figures who offered a wide variety of "possible" or "only" solutions. All these interviews, delivered without appropriate context or responsible news gathering, produced serious confusion in the public's mind as to who was demanding what and why. The only thing that was emphasised was that the nation was in trouble and every citizen had a duty to do help achieve a "final victory."

It is important to underline that the media was operating in a virtual political vacuum. The government, unstable and wavering, failed to offer the media and the public at large a coherent and "official" version of events and of its own policy response. Journalists resorted to speculation that exacerbated public concern and confusion.

## The Current State of the Media

Since 1993, the Georgian media's condition, along with the political situation generally, has changed significantly for the better. There is now a degree of openness and pluralism that was seriously

lacking following the end of Soviet rule. The state monopoly over media has been replaced by a range of publications and broadcasters, including some genuinely independent and impartial voices. Journalistic standards have improved and reporters have acquired valuable experience in reporting potential conflicts and civil tensions. Fundamental problems remain, however, and will continue to pose a threat to media freedom if left unresolved.

In August 1997, two Georgian journalists – Vasil Maglaperidze and Liuba Eliashvili – visited Sukhumi and interviewed the Abkhaz leader, Vladislav Ardzinda. The interview was broadcast by state television and subsequently published by the newspaper *Kavkasioni*. The report in many ways marked the beginning of a new era for the Georgian media. The interview received a mixed reaction among the public. Some people responded with predictable anger and fury, but others were supportive and saw the interview as a way of building peaceful dialogue. A few days after the interview, Mr. Ardzinba himself visited the capital.

The coverage of the assassination attempt on President Shevardnadze in Tbilisi in February 1998, the reporting of a subsequent hostage crisis involving Zvadist supporters and United Nations peacekeepers and the coverage of clashes between the Abkhaz forces and Georgians in Gali in May 1998, demonstrate that the professionalism of journalists has improved markedly. However, these same events also illustrate problems within the media that remain unresolved.

As stated earlier, prior to 1992, the Georgian media maintained partisan allegiances, dividing into two categories: the pro-government and the opposition media. After 1992, the first Western-style, impartial news agencies, such as *BS Press*, *Iprinda* and *BGI*, as well as several independent newspapers, including *Resonansi*, *7 Dge* and *Akhali Taoba*, started to appear. These new publications reflected the views of their publishers and not of any particular political faction. They immediately started to gain popularity and credibility with the public.

Today, several dozen newspapers are published in Georgia. Some of them can be regarded as independent, while others are financed by and represent the views of various political and financial groups. Georgia's first private television stations, *Ibervisia* and *Tamarioni*, were founded and started broadcasting as well. Both were affiliated with and backed by certain political or military factions and cannot be regarded as independent. The stations were shut down after government action against the respective owners in 1993-94.

Currently several new private TV stations, such as *Rustavi 2*, *Iberia* and *Sakartvelos Khma*, are broadcasting from Tbilisi and elsewhere. Some can be

regarded as more or less independent, while others are directly controlled by certain political or financial interests. Numerous FM radio stations have appeared, primarily in Tbilisi, broadcasting mostly music programs. The Tbilisi bureau of *Radio Liberty* helps to fill the gap by providing quality news coverage and current affairs programming, some of which is also aired by the state radio. *Fortuna Radio*, launched in 1997, offers some healthy competition for state radio. *Fortuna* covers almost the entire country, and is thus the only station with such a signal apart from state radio, and carries news summaries on the hour. Independent print and electronic media outlets have become an accepted part of the media landscape, attracting many talented young people to journalism and raising the quality of news reporting.

Although the progress made in recent years is encouraging, much work remains to be done for genuine media freedom to take root. Several issues must be addressed to secure the gains achieved thus far and to build a robust free media that will strengthen and promote the development of a pluralistic, democratic society.

Georgian media lack a modern legal framework. Existing media-related legislation is outdated and largely ignored. The regulation of the media is mostly conducted under the auspices of the tax code, commercial code, criminal code and by unofficial pressure from government officials. Although there is no longer official Soviet-style censorship, obliging media outlets to register with government agencies and obtain licences amounts to a hidden means of censorship and pressure.

There are numerous opportunities for vested interests to intimidate and silence "unwanted" media outlets. Authorities often use the financial

police to undertake a long and thorough investigation of a media outlet, forcing the suspension of normal operations for the duration of the probe. New media-related legislation is urgently required that would bring Georgian law into accordance with the highest international standards, ensuring freedom of expression, protection for responsible journalistic inquiry, open, fair access to information held by governmental bodies and appropriate obligations regarding defamation and privacy.

Media freedom remains stifled and restricted outside major cities. Truly independent media exists only in Tbilisi and Kutaisi. The degree of independence of provincial newspapers or stations largely depends on their distance from the capital. What is tolerated in Tbilisi may appear unacceptable for the authorities in the provinces, resulting in pressure tactics, violent attacks on journalists and even the closure of media outlets.

The large gap between town and country is exacerbated by the lack of any nation-wide media that speaks to the country as a whole. The independent publications in Tbilisi or other cities seem to be read mainly by the inhabitants of those cities. (The state radio and television are the only media that cover the entire Georgian territory). The provincial media are much more vulnerable to financial or other pressure as they must survive in much smaller markets with fewer readers or advertising sources.

The greatest danger for the new media in Georgia is perhaps the weak state of the economy and the lack of a viable advertising market. Publications and broadcasters cannot secure sufficient revenues to become self-sustaining or profitable. The print media must rely on daily street sales to survive. At best, advertising income amounts to only 30% of total revenue. These advertisers naturally seek out publications with larger circulation figures. The subscription system, which was quite efficient during the Soviet period, collapsed together with the communist regime. The poor state of the economy and low living standards mean that the majority of the population cannot afford to buy newspapers.

Inevitably, the competition for readership has led newspapers to resort to publishing articles of dubious news value, taste and accuracy (not an uncommon practice among tabloids in Western media markets). Scandalous and sometimes even fabricated stories are published along with often misleading headlines. The overwhelming pressure to increase street sales probably explains why there is such a lack of in-depth, investigative or analytical articles in Georgian publications. Financial obligations and burdens affect not only the quality of the stories produced by the journalists but the news criteria employed by the editors. Under

ideal circumstances editors are supposed to act as "gatekeepers" of the news, providing the most important and reliable information to the public concisely and clearly. In this financially insecure and vulnerable climate, though, many editors are forced to sacrifice minimum standards and allow unacceptable, irresponsible items to be published.

The difficult financial conditions mean that reporters and editors are poorly paid. Many journalists are forced to pursue quantity rather than quality, often producing three or four large articles every day to earn extra money. Perhaps for the same financial reasons, there is little specialisation or consistent "beat coverage" by journalists, who end up jumping from politics to war to sports to entertainment. Such a quantity-oriented approach significantly damages the quality of reporting, often making it superficial, inaccurate and misleading. Financial insecurity also creates ripe conditions for bribery by political or financial interests and some journalists find it difficult to resist the temptation.

The emergence of privately-owned media has eliminated the old state media monopoly and allowed a variety of commercial investors to strengthen existing outlets and create new media. The experience of Russia and other countries suggests that, without appropriate regulations prohibiting the creation of media monopolies and political-financial oligarchies, the development of large commercial media poses a potential threat to the editorial independence of the Georgian media.

Apart from local private investors, Western governmental agencies and private foundations have provided an alternative source of funding and support for the media in the 1990s. The U.S. Information Service (USIS), Internews (a U.S.-

sponsored media organisation), the Open Society Georgia Foundation, the Eurasia Foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the European Union/Tacis have been active in the media sector in Georgia. These organisations have sought to help raise journalistic standards and bolster media freedom through various projects. These foundations and agencies have sponsored training, conferences and seminars on media-related issues, subsidised equipment purchases and start-up costs, and funded specific journalistic projects undertaken by a particular broadcaster or newspaper. Unfortunately, these Western agencies fail to coordinate with each other and there is often duplication in their programs. Some journalists complained of "training fatigue" setting in as the frequent workshops are often similar to one another and fail to meet the needs of the participants.

Comprehensive training and education for journalists in Georgia is sorely lacking and absolutely crucial for the future development of the media. The professional level for many journalists remains extremely low and the paucity of journalism education is partly to blame. While Tbilisi State University does have a department of journalism, the faculty remains largely unchanged since the Soviet era. No new textbooks are available and none of the instructors or lecturers of the department are practicing journalists. The students are not being exposed to modern journalistic experience or practice. It is not surprising that most of the young graduates are unfamiliar with the established ethics of the trade and remain unaware of their role and responsibilities, to say nothing of knowing how to write concisely and clearly.

This lack of training and sophistication helps explain why the Georgian media rarely publishes articles explaining the experience of other countries with similar problems. Society therefore rarely has the opportunity to learn from and exchange ideas with other states. At the same time, little information about recent events in Georgia has been disseminated outside the country, leaving the world largely uninformed about Georgian social, political and economic development.

## Focus Group Sessions

This report used two methodologies in our study of indigenous media and conflict: the semi-structured interview and focus groups. The authors held two focus groups in the summer of 1998, one with journalists and the other with representatives of the general public (the "consumers"). The purpose of these was to try to find out how journalists and the general public see the media's role and responsibilities during war and political conflict, to discuss the problems

posed in covering war. They were also designed to invite suggestions as to how the media might alter its conduct in order to avoid fuelling conflict and to help create the possibility of reconciliation and peaceful, democratic dialogue.

The following is a summary of the discussions held in response to the ten questions posed.

## 1 Are you satisfied with the way journalists covered the conflict?

Neither members of the public nor journalists expressed satisfaction with the way the media has reported on recent conflicts in Georgia. For its part, the audience argued that the media had "undoubtedly worsened" the situation. As an example, they said, the war in Abkhazia was not inevitable. The media's conduct during the first stages of the conflict was wholly negative and fed the crisis. Some saw the media as championing the war against Abkhazia and recalled the case of a television journalist who reported the war while dressed in army fatigues and carrying an automatic rifle. The audience was also critical of the media's use of slang and slurs such as the "Abkhaz ran as rats," which effectively dehumanised the enemy.

## 2 Do you think that journalists' reporting of the conflict contributed to the peace-making process?

The sensationalist style of reporting was frequently mentioned and criticised by respondents. As one group member put it:

> "Georgian journalism regards sensationalism as the only way to present conflict. Unfortunately, it seems that this style of presentation was demanded not [only] by the government, but by the audience."

Indeed, others objected to the fact that reporters "did not have their own moral standpoint and merely reflected back existing public opinion." This was a view widely shared.

> "A lack of media professionalism is one of the major reasons why the population do not fully appreciate how these conflicts took place in Georgia in the first place. The media should help form public opinion, but this did not happen. On the contrary, the media only expressed the gut-felt opinion of the public, which was in a state of shock. This only helped to worsen the situation."

The panel was almost unanimous in decrying the absence of any analytical or investigative element in Georgian journalism then or now.

According to the "audience" focus group, the biggest responsibility for the poor quality of coverage lay with editors, who decide to disseminate "negligent and harmful material and reports to the public." These damaging stories were "duly used by the other side" for their own propaganda purposes.

The journalists said that media coverage of recent wars was poor, often contradictory and sometimes misleading. The journalists said that flawed reporting was partly due to problems faced on the ground near or at the front line. It is extremely difficult, if not implausible, for a journalist from one ethnic or national party to report from a conflict safely and accurately from the other side. One journalist said:

> "It is a fact that the value of information in Georgia is very low. There is no insurance for the journalists who work in the conflict zones, this leads to a scarcity of analytical material in the Georgian media and low level of reporting."

It should be noted that no media or society in history has been immune to the "military spin" offered by governments or generals who seek to distort or obscure actual events. The journalists, however, acknowledged that as a whole, many reporters did try to arouse patriotic sentiment among their fellow Georgians.

## 3 How should journalists have been reporting on the events of the last decade?

Members of the public said that "since it was obvious that that … conflicts in Georgia had been thoroughly prepared well in advance," the media should

have invited the country's leading independent writers, philosophers and intellectuals to express their views and encourage a genuine debate. Instead, the media, and *Literaturuli Sakartvelo* "particularly," attacked independent writers and academics for their "cosmopolitan" views, sometimes hounding them out of the country. At the same time, the media devoted much energy to promote the views of "nationalist" writers and activists.

The answers given by the journalists reflect the confusion and hesitancy that still pervades Georgian media more than eight years after independence:

> "If a journalist holds a certain position with regard to anything, he cannot prepare analytical materials."

## 4 What then, in your view, are the roles and responsibilities of journalists in conflicts?

The audience focus group maintained that the media:

> "...should create and maintain a balance between the conflicting parties and within the society. There is no doubt that censorship is unacceptable, but based on the existing situation, it is necessary that all material be supervised. Otherwise it is possible that the mistakes of the past are made again … If it is already late too talk about Abkhazia and Ossetia, we hope similar development of events can be prevented elsewhere."

Another participant said:

> "We have already witnessed the disastrous effects of xenophobia, and such things

should not be repeated, because they directly hinder democratisation and the development of civil society by encouraging violence and ethnic hatred."

The comments offered by the journalists displayed a certain degree of hesitancy and reluctance in discussing professional obligations or roles. They said that their responsibilities were "not yet defined, because there is no legislation, no traditions." Others were more forthright and said that pursuing an impartial stance and developing proper analytical skills was the best way forward and would help journalists and society cope with future conflicts and tensions. One journalist in particular went further and maintained that the media did have a role to play in helping to search for compromises in troubled times.

Both groups agreed that journalists can play a role in defusing tensions and resolving conflicts but differed as to how that might be done.

"Presenting objective information is one of the main factors in improving a [conflict] situation," said a participant from the audience group.

> "While in the summer of 1997, a whole series of articles in the Georgian media claimed that a significant section of society found it 'totally unacceptable' for the state television company to broadcast and Kavkasioni to subsequently publish an interview with bloody Ardzinba [Vladislav Ardzinba, the then Abkhaz leader]. In reality, however, this interview was probably the very first positive step in the direction of conflict resolution."

## 5 Do you think that the situation in our country prevents the political/social development that would enable journalists to fulfil their roles and responsibilities?

Generally there was broad agreement that social and political conditions neither helped nor hindered journalists in their work. However, the audience, demonstrating an extensive familiarity with the current state of the media, said that while journalism was now "relatively free" from governmental interference, the absence of media-related legislation, the fact that there is no "universally accepted code of ethics" and the weak financial position of many media organisations combined to make it harder for journalists to do their job.

The journalists' panel expressed scepticism about the effect of more balanced reporting. Participants said that even when reporters file stories that enable dialogue and understanding across ethnic or political boundaries, the government remains aloof and the public apathetic. Journalists from opposing sides can

and do now meet and exchange information, something which was impossible "not so long ago." The real impact of this positive development remains unclear. One journalist remarked:

> "It is outrageous that decisions related to issues of ethnic conflict are made solely by the government, while society is left out entirely of the decision-making process."
>
> "This creates the general impression that the government is following its own path, while the media and society are free to chose their own paths. This is why the media is trying to have an impact on the government rather than the public. Unfortunately, as a result, journalism has lost control of public opinion and is effectively left without an audience."

***...even when reporters file stories that enable dialogue and understanding across ethnic or political boundaries, the government remains aloof and the public apathetic...***

## 6 Could or should journalists play a role in creating peace and ending conflicts?

Both groups agreed the press should frame conflicts in a way that does not stoke violence.

> "Nowadays, everything aggressive sells better and thus the issue of framing of stories and choosing an angle is of greater importance. For instance, if a journalist makes an appropriate commentary to a brutal scene, or episode, its negative impact will be significantly reduced. Therefore, the wide use of correctly chosen commentaries will help reduce an escalation of conflict. Of course, such things as journalists reporting from the scene with machine-guns hanging on their shoulders, which we've seen on many occasions during the war in Abkhazia, are totally unacceptable. This is little short of a direct call for aggression."

## 7 Can journalism play a role in ending or preventing violent conflicts?

One audience participant added:

> "Journalism has the ability and power to analyse the causes of conflicts in the initial stages, and to put the primary emphasis on the means that could lead to peace and reconciliation. However, this requires a high level of professionalism, which our journalists lack. Also, dialogue with the opposing party will tangibly encourage this process."

The journalists agreed:

> "We are convinced now that media can have disastrous effects in conflict situations, and using the same logic, one can conclude that journalism has the power to prevent a conflict. It is journalism that creates the climate for what is acceptable or unacceptable for society. Because today, both politicians and the press are trying to offer society a relatively peaceful product, this opportunity should be taken advantage of.
>
> "The interests of the state should be of no concern to the journalist. Journalists should act according to their own professional interests. Perhaps all citizens think of the state's interests to a greater or lesser degree and in that journalists are no exception. But it is wrong to pressurise [sic] journalists in this way as happened during the Abkhazian and Ossetian conflicts."

## 8 Should the media contribute to the reconciliation of parties in the conflict?

One audience participant said:

> "The war in Vietnam clearly demonstrated that the media and public together could force politicians to take a peaceful course. This is impossible without political will, but as it seems that [in Georgia], this kind of will is now in place, the best possible option would be to create and carry out joint projects and establish as many contacts as possible. It is necessary to focus attention upon common interests [among rival parties]. Concentrating on the differences is totally unacceptable. Generally speaking, this could be formulated as follows: exchange of information; joint projects; creation of the atmosphere important for reconciliation; and presenting the positions of the confronting parties to one another, accompanying them with adequate and appropriate commentary."

## 9 Should the media act as a go-between or peace builder?

The journalists agreed that the media could and should play the role of mediator. The media, they said, should make it their business to contact the opposite side in a conflict and ensure that their interests and views are reported impartially.

The journalists argued that such a scenario would not come to fruition any time soon given the limitations of the electronic media and the financial insecurity plaguing media organisations generally. They said that most radio stations have virtually no news programming and that Georgian television completely lacks analytical reporting. Worst of all, financially strapped media outlets have turned increasingly to "yellow" journalism to attract consumers. There is no doubt that this sensational journalism feeds tension and intolerant attitudes, the participants said. Until the economic situation becomes more favourable for the media, journalism can hardly be expected to serve as an instrument for peace. Financial pressures produce more sensational and aggressive journalism.

## 10 Are there any other issues concerning the media and their role in reporting conflicts that you want to address?

Asked for conclusions, the audience maintained that the media:

> "...should create and maintain a balance between the conflicting parties and within society. There is no doubt that censorship is unacceptable, but because of what has happened here with the media since independence, it is necessary that all material be supervised."

How this supervision might work and who might conduct this was not discussed, nor was a clear distinction made between what constitutes supervision and what constitutes censorship. The final point made by the panel was that the focus group discussion itself should be broadcast on television to "make the issue of media conflict and peace a theme for a much broader discussion."

For their part, the journalists urged the creation of cooperative projects between media outlets across ethnic/political boundaries and borders. Such projects would focus upon the exchange of information and viewpoints to help opposing parties understand one another. They also called for the establishment of several experimental publications to explore the media's relationship to potential conflicts and tensions as well as investigating the media's influence, if any, on public opinion and behaviour in times of war and upheaval.

## Long-term Recommendations

Journalists are slowly but gradually beginning:

- ❍ to realise their own potential and possibilities and gain understanding of their role in times of potential conflict and ethnic/political tension;
- ❍ to learn how to ask difficult questions and how and where to look for sources that may provide possible answers to these questions;
- ❍ to recognise the need to approach and address issues related to conflicts analytically, as well as the necessity of cooperation with relevant experts;
- ❍ to understand the importance of listening and presenting opposing views, as well as the importance of dialogue between rival parties;
- ❍ to soften the presentation of information which may prove to be provocative, as well as to frame carefully potentially dangerous stories;
- ❍ to understand the importance of being impartial and the necessity to take into consideration the interests of the opposing side;
- ❍ and to learn how to be responsible and to keep in mind the possible implications of their reports.

It has to be emphasised that Georgian journalism has a long way to go to satisfy international standards and to start contributing to peace and open debate as a genuine "Fourth Estate." Certain legal, economic and other problems must be addressed to enable the media to help strengthen democracy in Georgia.

1) Perhaps the most important requirement is to improve the quality of journalism education. We believe that the best way forward would be to establish a Western-style degree in journalism, where the faculty would include well-known

Western journalism educators and practitioners as well as progressive local media professionals.

The curriculum of such a graduate programme should be developed in several categories. The students should be taught practical journalistic skills and modern techniques. They should be required to complete practical assignments for the courses that they take. They should be exposed to new equipment and technologies, computer-assisted and digital audio-video editing, and basics of the Internet and Web-publishing. They should be encouraged and taught to make extensive use of the Internet. Special attention should be given to the preparation and education of future editors with specially designed courses for them. The students should undergo practical training in the form of internships at established media outlets locally and abroad, so that they can apply what they have learned under the direction and supervision of experienced media practitioners.

The curriculum should focus on: media ethics, communications law and media-related legislation, critical analysis of the media, the principles of journalism, basic methods of media and communications research, investigative journalism and similar topics. It is essential that the students are exposed to experiences and practices from countries with strong free speech traditions.

2) The adoption of progressive media-related legislation should be treated as a high priority and Western assistance in this process is of utmost importance. Proper legislation, in accordance with the highest international standards, would preserve and enhance editorial independence and freedom of expression. This legislation, including defamation provisions, would also encourage more accurate reporting and discourage irresponsible practices.

3) As for the commercial problems faced by the Georgian media, the best way forward – if possible – would be to attract long-term investment from foreign firms which are motivated by purely commercial considerations. Commercial investment in the media market in the Czech Republic and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe provide a good model that deserves further study. Such long-term investment enables a station or publication to concentrate on producing a quality product and securing a share of the market. To reduce reliance on street newspaper sales, it is crucial to reconstruct some kind of subscription and distribution system.

4) Media assistance from international foundations and Western governmental agencies should adhere to a coherent and common strategy based on a thorough "needs assessment" of the media sector. Donor governments and foundations must coordinate their efforts to avoid duplication and ensure a fair distribution of available resources. Perhaps more attention and assistance should be devoted to the development of the provincial media, which operates in especially difficult conditions.

5) Building professional solidarity among journalists is a vital ingredient for the strengthening of media freedom in Georgia and promoting awareness of the journalist's role in society. Reporters should consider forming some kind of association or club gathering independent journalists that could serve as forum for discussion of professional issues and an exchange of information, ideas and concerns. Such a forum might oversee or promote the drafting of a voluntary code of ethics, which could serve as a mechanism for self-regulation and the raising of journalistic standards. Most importantly, such an association could establish professional contacts between journalists from opposing ethnic communities or political factions, helping the media fulfil its role as mediator and marketplace of ideas and opinions.

6) A professional publication, such as a kind of "Georgian Journalism Review", should be established as a forum for critical analysis of the media. Acknowledged media professionals would regularly discuss developments in journalism, pointing out positive and negative trends, and suggesting remedies for problems threatening the media's future development

If these recommendations are taken into consideration and carried out, we believe that professional standards will significantly increase, the quality of reporting will improve and the media will no longer feed ethnic or political divisions.

We recognise that pursuing these recommendations requires substantial

resources and a long-term commitment that will not necessarily produce immediate results. Therefore, the following is a list of more short-term, practical recommendations that should improve coverage of crises in Georgia.

## Short-term Recommendations

More scrutiny and attention should be focused on the work of editors who carry the responsibility for ensuring that no offensive, biased, irresponsible or provocative material finds its way into print or on to the airwaves. Editors can teach journalists on the job, while news is unfolding. Training and education efforts should therefore target editors.

Media outlets in general and journalists in particular should pay more attention to the public's reaction to their product, and encourage extensive communication with their audiences. Such "feedback" would give editors and journalists a better sense of public attitudes and the effect of media coverage on society.

Georgian media should arrange joint projects with media representatives from other ethnic communities. Exchanges should be organised that give journalists a chance to report from the "opposing side." Promoting a permanent free flow of information that transcends ethnic or political divisions is of the utmost importance. Far more attention and priority should be directed to covering the stories of ordinary people, examining how successive ethnic and political conflicts have affected their lives. ❍

*Giorgi Topouria was IWPR's Caucasus Project Coordinator in Tbilisi from July 1998 – June 2000*

# The Media as Political Pawns in the Fight For Cambodia

*By Khuy Sokhoeun in Phnom Penh*

## Introduction

There is no tradition of free press and open debate in Cambodia. There were no legal protections for a free press or the right to freedom of expression until 1993. There is still no genuinely free media in Cambodia, but a myriad of publications and broadcasters have emerged since the United Nations-sponsored elections of 1993. Financially, legally and even physically vulnerable, media outlets are funded and controlled by various political parties despite claims of editorial independence and neutrality.

When rival parties within the coalition government fought for supremacy in 1997, these media outlets sought to promote their political sponsors and helped to precipitate armed clashes on the streets of the capital, Phnom Penh. Dozens of people died in the fighting. The parties used the media as a political weapon to distort events, spread propaganda and promote fear and violence. Instead of helping to build democracy, the politically-tainted media has deepened disillusionment and created conditions for more violence.

### Historical Context

The legacy of the Cold War and the authoritarian practices it promoted can still be felt in

Cambodia. Treated as a pawn by regional and world powers, the country's recent history is inextricably linked to the conflicts and consequences of the Cold War, beginning with American military involvement in Vietnam in the 1950s.

Cambodia's former king, Norodom Sihanouk, agreed secretly to allow North Vietnamese communist troops to use Cambodian territory to launch attacks upon the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese forces in the 1960s. When the United States discovered the North Vietnamese presence in Cambodia, it launched a sustained bombing campaign over the south of the country. Thousands of Cambodian civilians were killed and many more fled the indiscriminate bombing by B-52 aircraft. On March 20, 1970, Prince Norodom Sihanouk (as he was known after a period of abdication) was ousted in a military coup by his aide, General Lon Nol, who enjoyed the backing of the United States.

As a result, Prince Sihanouk lent his support to the Khmer Rouge movement in the countryside that was fighting against the Lon Nol government. The Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975 and Prince Sihanouk found himself betrayed and detained by the Khmer Rouge.

During its years in power, 1975-78, the Khmer Rouge orchestrated mass purges and executions of party supporters as well as a horrifying genocidal campaign against the population as a whole and against the educated elite in particular. A group of Khmer Rouge members, including Hun Sen (now co-premier), defected to Vietnam (now united following the victory of North Vietnam) and formed a new resistance movement with support from the Vietnamese government. Following a series of attacks on ethnic Vietnamese communities on both sides of the border, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and toppled the genocidal regime in late 1978.

The Vietnamese invasion prompted Sihanouk to form a second alliance with his former bitter rivals, the Khmer Rouge, along the Thai-Cambodian border. A stalemate ensued between the Vietnamese-installed government and the resistance forces, with neither side able to win a decisive victory.

At the instigation of the major world powers, a peace agreement was signed on October 23, 1991, in Paris. All the parties concerned, including the Khmer Rouge, agreed to end decades of civil war and to participate in United Nations-sponsored elections. The vote was held in May 1993 but the Khmer Rouge staged a last-minute boycott after a riot against them in Phnom Penh was reportedly organised by Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP).

Following the elections, a power-sharing agreement between the election victors – FUNCINPEC (National United Front for an Independent, Neutral,

Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia ) and Hun Sen's CPP – was signed. The two co-prime ministers, Prince Sihanouk's son, Prince Norodom Ranariddh of FUNCINPEC and Hun Sen of the CPP, pledged to honour human rights, democracy and freedom of speech and expression.

Not long after the government was elected, the coalition partners fell into dispute and acrimony. Each side exploited the constitutional guarantee of free expression to create numerous partisan publications and broadcasting stations that sought to bolster one party's position rather than the government as a whole.

## Party Tools: Current Media Practice

Sek Borisoth, director of the Cambodian Communication Institute (CCI), describes the media as hostages to the divisive and authoritarian political climate. Politicians exploit the media for their own benefit, he says. If the media fails to liberate itself from this pervasive political control, it will never contribute to democratic dialogue or lasting peace.

According to Borisoth, some journalists would prefer to avoid affiliation with any political party, but have little choice because of a total lack of non-partisan, independent media organisations. There are no career prospects in journalism for those who would insist on maintaining professional objectivity. The whole notion of impartiality is something totally new to Cambodian journalism. Part of the problem is due to a lack of proper journalistic training or education. Tat Lyhok, co-president of the Khmer Journalist Association, says:

> "For as long as I can remember, there has never been any journalism school in Cambodia. Politicians are determined to keep it that way because if journalists are well trained they could threaten their grip on power."

The absence of genuine journalism training in Cambodia offers one reason why many reporters here confuse the concept of a free press with the right to freedom of expression. Many newspaper owners claim to have helped to improve democracy in Cambodia but the experts we have spoken to argue that journalists misinterpret the term "freedom of expression" as a licence to report in a reckless, irresponsible manner. The so-called free press in Cambodia passes off commentary and innuendo as news or plays to the anger of the mob.

Every day, journalists employ epithets such as "pig," "dog" or "puppet" to label members of the government, parliamentarians, journalists and even ordinary citizens. The media play a key role in promoting Cambodia's culture of

violence.

During the one-party state that existed during the 1980s and early 1990s, no privately-owned media were permitted except for those which supported Hun Sen and the CPP. All forms of media were controlled by the state and every article and piece of news reflected a one-way communication orchestrated by the government. The media did nothing to make those in power accountable to the needs and desires of the ordinary Cambodian.

*...journalists misinterpret the term "freedom of expression" as a licence to report in a reckless, irresponsible manner...*

With the 1993 elections, the number of Khmer-language newspapers increased to over 70. The number of electronic media also exploded. Today in Phnom Penh alone – a city of less than a million people – there are nine private FM radio stations and five private television stations. In such an impoverished country with high rates of illiteracy, radio remains by far the most influential and accessible media in Cambodia.

While most Cambodian journalists consider their commentary to be fair and based on facts, the public tends to see the media as allied with partisan political interests. The League of Cambodian Journalists (LCJ) has been established by a group of newspapers that are known to support the government, particularly the CPP. This organisation has sought to promote and defend Hun Sen's policies, including the removal of Prince Norodom Ranariddh from his position as First Prime Minister in the July coup last year. The Khmer Journalist Association (KJA), meanwhile, is comprised mostly of opposition newspapers. These two associations see each other as rivals and devote much energy to trading insults and accusations. Nevertheless, those newspapers that belong to the KJA tend to be considered somewhat more balanced and professional.

When Cambodian reporters cover events, they frequently receive envelopes full of cash from interested parties. Bribing journalists to ensure favourable coverage has become increasingly common even at sessions of the Council of Ministers, one of the most important governmental bodies. At the end of a press conference organised by the governor of Siem Reap province in 1997, just a few months before fighting erupted in Phnom Penh, envelopes containing $100 bills were handed out to journalists.

Chum Kanal, president of the League of Cambodian Journalists, alleges that the funds are actually "donations" and not bribes. Without such "donations" from party political sources, he says, many newspapers could not survive. Most publications have no viable commercial prospects or capital. The fate of the newspaper industry is thus tied to political machinations and ambition. Serving the public's right to know does not enter into the equation at the moment.

The situation is no better among Cambodia's broadcast media. Sek Borisoth of CCI maintains that the electronic media are under comprehensive political control:

> "I have no doubt that all broadcast media are controlled by the political parties."
>
> "None of the electronic media covered the return of the deposed first premier from exile. It was shameful for the country. And when the whole world was focusing on the death of Pol Pot, there was no news being broadcast about it here in Cambodia."

Kao Kim Houn, director of the Institute for Cooperation and Peace in Cambodia, says that political control of the media promotes violence and division:

> "Conflict is promoted when media can be bought or granted funds by a group or politicians. When media keep portraying the negative activities of the other side, a reaction will be triggered."

Much of the electronic media in Phnom Penh is controlled by the CPP. It strengthened its hand in 1998 by securing a station that broadcasts programming in Chinese to a local Chinese-Cambodian audience. Another pro-Hun Sen station started to broadcast in English 24 hours a day.

The CPP also controls the national television and radio stations, as well as RCAF (Royal Cambodian Armed Forces) *TV 5*, which is owned by a Thai businessman but managed by an army general who is a senior party member.

Through the city municipality, the CPP controls other radio and TV stations such as *FM 103Hz* and *TV3*.

Every single event and commentary broadcast by the pro-CPP media appears designed to promote the party's interests and goals. Identified as representatives of the CPP rather than the government, Hun Sen or other party functionaries are portrayed delivering gifts or overseeing the opening of roads, dams and schools.

Aing Engthong, secretary general of the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC), assesses the majority of Khmer language newspapers as totally irresponsible, publishing slanderous stories rather than accurate information. "Cooking up" stories is the primary activity of Cambodian newspapers, he says.

Cambodian soldier, 1990. Credit: Alan Davis.

Journalists regularly file unconfirmed reports without concern for rumour, hearsay or how such dubious information might affect members of the public. On July 19 last year, the newspaper *Moneak Sekar Khmer News* printed an article predicting the outbreak of violence while political parties were campaigning for the July 26 election. "There is somebody attempting to create chaos in the capital of Phnom Penh," read a headline. However, no source for the quote was cited in the related article. Not surprisingly, residents of Phnom Penh immediately began stockpiling food and other necessary items out of fear that fighting would again erupt in the capital.

The paper also subsequently printed an article that implicitly threatened the life of an opposition politician, writing:

> "The relatives of those who were killed during the July fighting request that Son

> Chhay [an opposition MP] be shot dead if he persists in seeking a royal pardon for the generals loyal to the Prince [Ranariddh]."

Aing Engthong says the article illustrates everything that is wrong with the Cambodian media:

> "Such an article reflects the deep irresponsibility and partisan nature of Cambodian journalists."

*Moneak Sekar Khmer News* was suspended by the Information Ministry in January 1998 after printing an article claiming that hundreds of soldiers loyal to Hun Sen were killed in fighting against the resistance in northern Cambodia. The government said the report was false and aimed at disrupting national security by encouraging soldiers to abandon their duties.

On August 24, 1998, the pro-Hun Sen newspaper *Chak Raval* alleged that about 50 Khmer Rouge guerrillas armed with grenades and assault rifles were to join a demonstration organised by opposition parties that included the deposed first prime minister, Prince Rannariddh, and the opposition leader Sam Rainsy. No Khmer Rouge soldiers turned up.

Three government officials, including the director of the Interior Ministry's anti-terrorist department, denied the report. But *Chak Raval*'s publisher, Keo Sophoan, stood by the story, saying it came from a "terrorist source" that he could not disclose. The edition was circulated for free in many of the city's markets, including those near the demonstration site.

Keo Sophoan said:

> "I published this article because, firstly, I wanted the authorities to be aware and prevent the problem from occurring as in the grenade attack in 1997 that killed at least 17 and injured more than 100. Secondly, I want demonstrators who joined Sam Rainsy to be careful with themselves, to protect themselves."

In the meantime, a pro-Hun Sen television station broadcast an interview with a man who alleged he had been hired by Sam Rainsy to throw a grenade into a crowd of post-election demonstrators in front of the National Assembly. State-run television also began broadcasting a daily two-hour programme entitled "Public Opinion" which featured participants drawn from political parties allied to the CPP. The programme carried a stream of criticism against opposition leaders, accusing them of failing to accept the results of the July 26 election.

Chum Kanal of the League of Cambodian Journalists was one of the most frequent and vocal guests on the programme.

At the same time, the Ministry of Information shut down the opposition-leaning *Sambok Khmom Radio* ("Beehive Radio") in mid-September of last year, arguing that the station's coverage had "endangered the social order." The station was the last local Khmer-language station still to broadcast the opposition's point of view.

Khieu Kanharith, the Ministry of Information's secretary of state and chief government spokesman, alleged that the station had carried biased and false information. According to Kanharith, the station had called the result of the July 26 election fraudulent and also had broadcast inflammatory stories about Vietnamese involvement in a spate of rice-wine poisonings.

At least three ethnic Vietnamese were beaten to death following allegations of poisoning Cambodians. Within three weeks, more than 50 residents of Phnom Penh died from drinking tainted rice wine. Health officials had not found any connection between the tainted wine and ethnic Vietnamese, but rumours of a connection were widespread in Phnom Penh.

Khieu Kanharith said:

> "This kind of information can create political and social turmoil among the listening public.
>
> "The order to close the station said the manager violated the agreement with the Information Ministry not to air political propaganda."

The owner of the station, Mam Sonando, denies his station was biased, but says he decided to go off

the air when he received the ministry order

> "I decided to close the radio on this request because I wanted to avoid any problem during these tense times."

Clearly, Sonando's station came under government pressure for reasons other than its reporting on tainted rice wine. Sonando had recently come out in support of an opposition sit-in demonstration that was broken up by police. The radio station was the only one that broadcast a message from King Norodom Sihanouk, Rannariddh's semi-estranged father, imploring Hun Sen to refrain from using violence against compatriots and Buddhist monks.

While political life will not improve until there is a genuinely free media, there is no sign that media outlets are any closer to shedding themselves of their political masters. As Koa Kim Houn says:

> "Any newspaper that reports about only one side should not be called a newspaper. It becomes a propaganda tool."

## Fuelling Violence: Case Study

The strategy of rival parties within the coalition government has been to build up armed support to achieve their goals. In April 1997, the National United Front was formed and chaired by the First Premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh. Top leaders of four opposition parties were invited as well, in order to counter the strength of the former communist elements. The formation of such an opposition front sparked a negative reaction from other political parties, in particular the CPP. Pro-Hun Sen media said the new opposition movement would cause the destruction of national interests.

On May 26, 1997, two tons of weapons were seized at the Sihanoukville port by military police loyal to Hun Sen. The cargo belonged to Prince Ranariddh. The capture of the cargo heightened political tensions and eventually led to armed hostilities with each party shelling the other – both figuratively and literally.

Prince Ranariddh's FUNCINPEC Party issued a statement shortly after the weapons seizure through its television and radio stations, seeking to counter CPP accusations that a coup was being planned and accusing Hun Sen of stockpiling weapons:

> "Those weapons are for units of the First Prime Minister's bodyguards and to counter the 45 tanks of Hun Sen."

The media exacerbated what was already a highly volatile situation. The national radio and television stations sided overwhelmingly with Hun Sen who by then controlled most of the political apparatus across the country. While the two parties continued to trade accusations and epithets through the mass media, troops and tanks loyal to Hun Sen were deployed around the outskirts of Phnom Penh and close to the Prince's bodyguard units.

*...the politicised media whipped up fear and hostility under the direction of the rival political factions...*

At the most tense moment, no newspapers or stations attempted to defuse the situation or explain the views of each side fairly. Instead, the politicised media whipped up fear and hostility under the direction of the rival political factions. According to Aing Engthong:

> "Journalists continue to damage Cambodian society in their pursuit of political gain. They attack the top, but hurt the ordinary people. The media are so terrible. They do not deserve to be called the Fourth Estate. None of the newspapers nor the broadcast media are credible."

## Focus Group Research

The concept of measuring, testing or even consulting public opinion is quite new to Cambodia. In conducting focus groups for this research, between six and ten participants were sought for each group. To protect confidentiality and encourage a free discussion in a society still plagued by fear and intimidation, participants were told that their opinions would be presented generally, without identifying any particular individual.

Several focus groups were organised and several sessions were conducted in Phnom Penh and twice in nearby provinces. The answers obtained from the provinces were less useful than the focus group

sessions held in the capital, perhaps because communities in the countryside are more isolated and less educated than those in the capital. After the completion of the focus group sessions, the results were presented to a group of journalists in order to test their reaction to comments and criticisms made by members of the public. Participants were considered to be representative of organisations across the political spectrum. One of those invited included an opposition editor whose article resulted in his newspaper being one of six suspended by the Ministry of Information earlier this year. What follows are composite statements based on individual answers and group discussions.

## 1 Are you satisfied with the way journalists have covered the conflict?

"No. We are not satisfied with what the local media have reported. How useful has the information we've got from the media been? When the fighting broke out [in July 1997], all opposition newspapers closed as all opposition journalists feared for their own safety and security. Radio and television stations belonging to the Prince were ransacked and pulled off the air. So the situation was like a plane with only one wing.

"Only newspapers and electronic media siding with the ruling party were on the news stands and on the air. In that situation, they did not provide for vulnerable people or for the whole society. This media provided nothing besides political commentary which justified the deposing of members of the coalition government.

"The number of casualties on both sides was never reported to the public; the number of people the war displaced has never been reported to the public. Local newspapers, radios and television only printed or aired numbers signifying military strength (of one faction) in an attempt to intimidate the other side. Until now, even the number of how many people became refugees as a result of the fighting has not been reported."

## 2 Do you think that journalists' reporting of the conflict contributed to the peacemaking process?

"I do not believe that the media contributed to building peace. How can I say this? Because I have read some papers that blamed the defeated side for attempting to stage a coup. And they said the victor had been protecting life and property. Many articles only sought to inflame passions. I am not a journalist, but I am not so gullible either. Peace can only happen with

cooperation from all levels of society. If they are trying to blame and attack just one side when will a solution be found?

"Of course the media have made the situation more dangerous. In the lead up to the fighting last July, the media supporting FUNCINPEC reported that Hun Sen was moving troops to attack the First Prime Minister's bodyguard units. In turn, the media that belonged to the Cambodian People's Party reported that the Prince was moving troops including hard-liner KR [Khmer Rouge] forces into the city suburbs with the intention to remove the CPP.

"Finally, fighting broke out that cost the lives of hundreds and left thousands of other people homeless. So, people can make their own mind up as to whether or not the media helped or hindered the situation. Some journalists closed their eyes to what was really happening after they accepted a thousand U.S. [dollars] to file slanderous commentary against certain people. That's a lot of money. This is a big problem. The media cannot be divorced from the political or economic environment."

## 3 How should journalists have been reporting upon events of the last decade?

"Let's not talk about what happened many years ago because in the last six years, our country was ruled by communism. In the State of Cambodia [1989-1993], as I remembered, there were no more than five newspapers controlled by the state. So, democracy had not existed in this country

prior to this. And soon after the [1993] election, we did not see any disputes occur. But in this recent time, we have fallen back into a small civil war.

"So, all the media should do is to report what is the truth of an event. They should file stories with verification and balance and by using as many different sources as possible. If only one source is cited, the other side will be agitated, which will lead to further confrontation and violence can be provoked easily. Media should be a tool to serve society. All of society. In the countryside, people are generally less informed, less educated and are therefore more gullible. Whatever is seen in the media is regarded as an uncontested fact."

## 4 What, in your view, are the roles and responsibilities of journalists in conflicts?

"Apart from giving out information, the media are supposed to educate and entertain. The provision of reliable information is especially important in a conflict situation. But the media should also be speaking to people who do not like war. The media should let these people express themselves and react to what the leaders are doing in their name. They should collect as many opinions and poll people on what they want to have changed. Then political leaders might start listening themselves in due course to what is being said on the street.

"Journalists should be watchdogs for the public. They must be investigative because a government source is not always accurate. People with first hand accounts of events being reported on should be cited. In countries like Cambodia, journalists should cultivate sources to expose the causes of conflict. How did this conflict happen? What kind of conflict is it? How many parties are involved? The media should single out important points to discuss and define solutions to be resolved. Then they should establish enough opportunities for both sides to talk about what it is that divides or angers them."

## 5 Do you think that the situation in our country prevents socio-political development that would enable journalists to fulfil their roles and responsibilities?

"The political environment here has always hampered journalists from carrying out their roles and obligations. The biggest impediment is that

journalists can be liquidated if they dare to report the truth. As we know, this happens. One Cambodian-Canadian journalist was shot dead when he attempted to take a picture of soldiers looting in July.

"The environment here is not good for an independent and objective journalist to provide reliable information or to expose wrongdoing. I'm sure that if an independent journalist said the problem is going on this way, it will be said that the journalist must have reported it incorrectly, was biased or misinterpreted facts. Remember what happened to Som Sattana, [former *VOA* correspondent who is currently a reporter for *Radio Free Asia*, based in Washington D.C.] and Mr. Pin Samkhon [former co-director of Khmer Journalist Association currently working as a correspondent for *Radio Free Asia*, based in Bangkok.] Mr. Sattana found it very difficult to leave Cambodia right after the fighting. That's because he was used to filing factual information for *Voice of America*."

## 6 Could or should journalists play a role in creating peace and ending conflicts?

"Why not? In Cambodia, life is very difficult and people are vulnerable. It would be great then if journalists could effectively play the role to end these endless conflicts. Journalists could write to make the national and international community aware of the ongoing conflict and beg for intervention. As all of us understand, the war in Cambodia could not end without help from the interna-

tional community. To attract attention from the international community is the only way that journalists look likely to end this conflict."

## 7 Can journalism play a role in ending or preventing violent conflicts?

"Of course, journalists are key actors in preventing conflict. In my opinion, all they should do is report the truth and accurate information. In this context, journalists not only should but must do their best to cope with those matters. Journalists should devote themselves to investigating rumours to expose the truth. Journalists should be very careful about what and how they report. As we have seen, people are easily agitated by false information."

## 8 Should the media contribute to the reconciliation of parties in conflict?

"Yes it should. The broadcast media especially. They are even more important in providing factual information because a huge number of Cambodians are illiterate. If broadcast media, particularly radio, is impartial in working for the collective interests, it will be of great benefit since radio can reach all parts of the country. I am sure that everybody can afford to pay for a small FM radio."

## 9 Should the media act as a go-between or peace-builder?

"Media not only should, but they *have* to act as a peace-builder for the current conflict. But we have to differentiate which media is appropriate to take on this role. Of the ten of us here, I am sure that that no one here would argue against the fact that the existing media – including newspapers – are politically controlled. The question is then, can the media we have today help in this?

"If journalists are political beings, how can they then act as go-betweens in the current conflict? Media in Cambodia, except for a few foreign language newspapers, have been discredited. To then try and begin playing such an important role would only suggest to the public that they were playing a new game. It is all too complicated. I am sure that no media owner, even if he did want to be objective, would let a good opportunity [to make money or curry favour] slip away from him."

## 10 Are there any other issues concerning the media and their role in reporting conflicts that you want to address?

"In Cambodia there are a great many newspapers, TV and radio stations, only people rarely get any information from them. People mostly rely on foreign [English-language] newspapers such as the *Cambodia Daily* [which incorporates a Khmer language section] and the *Phnom Penh Post* that contributed a great deal of factual information in the wake of the July fighting. Most Cambodian people cannot read or write the English language.

"Why is the information on an event we get always different according to who is reporting it? Did an event truly happen? For example, during the July fighting in the capital, many media organisations reported that Nhiek Bunchhay troops [a general allied to Prince Ranariddh] launched the attack first on the troops loyal to the Second Prime Minister.

"I have no doubt that the reports came from government sources, but we should bear in mind that such sources are not always accurate. For another example, [Secretary of State of Information] Khieu Kanharith told journalists that Nhiek Bunchhay was in a hideout in Phnom Penh and wanted to surrender. But in the next two days, *Voice of America* and *Radio Free Asia* reported that Nhiek Bunchhay had arrived at the former FUNCINPEC stronghold in Osmach. Who was right and who was wrong? Who lied?

"On the day that the Prince returned from

exile, none of the television or radio stations aired that event. The claim from the Ministry of Information that he [the Prince] was merely chairman of a political party is just unacceptable. It reflects that national radio and television are not independent, that they remain under the influence of one side of the coalition. Of course, the Prince is no longer the leader, but he remains a person that many other Cambodian people wanted to see coming back.

"Moreover, it seemed that all the world had heard about the death of Pol Pot before we Cambodians did. The media here did not really report the story at the time. Of course, none of us liked Pol Pot, but he was the head of one of the world's biggest terrorist organisations and the Cambodian people want to know how he died and where he died. This is enough for me to show that the media here are not serving society."

## Conclusions

Those interviewed in the focus groups displayed anger and exhaustion with regard to the ongoing conflict and the warring factions' failure to agree its resolution after many years of civil war. The focus group discussions illustrated the extent to which Cambodians believe that the mass media are directed by particular political parties. Interviewees – including ordinary people, high school and university students, teachers and media experts – said that the media take sides with a political party and that it has become accepted practice.

The public view is that the media has the potential to heal the dispute between the rival parties. According to one group of people interviewed, the media:

"...possess immense influence to resolve conflicts and are suited very much to this role."

"If they are objective, independent and unbiased in the way they report, then they will gain more prestige, respectability and a better reputation. And then people will trust them."

Focus group participants said that none of the Cambodian media ever tried to play the role of mediator. On the other hand, participants argued that journalists have never earned the trust necessary to play that role. Although people receive most information from the media, the chief characteristic of that information is its unreliability.

According to the journalists themselves, it is unrealistic to expect the media

to rid itself of political control. The reporters complain that their colleagues are prevented from carrying out their proper roles because they are working for low wages and are susceptible to bribes and pressure. Politicians use money to consolidate their power over the media and society in general, they said.

There was uncertainty as to whether journalists can serve as peacemakers. Some journalists said that they are continually contributing to the peace process by calling for an end to hostilities in their commentaries. One opposition journalist, who denied ever printing inflammatory articles, said:

> "I have been doing my best to stop violence. I have been trying my best to remind political leaders through my articles."

Other journalists said that media organisations should heal themselves prior to making any attempt to arbitrate social conflict. An editor of a local newspaper owned by the business tycoon, Teng Bunma, remarked that:

> "I think, if the environment remains as it is today, the media will never be able to play a role as peacemaker or mediator.
>
> "Journalists do not yet regard each other as colleagues. This they must learn to do first if things are to improve."

Sek Borisoth complained that he is dissatisfied with the results achieved from training that started in 1992. Journalism training is not enough to overcome the political environment, he said.

Another journalist, Dam Sith, agreed:

> "It is truly up to political leaders to manage the country on the way to peace or war. Although some journalists want to, they still

cannot overcome the environment of political barriers."

The focus group discussions emphasised that the Cambodian media is defined by its reliance on partisan political backing and financing. One of the main obstacles to promoting quality journalism are the politicians who do not want reporters to become more investigative, objective or independent. These political leaders are frightened of what journalists might expose about how human lives are sacrificed for vested interests. Such journalistic inquiry would help defuse the causes of conflict and would uncover the high-stakes games played by Cambodia's political elite.

## Restoring Credibility: Recommendations

1) As for helping to resolve conflict and promote dialogue, the Cambodian media should make efforts to improve its tainted reputation before trying to act as mediator. The media first has to earn the trust of the public by being seen to provide reliable, balanced and well-sourced information from and for all sections of society. It might be necessary to launch a new publication or station, which could prove its independence and impartiality from the beginning.

2) The media should respect minimum journalistic standards. Journalists should cease reporting rumour and exercise restraint and responsibility with regard to sensitive stories that could trigger violence. Media outlets should only print or broadcast facts that have been verified, allowing the public to reach its own conclusions. Partisan opinion should not be dressed up as news. If basic journalistic ethics were encouraged and allowed by media owners, newspapers and broadcasters would gain credibility and begin to report on the real causes of upheaval in Cambodia. While the media should never suppress or distort facts, it should present information in a responsible, balanced manner that is fair to all citizens. Specific information about armed clashes such as casualties should not be issued until there is proper verification attributed to a dependable source.

Bit Seanglim, an economist and psychologist who has studied Cambodian trauma from the Khmer Rouge era, said that Cambodian journalists fail to understand or appreciate the nature of their work. Reporters can help create understanding within society if they work within the framework of professionalism. But at this moment, none of them are aspiring to professionalism. The current climate gives value and power to those who act unethically and devalues those who try to uphold journalistic standards, he said, continuing:

"To contribute to peace, journalists must realise who they are. They must

> understand whether they are journalists or not. If they do not change they will continue to devalue themselves as well as the prestige of journalism."

***...the Cambodian media is defined by its reliance on partisan political backing and financing...***

In covering violent demonstrations, many newspapers printed photos which were accompanied by inflammatory commentary and unverified or biased articles. According to Kimsan Chantara, a reporter with the *Cambodia Daily,* journalists should exercise caution before filing volatile stories that could provoke more violence:

> "Publicise what should be public and keep private what is the best left private in any negotiating process. Of course, the definition in each case is likely to be highly contested and should not be taken for granted."
>
> "They [the media] should make the best effort to prevent the circulation of incendiary rumours and counteract them when they surface."

3) The media should give voice to the ordinary people affected by the conflict and report the points of contention between opposing sides in a neutral manner. For example, when the government moved to crush protests in front of the National Assembly following the elections, no newspaper, television or radio bothered to approach those who were not directly engaged in the incident. Bystanders were not asked for their comments or reactions to either the demonstrators or the government's response. Participants were not asked their views about how to resolve tensions. Instead, the media reinforces attempts to polarise society and does not acknowledge those who do not sympathise with either faction.

4) Cambodian disputes in the past three decades have mostly been settled through negotiation and arbitration involving international governments including the world's major powers. Van Roeun, a *Cambodia Daily* reporter, said that the media should help highlight the nature of the conflict in order to focus the attention of the international community on helping resolve it:

> "When the media can focus the attention of the international community on a certain conflict – how much it is affecting human lives, how many people are being killed and dying – it can bring pressure on the parties to find a way to resolve it or the international community can play the role as arbitrator or mediator for the parties.
>
> "It will be more necessary for journalists to engage in confidence-building measures, to promote trust for parties."

5) Journalism training and education must receive the highest priority. There is still no journalism school in Cambodia today. The tradition has been that those who graduate from the faculty of literature, history or sociology became journalists. Many of the new generation of journalists have learned from those who remained or re-emerged from previous regimes. Also, many have started newspapers, despite a lack of professional experience or qualifications. From 1992 to the present, the Cambodian Communication Institute has been conducting training courses, which have financial support from UNESCO. However, some of the old, untrained journalists have not appreciated the course because they consider themselves as already skilled and experienced. According to Sek Borisoth, the result of the training has not been satisfactory but he has not given hope for improvements in the future. It should be compulsory for journalists to undergo training and more journalism education or a permanent school should be available to give the next generation an opportunity to learn the craft.

6. Respect for the press code of ethics must be instilled and professional solidarity must be encouraged and promoted. A press law and a press code of ethics have been defined, but many journalists have seriously defied them. Unprofessional and unethical practices can be seen regularly in the press, where articles appear attacking individuals with epithets and slurs. There are two Khmer news associations that work against each other and trade bitter accusations. The League of Cambodian Journalists is managed by a figure who is considered a hard-line supporter of the ruling party. The Khmer Journalist Association is considered to be biased in favour of the opposition parties.

Pen Samithy, editor of the Khmer-language newspaper owned by the busi-

ness tycoon Teng Bunma, said that the quality of journalism will worsen if the two top journalist associations remain divided. He said that the two news associations should cooperate and find ways to improve the working conditions and professional level of Cambodian journalists:

> "I think the first thing the media have to achieve is to heal their cultural friction.
> "If journalists do not reunite and find acceptable solutions to both sides, then disputes [in society] will worsen."

***...media owners or managers will have to find ways to run media organisations without resorting to bribes or subsidies...***

Once the media are unified, they can focus on defining ways to heal the conflict.

7) To build a genuine "Fourth Estate" in Cambodia, the financial vulnerability of the media has to be addressed. All efforts should be undertaken to provide the media with a financially stable foundation free of political interference. It is a problem which Cambodian journalists are largely powerless to rectify. Future media owners or managers will have to find ways to run media organisations without resorting to bribes or subsidies from political interests. Perhaps they will have to turn to international foundations or industrialised nations to help with advice or start-up capital. Appropriate economic reforms must be pursued by the government in order to create conditions for a commercial media market. Without some financial independence and security, the Cambodian media will never regain public confidence and will remain the tools of political factions. ❍

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# The Media War and Peace in Bosnia

*By Ahmed Buric in Sarajevo*

## Introduction: Inciting War

The political leaders who plunged former Yugoslavia into bloodshed employed the media as a strategic weapon to strengthen their hold on power and justify violence. Politically controlled media were used to manufacture acceptance and support for expansionist, aggressive warfare. Indeed, historians may decide to trace the beginning of the Yugoslav conflict to 1987, when the new head of the League of Communists in Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic, began purging dissenting editors at Belgrade television and newspapers.

Exploiting control over the airwaves and printing presses in Serbia, Milosevic's media machine sought to persuade ethnic Serbs that they faced imminent danger from their fellow citizens in other former Yugoslav republics and provinces. Incessant chauvinistic demands broadcast by the media undermined the principle of national equality cultivated for decades by Marshal Tito. The hysterical nationalist mythology churned out by the Serbian media after 1987 fuelled nationalist sentiment among other ethnic and religious communities.

Resurrecting the ghosts of World War Two, the Milosevic-controlled media sowed fear and hatred, warning that a new generation of Serbs allegedly faced a "new genocide." Later, political leaders in

other Yugoslav republics imitated Milosevic's example and launched their own propaganda efforts. More than a decade since Milosevic seized control of the media in Serbia, the devastating consequences of his media warfare are still felt in Bosnia-Herzegovina and throughout the Balkans.

The outside media that covered the wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and, most recently, Kosovo, also influenced the course of events and became secondary battlegrounds for world opinion. Keenly aware that perceptions outside the Balkans would determine how major powers would attempt to settle the conflict, the warring sides competed to secure favourable international coverage. Foreign media reporting of the war prompted U.N. Security Council resolutions and influenced policy and tactical moves by the governments that eventually ordered the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) air strikes and brokered the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995. International media coverage continues to shape public discussion in the countries that lead the international peacekeeping missions in the Balkans.

Although there was no strong tradition of a free press and open debate on which to draw, elements of the media in old Yugoslavia appeared to be headed away from communist censorship towards a Western, liberal model in the 1980s. As the reach and influence of the communist party declined after Tito's death in 1980, its control over the media began to fade as well. With student publications leading the way, some media pushed out the boundaries of what was acceptable and attempted to shrug off the stifling tradition of servility and taboo subjects.

Bold editors and managers at *Mladina* in Slovenia, *Polet* and *Iskra* in Croatia and *Mladost* in Serbia won audiences and unsettled the communist regime with muck-raking articles, provocative satire and a more Western look and tone. Journalists in Bosnia-Herzegovina enjoyed more editorial freedom in the late 1980s compared to Serbia and did not face the kind of purges that were launched in Belgrade and, later, Croatia. The daily newspaper *Oslobodjenje* and *Radio Television Sarajevo* (RTVSA) took advantage of the communist party's decline and began to assert their editorial independence.[1]

However, by 1990, even as editorial freedom began to emerge in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia was unravelling and the main media in Serbia and Croatia were locked in an escalating propaganda war. The nationalist media campaign that had started in Serbia in the late 1980s triggered a similar campaign in the Croatian republic. After consolidating power in Serbia by stripping the provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo of autonomy, Milosevic attempted to assert control over the whole Yugoslav Federation with the support of the Yugoslav

army command. The leadership of the Slovenian and Croatian republics viewed Milosevic's calls for a centralised state as a formula for imposing Serbian domination under his authority. After elections in 1990 handed power to Milosevic's communist party in Serbia and to mainly nationalist parties and platforms in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Yugoslav federal government fell into a state of paralysis. Negotiations among the republics failed to produce an agreement after Milosevic rejected a number of compromise proposals. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the international community's attention was focused elsewhere. The strategic importance that the Cold War had granted Yugoslavia no longer applied.

Slovenia declared independence on June 25, 1991. The Yugoslav People's Army attempted to secure the republic's border posts but met well-organised resistance. Less than two weeks later, Belgrade agreed to withdraw troops and allow Slovenia to go its own way, choosing to concentrate its firepower in the Croatian republic, where there was a sizable Serb minority. Croatia, which lacked the federal regime's military might, had declared its independence as well and months of violence escalated into a full-blown war in the summer of 1991.

Media in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which served a mixed population of Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Muslim Slavs or Bosniaks, struck a more moderate tone and avoided the ultra-nationalist rhetoric of its counterparts in Serbia and Croatia. Reflecting the conciliatory attitude of the disorganised Bosnian political leadership and wishing to avoid spreading panic among the population, the local media failed to prepare their audience for the coming onslaught despite numerous ominous signs. The victorious nationalist political parties in Bosnia attempted to manipulate editorial staffs, especially at *Radio-Television Sarajevo*, but their efforts mostly failed because – unlike the republican governments of Serbia and Croatia – they had to share power with other ethnic representatives and could not agree on how to assume authority over the media. Radovan Karadzic's nationalist Serb Democratic Party (SDS) demanded that the broadcasting service be divided into three ethnically separate channels but public protests and a constitutional court decision defeated the proposal.

War spread to Bosnia in April 1992 after a referendum supporting independence won majority support. Western countries recognised Croatia and Bosnia as independent states. Karadzic's SDS, armed by the Milosevic regime, boycotted the March referendum and had already begun to create a parallel state linked to Belgrade through Serb "autonomous regions." The Serbian-dominated Yugoslav army and irregular units launched a brutal war, expelling Croats and Muslims

from eastern and northern towns as part of Milosevic's campaign to carve out a Greater Serbia.

Months before shooting broke out, Milosevic loyalists prepared the ground by taking control of a strategic asset – television transmitters. Serbian forces seized a transmitter outside Banja Luka on Mount Kozora in August 1991, and took over five of the 11 main transmitters of *Radio-Television Sarajevo* by March 1992. The transmitters were adjusted to beam the Belgrade television signal to northern Bosnia. Before outright war began, Milosevic's sectarian propaganda covered half of the republic, warning Serb citizens that their Muslim neighbours were allegedly creating an Islamic fundamentalist state.

"Every bullet shot in Bosnia was supported by media activities. The war definitely wouldn't have been so cruel and bloody without media hate speech," said Senad Pecanin, editor-in-chief of the Sarajevo magazine *Dani*.

The broadcasting infrastructure was treated as valuable booty and carved up three ways by the Serb, Croat and Muslim-led Bosnian government armed forces. In Serb-controlled territory, *Serb Radio Television* (SRT) broadcast from the mountain village of Pale, outside the besieged city of Sarajevo, with technical and financial from *Radio-Television Serbia* in Belgrade. SRT's crude propaganda, filled with religious and ethnic epithets, managed to surpass Belgrade television's excesses. In territory controlled by the Croatian army and the Croat Defence Council (HVO), Croatian state television broadcast its version of reality using captured transmitters as well as new transmission equipment supplied by the Zagreb government. Croatian state television resorted to hateful ethnic stereotypes, disinformation and

***...every bullet shot in Bosnia was supported by media activities...***

*1 M. Thompson, Forging War, p. 224. In 1989, the Bosnian republic's Union of Journalists managed to win parliamentary approval for a law allowing the staff of RTVSA to elect their managers by secret ballot, subject to the parliament's ratification. No other republic granted broadcast journalists such autonomy.*

chauvinistic appeals, though on a slightly smaller scale than Belgrade television.

When fighting erupted between the HVO and the Muslim-led government army in the spring of 1993, Croatian state media – copying the methods of Milosevic's propaganda – warned of an "Islamic fundamentalist" threat and rallied support for Croatian territorial expansion. *Radio Television Sarajevo* – renamed *Radio Television Bosnia-Herzegovina* (RTV BiH) – broadcast to the mostly Muslim communities in government-controlled territory. Many staff members fled the station in the early months of the war as Sarajevo fell under a barrage of daily shell and mortar fire from the Yugoslav army. Some journalists found safety abroad, some viewed honest reporting as hopeless in war conditions and others found work in Croat or Serb nationalist media.

By the end of 1992, the main Muslim party (SDA), led by Alija Izetbegovic, appointed loyal party members to executive positions. SDA control of the station gradually increased over the course of the war, especially in 1993 when Croat-Muslim fighting broke out. The station took on a more exclusively Muslim identity, marginalised non-Muslim staff, avoided sensitive topics and adopted a servile tone towards Izetbegovic and the ruling SDA authorities. However, the station's shortcomings were sometimes due to incompetence as much as nationalist tendencies. It retained non-Muslim employees and refrained from the kind of explicit hate speech employed by Belgrade or Zagreb broadcasters.

Print media in wartime Sarajevo managed to retain a degree of autonomy that was completely absent from the Serb- or Croat-controlled territories. The daily *Oslobodjenje*, which had become a private company on the eve of the war, gained international fame as a symbol of civic resistance against nationalist intolerance. The newspaper's building was wrecked by Yugoslav army artillery but the multi-ethnic editorial staff managed to keep publishing the paper throughout the Sarajevo siege. *Oslobodjenje* sometimes published trenchant commentaries that criticised Izetbegovic and the Bosnian government even as Serb forces bombarded Sarajevo. Editorial freedom was limited, though, and most sensitive stories about atrocities or corruption were too dangerous to pursue. The magazine *Dani*, funded in part by an opponent of Izetbegovic's who had emigrated, adopted a more critical stance and dared to publish stories on awkward subjects that the authorities considered "unpatriotic."

The peace settlement agreed in November 1995 at a U.S. Air Force base in Dayton, Ohio, ended the wars in Bosnia and Croatia and confirmed Milosevic's failure to forge a Greater Serbia. Milosevic, Croatian President Franjo Tudjman and Bosnian President Izetbegovic agreed on a peculiar constitutional structure

in Dayton. The new Bosnian state was to be comprised of two autonomous "entities," a Federation of Moslems and Croats and a Serb entity (Serb Republic or Republika Srpska). These entities were given their own parliaments, tax revenue, and armies. A central bank under international supervision was to issue a single currency. A tiny central government was supposed to oversee foreign policy, international trade and "inter-entity" matters. Rival political parties and the international community continue to argue over how to interpret this unusual constitutional formula. NATO agreed to lead a multi-national peacekeeping force to enforce the military aspects of the Dayton agreement. The Stabilisation Force (SFOR), as it is now known, has reduced its troop strength since 1995, but it remains a guarantor of peace in an unstable region. NATO has made it clear that the peacekeeping force will stay in Bosnia-Herzegovina for as long as it takes to build a secure democracy.


Sarajevo, 1996. Credit: Alan Davis

The Dayton Peace Agreement succeeded in ending a conflict in which no side was able to obtain a clear victory, but it failed to address the future of the media in the new state – except for a passing reference to media freedom in relation to elections. The agreement enshrined freedom of expression as a fundamental human right but set out no details as to the provision of public service broadcasting, transparent allocation of broadcast frequencies, public access to information held by governmental bodies or defamation legislation. This oversight has hampered the development of free media, pluralism, reconciliation and the implementation of the peace agreement. Incredibly, the international community once again neglected the role of the media when it set out the terms of the U.N. administration of the Kosovo province.

## The Current Media Landscape: Overcoming the Legacy of War and Communism

Five years after the war ended, there is an unprecedented range of opinions, perspectives and information available in the media in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The quality and accuracy of the reporting can be erratic, but nevertheless the public has access to critical coverage of the political parties in and outside of government as well as information about events in the rest of former Yugoslavia. The extensive control exercised over the flow of information during most of the communist-era has disappeared. A section of the media has attempted to transcend the ethnic divisions created by the war and forged professional and commercial networks covering much of the country, helping to contribute to understanding and dialogue and counter the effects of nationalist propaganda.

The political climate that was dominated exclusively by nationalist parties and intolerant rhetoric has begun to ease somewhat, creating a more pluralistic climate. Voters are beginning to focus less on purely nationalist issues related to the war and more on practical concerns such as employment and the economy. The death of former Croatian President Tudjman and the defeat of his ruling HDZ political party in Croatian elections in 1999 have altered the political landscape in Bosnia, which had been squeezed by Tudjman's separatist policies. The hard-line HDZ party branch in Bosnia no longer can count on the Zagreb government to fund their separatist goals or offer them sympathetic media coverage on Croatian state television. More media freedom and higher journalistic standards in Croatia have had a positive spillover effect in Bosnia, where Croatian publications enjoy substantial circulation.

As for Izetbegovic's SDA party, its once monolithic position is crumbling. The opposition, civic-minded Social Democratic Party (SDP) scored surprisingly well in municipal elections this year. The nationalist bloc in Republika Srpska, led by the SDS, has been out of power for two years and has lost its once firm hold over the army, the police and public television. However, the SDS remains the strongest single party in the Serb entity and nationalist appeals still play well among a substantial portion of Serb voters. (Milosevic regime newspapers are distributed in the RS and the Serbian television signal can be seen in border areas.)

Although developments in Croatia have eased nationalist pressures on Bosnia-Herzegovina, Milosevic (now Yugoslav Federal President) remains firmly entrenched in neighbouring Serbia. The Kosovo conflict and NATO's air campaign in the spring of 1999 forced Milosevic to withdraw the Yugoslav army

from the predominantly Albanian province. But the NATO bombardment also gave Milosevic plenty of fresh ammunition for his state television and newspapers with which to persuade the Serbian public that they are victims of a vast Western imperialist/Islamic conspiracy. As long as Milosevic stays in power, Belgrade will persist in funding and orchestrating the Serb nationalist media within Bosnia's Serb entity.

Unlike Serbia, there is a degree of debate and pluralism in the Bosnian media which has strengthened in the years since the Dayton Agreement was signed. Increasingly, politicians, as well as international peacekeeping representatives, are finding it difficult to sidestep relevant issues raised by journalists. The policy agenda of the High Representative, an international diplomat appointed by major powers to implement the civilian aspects of the peace agreement, is clearly influenced by critical press coverage. The presence of a NATO-led peacekeeping force, international funding of alternative media and regulatory intervention by the international community has given the media more breathing space to develop. Media freedom, albeit fragile and embryonic, has begun to take root. As media freedom is secured and expanded, there is a greater chance that impartial, accurate and civic-minded journalism will develop and contribute to a stable peace and democratic society.

Much remains to be done to secure and extend this fledgling editorial freedom. The financial, legal, judicial and educational conditions for genuine media freedom still do not exist and the lack of a strong democratic condition makes the achievement of these other conditions all the more difficult. The legacy of communism and the authoritarian treatment of media before and during the

war (still practiced by Milosevic) infect the quality and style of Bosnian journalism, often producing propagandistic reporting and "self-censorship."

The physical safety of journalists cannot be assured. A car bombing last year nearly killed the editor of *Nezavisne Novine*, Andjelko Kopanja, who lost his legs in the explosion. The attack came after Kopanja published detailed stories on atrocities committed by Serb forces at the beginning of the war. The perpetrators of the car bombing have yet to be found or prosecuted. The incident served as a stark reminder that journalists face lethal danger if they dare to probe the actions of the nationalist factions that plunged the country into conflict, particularly the Milosevic regime in Belgrade. The rule of law does not prevail in Bosnia and the threat of violence continues to stifle journalistic inquiry.

The judiciary, vulnerable to political and financial pressure and burdened with a communist past, offers little or no protection against threats to press freedom or journalistic inquiry. At the same time, the judiciary fails to protect individuals against outrageous slander and defamation.

News organisations at the moment have no way to secure their financial independence. Major advertisers are comprised exclusively of public companies managed by political party appointees. Free-market reforms have yet to take effect. To survive, media companies must secure assistance and favours from vested political interests or rely on the generosity of ad hoc donations from foreign governments and international foundations. Local political parties and international donors have created a chaotic, saturated media market with more than 280 television and radio outlets in a small, impoverished country.

Bosnian journalists have yet to organise themselves effectively to demand press freedom and to secure adequate working conditions from employers. The average monthly salary of a journalist is approximately 350 German marks and many work without a contract. There is virtually no professional solidarity, even among the so-called "independent" media that share a common goal of working free of political control. Editors of two of the main independent magazines *Dani* and *Slobodna Bosna* (which have received donations from Western governments and foundations) sometimes use their publications to launch personal vendettas. In one case, the rival editors accused each other of plagiarism and treachery, trading insults in their publications. Such childish displays illustrate how far Bosnian journalists are from forming a united front to protect their interests.

For the most part, the media remains divided along ethnic and political lines. There are at least five journalists' associations in Bosnia and all except one enjoy partisan political backing. Several associations representing all three ethnic

communities have approved a voluntary press code of ethics, following mediation by the Independent Media Commission in 1999. The code of ethics remains a lifeless piece of paper because the associations have failed to agree on the structure of a "Court of Honor" or self-regulating Press Council.

Bosnia-Herzegovina has no comprehensive journalism training or education in place. The existing journalism faculties are politically tainted, obsolete and often incompetent. Precious few members of the older generation of journalists have survived with their professional or moral integrity intact. Even then, many are unwilling to relinquish the old ways of managing and reporting during the previous communist era. Some of the most talented journalists emigrated and will never return.

The younger generation of journalists often lacks mentors to teach them the craft. Training that reflects the highest European standards and practices should be treated as a top priority by journalist associations, local authorities and the international community. Short-term courses in broadcast journalism offered at the Soros/BBC Training Centre in Sarajevo have attempted to fill the gap and have proven highly effective. The school, which has begun to seek links with local journalism faculties in both entities, may offer a promising model for the future. Sadly, but not surprisingly, some young reporters who attended courses at the BBC school have subsequently been sacked by their editors, who view Western-style journalism education with suspicion.

***...some young reporters who attended courses at the BBC school have subsequently been sacked by their editors, who view Western-style journalism education with suspicion...***

Governmental bodies and agencies operate in a political culture of secrecy, withholding information of vital interest to the public. Journalists, as well as ordinary citizens, are denied the most basic information about governmental policies and deci-

sions that affect the country's economy, schools, public health, tax system, environment, police, defence and foreign policy. Journalists sometimes resort to offering sweetened media coverage for vested interests in return for access to newsworthy sources. Legislation guaranteeing the principle of transparency and public access to information held by government is crucial to transforming the prevailing political culture.

Carlos Westendorp, the former High Representative, called for the adoption of such legislation by December 1999 but the parliaments in both Entities failed to act. A draft Freedom of Information law has been prepared by legal experts at the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mission and is now being debated by the Bosnia-Herzegovina parliament. The adoption, or, if necessary, imposition by the High Representative, of this law represents only a first step. Public education campaigns will be crucial to informing citizens and journalists about their rights. It may take years of persistent campaigning by journalists and others to ensure the promise of the law is fulfiled.

There is a drastic lack of experience and knowledge in managing media as solvent or profit-making companies. Before the war, radio and television was provided by the state, based partially on mandatory subscription fees. Printed media did not face real free-market competition. Senior broadcast editors and managers were accustomed to bloated, inefficient organisations and generous state subsidies for their stations, which were never required to operate in a competitive market. *Radio-Television Sarajevo* had close to 3,000 employees before the war and vast technical resources, including elaborate studios built for the 1984 Winter Olympic Games. Despite a dire financial situation and radical technological changes that have occurred in the industry over the past decade, *RTV BiH* has kept its old-fashioned management organisation and employs 1,200 people. *Radio-Television Republic Srpska* in the Serb entity has some 600 employees and a similarly backward management culture.

Nationalist, ethnic propaganda is still prevalent among sections of the media, especially in areas bordering Serbia and Croatia. The ethnic slurs and excesses so common during the war have been replaced by slightly less explicit language. However, the message of this sectarian media – that ethnic equality and integration is impossible – has not changed. Nationalist Serb and Croat media attack the idea of Bosnia's statehood and multi-ethnic, civic principles generally. Every issue is portrayed through the lens of the "nation" and any criticism of the nationalist parties is treated as a betrayal of nation and religion.

Other religious communities are treated as inherently hostile. Nationalist

Bosniak media emphasise the image of victimhood to justify discrimination and to label Serb or Croat communities as uniformly bloodthirsty. The sponsors of this intolerant media rhetoric are the same nationalist political parties that won the elections in Bosnia in 1990 and helped incite bloodshed. The intervention and the regulatory mechanisms initiated by the international community since 1997 have served to deter the worst kind of hate speech in the electronic media but extremist, vicious language can still be found in print media. (The role of the international community is addressed in more detail below.)

Vokovar, September 1991. Credit: Alan Davis

The more independent-minded print media sometimes publish bold critiques and investigative articles exposing the corruption and the duplicity of the ruling nationalist parties. The magazines *Dani* and *Slobodna Bosna* in Sarajevo and *Reporter* in Banja Luka present themselves as impartial with no favourite cause or party. Indeed, *Reporter* is arguably the only genuinely independent publication in the Serb entity (Republika Srpska), as other media outlets are aligned with the nationalist bloc and the Milosevic regime or with the "pro-Western" faction led by Prime Minister Milorad Dodik. These three magazines have not shied away from running critical stories about opposition parties or decisions by the High Representative or other international organisations. These magazines and some other publications have set up formal and informal cooperative networks, exchanging information and sharing resources.

For all their success, these magazines and other independent media often fall short of minimum journalistic standards and sometimes engage in tabloid-style reporting, printing unconfirmed allegations based on less than thorough research.

Individuals and organisations that are attacked are sometimes not offered a legitimate opportunity to reply or explain their position.

*Oslobodjenje* remains the only daily newspaper that upholds journalistic standards of fairness and impartiality as well as civic-minded values. However, it has lost its dynamic quality. The morale of the staff is not what it was in wartime and the editors have often found it more frustrating to operate in peacetime. The lingering influence of the nationalists, the international community's faltering political will and the general malaise in Bosnian society have also discouraged the staff who fear the values they struggled for have been defeated.

Many of the talented editors and columnists who wrote for the newspaper before and during the war have since emigrated or found work at other more vibrant (and better-paying) news organisations. The former editor-in-chief, Kemal Kurspahic, and the former deputy editor, Gordana Knezevic, live and work abroad. The newspaper, which borrowed large sums of money to keep afloat in wartime, has been squeezed legally and financially by SDA authorities who control the main printing press in Sarajevo, the price of newsprint and the privatisation process. After the authorities attempted to cast doubt on *Oslobodjenje's* joint-stock company pre-war status, the newspaper feared a government takeover and managed to establish itself as a private company with help from Western donor governments and foundations. Other major daily newspapers in Sarajevo and Banja Luka are aligned with political parties and have mono-ethnic perspectives and editorial staffs.

As the political landscape has fragmented, some partisan media outlets have begun to report on the dirty laundry of their patrons. Internal party quarrels in the SDA and allied Bosniak parties have spilled over into the pages of *Dnevni Avaz*, the largest daily newspaper in the country. With an exclusive Bosniak orientation, the newspaper had relentlessly promoted the SDA leadership until just before the municipal elections in 2000. Poor election results and disputes within the SDA and among rival Bosniak politicians have resulted in the newspaper adopting a critical attitude in its coverage of the Federation Prime Minister, Edhem Bicakcic, and his allies. The newspaper soon found itself the target of a financial police investigation and ironically turned to the international community for political assistance. Given the paper's financial reliance on political connections and favours, it remains uncertain if the newspaper has embraced journalistic independence. *Dnevni Avaz* may decide to wager its future on political factions or leaders with better prospects than the prime minister. Whatever motivations lie behind the paper's shift in editorial tone, the public has benefited

from the newspaper's open coverage of SDA internal debates that were previously conducted behind closed doors.

The broadcasting media has tended to lag behind print media in quality and professionalism (the journalist community shares the same assessment). As a more expensive and influential medium, many stations were launched by vested political or financial interests and remain beholden to them. The public or state broadcasters, *RTV BiH* and *Radio-Television RS* in the Serb entity, have yet to shrug off the legacy of wartime nationalism and communist-era passivity. Both stations have failed to conduct a serious recruitment of a multi-ethnic staff, although *RTV BiH* has recently added more Croat reporters to its evening news programme.

The international community has funded country-wide radio and television networks that have succeeded in transcending ethnic partition and offer more impartial news. *Radio FERN*, launched by the OSCE mission in 1996, and the *Open Broadcast Network* (*OBN*), launched in 1996 by the Office of the High Representative, have attracted talented, ethnically-diverse staff and offered competition to the politically controlled broadcasters.

*OBN* got off to a slow, controversial start and was heavily criticised for wasting money and time in 1997. One of its affiliates in Banja Luka, A-TV, has evolved into a quality station providing some of the best domestic production in Bosnia. Neither *FERN* nor *OBN* possess the kind of dynamic identity and investigative or analytical flair displayed by the three leading independent magazines already mentioned. Nonetheless, *OBN* and *Radio FERN* do provide a civic alternative to nationalist party media reports. The propaganda monopolies that political leaders once enjoyed have been wiped out

thanks to the presence of *OBN* and *Radio FERN*. Opposition parties have managed to reach voters through these alternative networks and the ruling nationalist parties have been forced to engage in uncensored debate.

Nationalist party stations have in turn been forced to compete with the higher standards set by *Radio FERN* and *OBN*. *Radio Fern* has also participated in the organisation of a network of local radio stations that share programming and advertising revenue. The project has proved successful thus far despite attempts by politicians to obstruct its formation.

Both *FERN* and *OBN* require substantial international funding and the commercial market has yet to develop. It remains to be seen if donor governments and Western foundations will be willing to continue with such generous assistance. What happens at *Radio FERN* and *OBN* will also depend on whether the public broadcasting services show signs of improvement.

Perhaps the best broadcast news coverage is produced by the local language radio services of the *BBC*, *Deutsche Welle*, *Radio Free Europe*, *Voice of America* and similar services. (*Radio Free Europe* also produces a television programme that is aired by some independent stations.) The correspondents for these services, many of whom worked at *Radio-Television Sarajevo* before the war, provide context and analysis without sacrificing accuracy, timeliness or impartiality. It is precisely this kind of high journalistic standard that helps build peaceful co-existence among the country's ethnic communities and open, pluralistic debate. Perhaps one day this elite group of talented reporters could organise themselves into a larger, domestic broadcasting service.

The cumulative effect of the alternative print and electronic media has been to break the information blockade that nationalist politicians had attempted to set up to divide and separate the country's mixed population.

Even the best news coverage in some magazines and international radio services focuses almost exclusively on straight political news and events. Rarely are ordinary people seen or heard. Bosnian media too often fail to give voice to the concerns of those who feel disenfranchised such as students, war veterans, pensioners and artists. The public has become accustomed to news as an account of high politics. Too many commentators lecture their audience about history and political machinations without taking notice of the worries and dilemmas of their neighbours. The media portray violent incidents occurring against anonymous members of an ethnic group instead of attempting to convey the humanity and specifics of an individual with hopes and dreams.

Television news, even the less nationalist variety, tends to regurgitate a series

of press conferences held by various political parties. Instead of news-gathering, the Bosnian media often waits passively for the latest political declaration or "statement." These declarations are offered to the viewer undigested, sometimes without sufficient context or relevant background. This kind of passive journalism is not only the product of political pressures but a lack of training and, above all, editorial leadership and management. Quality editors who lead, organise and inspire reporters to dig deeper are few and far between.

Bosnian journalists all agree that they face political pressure and interference but disagree as to the extent of the threat posed to editorial freedom. The days of overt and strict censorship are over. Instead of totalitarian methods, political interests employ authoritarian means by exploiting their control over the judiciary, police, housing and public enterprises. Fears and insecurities left over from the war are exploited to discourage hard-hitting journalism. Senad Pecanin, editor-in-chief of *Dani*, said that the post-communist, post-war era exposes the inquiring journalist to more indirect but effective tactics:

> "The new government is more sly and refined in its choice of means of pressure. If the journalist does not agree to be under the nationalistic flag, to side with the dominant political party, he'll be mistreated, humiliated as a traitor and marked as a kind of lunatic, liar, provocateur. That, or he will be pronounced as a Western-financed spy."

Financially insecure, dependent on a politicised judiciary and a closed economy, Bosnian media are ripe for exploitation and intimidation by vested interests. Apartments and most housing have yet to be privatised, allowing local politicians to evict or

threaten any inquisitive journalist. Political parties and religious leaders also play to the fears and prejudices whipped up by the war, accusing journalists of betraying their nation or religion if critical stories are printed or awkward questions raised. When political or financial pressure fails to work, political parties resort to violence or the threat of violence.

Even when incidents of intimidation or harassment of journalists are exposed and publicised, Bosnia has no robust civic society or public opinion to hold authorities accountable. Stories of corruption and misconduct are published regularly but there is rarely a public outcry or even reaction by other media outlets. The exodus of many educated Bosnians during and after the war has helped to contribute to this lack of public opinion. The trauma of the war combined with years of communist rule has produced a passive public that is afraid of jeopardising what little property or position they retain.

Two years ago, the son of the chairman of the Bosnian presidency and SDA party chief, Izetbegovic, and his associates forced their way into the Sarajevo office of *Dani* magazine and threatened the staff. Izetbegovic's son was angered by articles that alleged his involvement in corrupt ventures. There was little public outcry and the incident was soon forgotten.

The coverage of the shooting of a security service agent illustrates the problems and dilemmas surrounding the Bosnian media. The murder raised many disturbing questions about the ruling SDA party and the shadowy workings of the security service known as AID (Agency of Investigating and Documentation). A mixture of secretive government, weak civil society and sloppy journalism conspired to prevent any serious public discussion of the whole affair. Nedzad Ugljen, deputy director of AID, had been reportedly involved in a web of terrorist activity and obtained confidential documents. He allegedly relayed these documents to the International Criminal Tribunal in the Hague. Soon afterward, the "man who knew too much" was killed in November 1996. Before the shooting, his colleague, Nedzad Herenda, was allegedly kidnapped by agents within AID, tortured and shot. He survived the gunshot wound and his court testimony describing his abduction was later passed on by his lawyer to independent magazines in Sarajevo in 1998.

Reporters desperately tried to dig up the truth behind the shootings but ran up against a labyrinth of criminal and secret service connections. Given the culture of secrecy inside the government and the threat of violence, in-depth investigative reporting was virtually impossible. One of the magazines, *Slobodna Bosna*, published material regarding the case based on an account from one source.

Later, the magazine had to retreat and publish a story very similar to one already printed in the rival Sarajevo magazine, *Dani*. A furious exchange of insults ensued between the competing editors in print but the larger questions arising from the whole AID affair were never addressed. The individuals and organisations implicated in the affair were never brought to account.

While there is a relative and limited degree of editorial freedom in Sarajevo and Tuzla, other areas in the south-eastern region of the Federation and the eastern region of the Serb entity pose serious risks to independent-minded journalists. Reporters visiting from Croatia have been beaten in west Mostar, where the Croat nationalist HDZ party exerts strict control over the local media. Non-Croat journalists try to avoid rural areas in Herzegovina west of Mostar, just as non-Serb journalists face physical danger when reporting from eastern towns near the Bosnia-Serbia border. The mayor of Zenica has threatened to use his control over public housing to punish journalists.

News organisations, including Serb-oriented publications, often have to hide the identity of their correspondents in eastern Republika Srpska due to the climate of fear produced by the pro-Milosevic nationalist SDS and Radical parties. The car bombing attack on *Nezavisne Novine*'s editor revealed how dangerous Republika Srpska remains and that Banja Luka's reputation for relative openness should not be exaggerated.

The prime minister of the Serb entity, Milorad Dodik, has accused the nationalist parties of suppressing media freedom in eastern towns but he too has worked to bolster his position by appointing loyalists in media outlets. Dodik's information minister, Rajko Vasic, has ensured that editors at

***...a mixture of secretive government, weak civil society and sloppy journalism conspired to prevent any serious public discussion of the whole affair...***

two publicly-funded newspapers and an entity news agency offer consistently sympathetic coverage. When the director-general of *Radio-Television Republika Srpska* (RTRS) ran afoul of Dodik by consistently promoting the Socialist party and its criticisms of the Dodik government, Dodik began cutting off funding for the station. Although the director had clearly interfered with the station's editorial independence, Dodik violated the same principle when he attempted to illegally sack the director last year. The move was rejected by the Board of Governors of RTRS and by the international community.

## The Role of the International Community: Making up for Dayton's shortcomings

Due to the attitude of the ruling political parties who view the media as a tool to be controlled, the international community has been forced to take an active role in attempting to free the media of political interference. With no guidelines set out in the Peace Agreement, the High Representative's office and other international organisations arrived at a strategy for piecemeal media reform.

The pivotal moment for the international community and for Bosnia's post-war development came in October 1997, when NATO-led peacekeeping troops moved against the ultra-nationalist *Serb Radio Television* (SRT). The station, which had remained under the influence of indicted war criminal and Bosnian Serb wartime leader Radovan Karadzic, had kept up a campaign of hatred and intolerance despite repeated pleas and warnings from the then High Representative, Carlos Westendorp, and the NATO alliance. SRT coverage attacked the peace agreement, denied access to opposition parties, warned of violence if ethnic segregation was altered and even compared the SFOR peacekeeping solders to Nazi SS units. Karadzic loyalists refused to alter the explicitly partisan governance of the station or to offer airtime to rival political leader Biljana Plavsic, the then president of Republika Sprska.

Plavsic broke with the Karadzic faction, advocating cooperation with the international community and pledging to end widespread corruption. SFOR, which had initially been reluctant, took over four SRT television transmitter towers without firing a shot. French, Italian, U.S. and other SFOR troops turned the network over to President Plavsic's faction in the western half of the Serb entity. The station retained an exclusively Serb orientation but dropped the use of ethnic slurs or attacks on the peace agreement.

In February 1998, President Plavsic and the High Representative's office negotiated "interim arrangements" that installed a new, relatively non-partisan

board of governors and international supervisor or "administrator" empowered to ensure editorial independence; and provided an editorial charter based on international models. For the first time since 1991, the Milosevic regime in Serbia had lost control of the broadcasting infrastructure that had been exploited to create ethnic segregation and control events in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Until NATO's action against SRT, the international community had refrained from direct intervention or regulation of the media landscape. The major donor governments had hoped that supporting alternative or "independent" media would counter the propaganda churned out by the nationalist party outlets. Donor governments have spent millions of dollars over the past five years supporting new broadcasters and publications with mixed results. The donor funding has been ad hoc and rarely coordinated coherently. Some media outlets of dubious origins and quality have received generous donor support.

Despite these shortcomings, a new generation of independent, civic-minded publications and stations has emerged, breaking the monopoly of politically-controlled, nationalist media. Reliance on donor funding carries its own problems and sometimes results in sycophantic coverage of the international community. However, without donor support and with the existing closed economy, independent-minded journalists would have had no platform and the political climate would have remained stagnant.

Although donor funding for alternative media has been crucial to building a degree of editorial freedom, the intervention against SRT made clear that the international community would need to take a more activist and systematic approach to

reform the media landscape. Resorting to military action did not provide a realistic way forward. The recognition of the need for a more robust approach to media development coincided with a strategic decision by Western powers to confront obstructionist tactics by the nationalist parties and to treat Bosnia as a quasi-protectorate.

Three months after the NATO action, the governments paying for the peacekeeping mission in Bosnia, known as the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), granted High Representative Carlos Westendorp authority to impose solutions when rival parties could not agree. Westendorp then promptly imposed final decisions for the design of a new Bosnian flag and currency that had been the subject of protracted squabbling.[2]

In addition, the PIC declaration issued in Bonn, Germany, called for the establishment of a regulatory body under interim international authority that would issue licences and allocate frequencies for broadcasters. The decision was designed to liberate access to the airwaves and to introduce Western standards for broadcast regulation.

In June 1998, Westendorp set up the Independent Media Commission (IMC), which constructed a regulatory framework for broadcasters, including a code of practice and a transparent licencing process. The IMC, described as an interim body that would eventually hand over to local authorities, included an appellate council comprised of international and Bosnian representatives who were supposed to review appeals from broadcast licence holders or applicants. The IMC has succeeded in setting up a transparent licencing regime and winning the cooperation of local broadcasters who have largely abided by its code of practice. Violators have paid fines and even ceased broadcasting temporarily. Quality broadcasting programmes may be lacking among the electronic media but the IMC, by using its leverage as a licence regulator, has managed to act as a deterrent against the more extremist stations.

The commission has come under criticism for moving too slowly in its licencing and for ratifying the status quo, instead of creating a more realistic, rational media market. After issuing temporary licences, the IMC has promised to issue stricter long-term licences, a step that has been repeatedly delayed. IMC officials have promised that the long-term licencing phase should reduce the size of the saturated media market, as many broadcasters will fail to fulfil the IMC criteria. More than two years since its establishment, though, the IMC has yet to fulfil its full potential.

The IMC, describing itself as a Western-style broadcast regulator, has chosen

to steer clear of print media except to encourage self-regulation and professional solidarity among the journalist associations. A voluntary code of ethics for the press has been agreed upon by the journalist associations, but the same associations have failed to agree on the structure of a self-regulating press council. (The politically influenced journalist association in Republika Srpska has insisted on separate press councils in each entity.)

The IMC's most significant decisions came in the case of *Erotel*, a station funded and directed by the former hard-line Croatian government in Zagreb which re-broadcast Croatian state television (*HRT*) over most of Bosnia. The IMC ruled that *Erotel* and its parent, *HRT*, were occupying a large section of the frequency spectrum without legal permission and without respect for the needs of other broadcasters. In addition, *Erotel*'s programming displayed consistent political bias in favour of the nationalist HDZ party while denying airtime to other parties. The effect of *Erotel/HRT*'s inflammatory broadcasts was to promote ethnic segregation and to bolster Croatian President Tudjman's attempt to expand Croatian territory into Bosnia. The IMC also ruled that *Erotel* and *HRT* were violating intellectual property rights by failing to secure permission to broadcast foreign programmes in the Bosnian market.

The IMC's rulings in 1998 and 1999 were ignored by *Erotel* and no action was taken to enforce its authority, apparently because the international community and SFOR in particular lacked the political will to confront the ruling HDZ faction in Herzegovina. When it came to issuing licences to Bosnian broadcasters in the summer and autumn of 1999, *Erotel* was denied its request to continue its massive use of frequencies and was granted a

*2 Officially the PIC said that the High Representative's authority already existed under the Peace Agreement and that it had simply stated its interpretation of his powers. Bosnian writer Ivan Lovrenovic calls the High Representative "Bosnia's unofficial No.1.*

restricted licence with a much smaller footprint and other limitations. Croatian state television was told it would have to apply separately for permission to rebroadcast its programmes through public broadcasters in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Tudjman government and its deputies who ran *Erotel* flouted the IMC's authority and refused to withdraw from the occupied frequencies. Events in Croatia undercut *Erotel*'s patrons. Following a long illness, President Tudjman died and the HDZ was defeated in general elections in December 1999. With a new government in Zagreb and the elections over, once-reluctant SFOR commanders and Western governments were now ready to help enforce the IMC's rulings without having to worry about a nationalist backlash in Croatia. *Erotel* was taken off the air and *HRT* was granted permission to rebroadcast one channel (instead of three) under IMC authority. With a new Croatian government in power, political commissars no longer run *HRT* and the nationalist propaganda has ceased. *HRT*, which may be the most watched television in Bosnia, is now moving towards European norms of public service broadcasting, similar to its counterpart in Slovenia.

Both *Erotel* and Karadzic's *SRT* were under direct political control and were used as partisan, nationalist weapons to crush opposition and ethnic co-existence. By removing these political weapons posing as legitimate broadcasters, the international community – albeit belatedly – strengthened media freedom and pluralism by insisting on fair and transparent access to the airwaves. The IMC's rulings on *Erotel* and earlier decisions on the re-transmission of Belgrade television in Bosnia territory have restored the country's sovereign control over the airwaves which it lost beginning in 1991. The IMC has adhered to international standards in its policies, stating clearly that foreign broadcasters are not uniformly banned from Bosnia but must submit to the same licencing rules and regulations as domestic stations.

Apart from funding alternative media and setting up a regulatory framework for broadcasting, the High Representative's office has attempted to create genuine public service broadcasting throughout the country. It has proved a difficult task. The international community has met with fierce resistance, overt and covert, by political parties who have a vested interest in obstructing reform.

Following the SRT intervention, Westendorp negotiated with the BiH Presidency to launch reform of the former *Radio-Television Sarajevo*, or *RTV BiH*. After protracted negotiations, the Croat Presidency member, Kresimir Zubak, and a deeply reluctant Izetbegovic signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the restructuring of public broadcasting in June 1998 (the

same month IMC was created). The Serb member of the Presidency, Momcilo Krajisnik, refused to be party to the MOU. The document called for the existing *RTV BiH* to be succeeded by a public broadcasting corporation that would serve all of Bosnia and its ethnic communities as well as uphold the principles of editorial independence, financial transparency and religious tolerance.

The MOU was ignored by Izetbegovic and the SDA, but it did succeed in launching a reform process and putting the issue on the public agenda. Above all, the document forced Izetbegovic, who had consolidated his political control over *RTV BiH*, to concede publicly that the broadcaster needed to be reformed and made truly multi-ethnic. A new, non-partisan, multi-ethnic board of governors at *RTV BiH* encountered obstruction by SDA loyalists in *RTV BiH*. Authorities in both entities made no effort to discuss the creation of a public broadcasting corporation.

Frustrated by a lack of progress a year later, Westendorp imposed a new framework for public broadcasting in July 1999. For the first time, the High Representative's office ruled that there was a constitutional basis for state-level public broadcasting (Article II). The July 1999 decision called for the creation of a Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) of BiH that would succeed *RTV BiH* and represent Bosnia exclusively in international organisations.

*PBS* was to distribute programming provided by the European Broadcasting Union and produce at least one hour of news programming daily. *PBS* would be funded initially by contributions from the two entity broadcasters, *Radio-Television Republika Srpska* and a planned Federation service. An international expert was to distribute the property of *RTV BiH*, enabling the creation of *PBS* as

well as a Federation network. Westendorp amended legislation for the Serb entity television, removing mono-ethnic references and requiring it to serve all the citizens of the entity. (A multi-ethnic board of governors was appointed by the High Representative in July of this year.)

The High Representative also imposed a Federation TV law that had been negotiated by the Bosniak nationalist SDA party and the Croat nationalist HDZ party. It called for two complementary channels with one channel predominantly in the Croatian language. (As Croatian, Bosnian and Serbian differ in only minor respects and are essentially a single language comprehensible to all in Bosnia-Herzegovina, many journalists have criticised the two-channel model as a concession to nationalist politics without any professional rationale. It remains to be seen if it is financially or technically feasible.)

A year after the sweeping decision, *PBS* has yet to produce its evening news programme. It has secured membership in the European Broadcasting Union and has begun broadcasting international sports programming on both Entity networks with a *PBS* logo. A multi-ethnic team of commentators in Sydney and Sarajevo will cover the Olympic games for *PBS*, a step that would have been impossible a short time ago. Still, the pace of progress has been slow, largely due to obstructionist tactics employed by nationalist parties who have attempted to exert pressure on the multi-ethnic founding board of *PBS*. SDA loyalists who hold key management positions in *RTV BiH* have resisted the restructuring effort and failed to recruit non-Bosniaks to important posts. The international community also may have underestimated the size of the problem and the commitment necessary to create an institution that has no precedent in Bosnia. Two international supervisors, both from Slovenia, have failed thus far to break the political stranglehold and stagnation prevailing at *RTV BiH*. A former *BBC* manager has been named as the Transfer Agent and has pledged to re-organise the whole public broadcasting sector.

Creating a modest, efficient public broadcasting service out of the ashes of a demoralised, inefficient, ethnically-biased and politically-tainted structure may take longer than the international community is willing to admit. The jury is still out on the High Representative's ambitious plan for public broadcasting reform and whether the donor governments are ready to offer him sufficient support. The emphasis by donor governments, especially the United States, on supporting commercial media (or quasi-commercial media) has meant that public broadcasting reform has received a lower priority and this approach, in retrospect, may have been mistaken. That may be changing, at least somewhat.

Recent press reports indicate that the *Open Broadcast Network*, which more closely resembles a public service, may be integrated into the new *PBS* structure. Such a move would represent an opportunity to create a strong public network but it would also be fraught with risks if the transition is mismanaged.

As for media-related legislation, the international community has belatedly moved to strike out communist-era regulations and introduce laws that meet democratic standards. In July 1999, then High Representative Westendorp suspended provisions in the criminal code that allowed for prison sentences in libel and slander cases, and called for new laws on defamation and freedom of information to be prepared under international guidance.

A draft law on freedom of information that was prepared by OSCE experts is now under discussion in the state parliament and has been presented to the Entity governments as well. (The law would put Bosnia ahead of some European countries in terms of legal standards on access to information, including the United Kingdom, which has yet to adopt such legislation.) This law, coupled with proposed defamation legislation that is due to be released later this year, should create the legal foundation for genuine media freedom.

Of course, the adoption or imposition of these laws does not mean that the authorities will abide by the new regulations. The success of international efforts to reform the judiciary and police will determine how much the courts are willing to challenge the political establishment. Bosnian journalists and civic organisations, acting as a unified front, will have to fight for the law's implementation at every stage and international human rights monitors will have to intervene to ensure the law is enforced.

The planned privatisation process will figure decisively in shaping the future media landscape. The whole issue has yet to receive thorough and coherent press coverage and the international community has yet to focus its attention on the risks and opportunities presented by privatisation. The present High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, recently pushed for the suspension of any media privatisation in order to allow further examination of the issue and to pre-empt any politically motivated moves.

The presence and authority of the international peacekeeping mission should be exploited by independent-minded journalists. Appealing for international intervention may be the only way to protect what editorial freedom has been gained thus far. Powerful media oligarchies in the former Soviet Union serve as a stark warning of the dangers of over-hasty media privatisation. However, Bosnia's artificially bloated market (one of the most saturated in the world) is crying out for rationalisation and free-market reform. Talent and resources are dispersed. No viable advertising market can evolve if the status quo is allowed to continue. If carefully and transparently regulated, privatisation in the media sector could introduce long-overdue competition and create commercial media insulated from direct political control. Such a process could end the cycle of dependency that has been so detrimental to all of Bosnia's economic ventures.

## The Future

Both international organisations and Bosnians must view the media as a crucial element in building peaceful co-existence and democracy. However, the media cannot be separated out and cured. Media freedom is inextricably linked to broader political developments and reforms. Some donor governments have at times turned to the project of media reform after growing exhausted with the paralysed political environment in the Balkans. Fundamental reform of the economy, the judiciary and police must coincide with any effort to promote media freedom. The media cannot be free if the economy is closed, if indicted war criminals roam free, or if the courts are in the grip of political factions.

Despite difficult conditions, a small but significant number of editors and reporters in Bosnia-Herzegovina are attempting to follow best international practice and uphold journalistic ethics and standards. The local political winds are beginning to blow in a more hopeful direction as well, reducing the authority and longevity of the nationalist parties. Politically-controlled media helped ignite the war but independent-minded media are now helping build a more pluralistic, tolerant climate. The media situation in Bosnia is far better than in

Serbia or other authoritarian states, but still a long distance from European standards.

Over the past five years, many of the building blocks for genuine media freedom have been put in place. The battle is far from over and the international community must work to ensure an end to the physical dangers faced by reporters. The journalists themselves will have to begin joining forces in a united front and shouldering more of the burden if they want to secure the freedom they have been denied for far too long. Criticising the mistakes made by the international peacekeeping mission or local politicians is healthy but not sufficient in itself to bring real change. Independent-minded journalists will need to take their destiny in their hands and fight for their rightful place in society.

## Focus Group Research

The following are composite answers to questions posed in 1998 to a focus group of individuals in Bosnia-Herzegovina representing various social and professional categories, gender, and ages (between 20 to 45 years).

## 1 Are you satisfied with the way journalists covered the conflict?

"Mostly not. The main issue still boils down to the fact that journalists are perceived as having substantially affected the development and pace of the conflict. 'Patriotism' made relative all working and ethical principles, bringing the profession to a miserably low level. What currently has to some extent succeeded this, is an often-deceptive level of 'dilettantism.' By and large, people, it seems, people still trust 'their' [i.e. ethnically-orientated] media. There has been some progress in media practice, especially in the last two years. But this remains insufficient to render real social change."

## 2 Do you think that journalists' reporting of the conflict contributed to the peacemaking process?

"Their contribution was insufficient. Journalists were left with very few options for performing their duties. Instead of presenting an alternative position, the press, like society at large, was infected with nationalism. Overall, few media professionals seemed able or willing to resist the growing tide of nationalism. But despite this a living nucleus for a new model of peacekeeping journalism model survived."

## 3 How should journalists have been reporting on the events of the last decade?

"In the main, reporting was preoccupied with battlefield concerns, or the role of the international military community. Certain independent media admirably managed to avoid this war-mongering pattern, but these were the exception not the norm. While now, the media have spent vast sums on tidying up their past propagandist image and revamping their presentation, many are again reasserting their nationalist position or peddling a partisan line.

"While writing the truth in the frenzied or frustrating environment of war time was literally suicidal at the time, surely a more moral choice would have been silence. Any decent journalist should prefer quitting his/her profession, rather than accept or participate in disseminating inflammatory information/commentary in such a climate of evil, hate and violence."

## 4 What then, in your view, are the roles and responsibilities of journalists in conflicts?

"Practical obligations for a journalist include rejecting the 'hate-speech' mentality. Being well versed in the background to his/her assignment. Being able to warn the public of moves likely to escalate a situation, while avoiding unnecessary and negative dramatisation of events. Essential to this, of course, lies the support of a legitimate political system. In the context of the Bosnian conflict, the problem was that journalists reporting the news were automatically incorporating subjective material. Usually based on the matrix of the respective ideological clique they were serving. Communist society had nurtured a sort of 'ideologically-friendly' reporting, and the new set of nationalist concepts just recycled the communist way of exercising authority. Thus the main task for journalists during and after conflict, should be inaugurating a new set of values in which sober political and social analyses provides a check on demonising influences."

## 5 Do you think that the situation in our country prevents the political /social development that would enable journalists to fulfil their roles and responsibilities?

"The political-social situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina does not provide enough space for performing regular or normal journalistic duties. Journalists in the main are caught between the pressures of public responsibil-

ity on the one hand, and political expectations on the other. Reconciliation of journalists to these respective roles has not gone well until now. Even the international community it seems fails to understand how imperative the need is to clarify these roles and establish dialogue between these two sections of the community. Without this dialogue journalists will never be able to function in a proper capacity."

## 6 Could or should journalists play a role in creating peace and ending conflicts?

"Yes, but it's a long difficult process. In the first instance this new kind of journalist must be accepted as a socially committed person with an understanding of the complexities involved in the post-war situation, and a real commitment to the truth. The current media trend towards 'dilettantism' and paying lip-service has to be overcome and discouraged before any peace-keeping journalism model can be accepted. These condition are prerequisites, to allow this new form of journalism to come before the public in its purest form, without the burden of past political discourse.

"Perhaps a useful tool in creating this kind of journalist is to create opportunities for reporters to travel and meet colleagues in other conflict/post-conflict situations in other countries. Identifying common problems, experiences and lessons to be learnt. Ultimately, of course, the success or failure of peace-keeping journalism is directly linked with other wider political conditions."

## 7 Can journalism play a role in ending or preventing violent conflicts?

"Theoretically, yes. But local experience in Bosnia-Herzegovina did not confirm this, despite some visible progress in the last two years. The media's role remains an extremely sensitive subject. The establishment of a journalism model capable of effective intervention or influencing the end of hostilities, shows all the signs of being a long process. While journalism continues to be viewed with disdain by the community at large, a grass-roots political change is necessary for any real forward momentum. It remains something of a chicken and egg situation. A two way process in which both the media and society must display not only the will, but contribute in practical terms to make it happen.

## 8 Should the media contribute to the reconciliation of parties in conflict?


Sarajevo, 1996. Credit: Alan Davis

"Yes, they should. The last two years in Bosnia-Herzegovina has shown that this is possible. Inter-entity media dialogue develops, albeit slowly, on two levels. The first is the direct partnership experience of independent magazines, like *Dani* and *Slobodna Bosna* of Sarajevo, with *Novi Prelom*, *Reporter* and *Nezavisne novine* from Republika Sprska.

"Soros Media Center from Sarajevo, together with the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), organised meetings of journalists from the two entities. This helped create the grounds for dialogue, even though those involved have primarily been moderates. Perhaps the time has come to organise meetings between hard-line nationalists, that is, people who initially opposed each other and remain opposed to this day.

"An interesting phenomenon worth noting is the transformation of the SDA's image, in part through the publication *Ljiljan*. As the dominant Bosniak Muslim party attempted to soften its image, it entered into a coalition with a few small civic-style parties. The SDA's publication, *Ljiljan*, founded as *Muslimanski Glas*, has often advocated radical clerical-nationalist tendencies, bordering on fascism. So extreme was its views that it has at times been criticised by the SDA hierarchy itself. It has retained a harsh wartime rhetoric long after the Dayton agreements. Yet lately, it has attempted to transform into a moderate, European-style weekly with a slightly conservative and right of centre

editorial outlook. This new-style *Ljiljan*, with fewer clerical opinions and more space given to the opposition, and a decent entertainment section, is surely more palatable for readers, and an indication of how influential such publications can be in shaping opinion. In light of such an example, the international community naturally seeks media support for softening nationalist concepts. It remains, after all, one of the few political tools which create leverage for that policy."

## 9 Should the media act as a go-between or peace-builder?

"In the current situation, the media do act as a go-between. In Western democracies such a brokering role comprises revealing both public attitudes to politicians and informing the public about the intentions of authorities. In Bosnia, however, it remains one-sided in favour of the politicians. Another question that remains is that if such a shift should take place, who would actually orchestrate it?"

A lack of democratic values has so far made it impossible for the people to assert their political will. And it would be illusory to expect the 'corridors of power' to start such a process. Only perhaps, by breaking the media into even smaller, atomized local units, might the monopoly of certain media bodies be removed. But this is a gamble which could easily backfire, rendering the media even more vulnerable to manipulative interference.

## 10 Are there any other issues concerning the media and their role in reporting conflicts that you want to address?

"Independent of external factors influencing media practice, there is perhaps one component that journalists themselves could establish to raise awareness of their professional role. There remains a desperate need for an enforceable, independent and committed media 'Court of Honour', with the work of applying higher moral standards and resolving inter-professional disputes up to the journalists themselves. Such an institution is vital, especially with regard to settling disputes arising from misuse of media space.

## Conclusions

The following represents summarised responses to the focus group findings from a variety of journalists and political representatives.

Not everyone is so positive about recent media developments. “There has been no progress in the last two years in journalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Lots of journalists live and work outside the country. There are no well-educated journalists,” said Merdijana Suvalija, head of the NBC bureau in Sarajevo. This is something of an exaggeration, in keeping with the viewpoint of many “old school” Bosnian journalists. Education is a continuous process, and the prevalence of a kind of war-induced autism among the younger generation of journalists is probably more of a psychological problem than a lack of knowledge.

Suvalija said:

> “The circumstances of the war brought a lot of young people into the profession who knew nothing about peace journalism. Problems also exist within different media and on different levels. The print media has some well-trained journalists who are equipped to handle modern media rules, but in my opinion, there are not enough good radio and television journalists to cope with the new situation.”

Training and education were crucial to improving journalistic standards, Suvalija continued:

> “A lot of new journalists have no experience in the working process nor the language. We just cannot say that we have good journalism.”

As a general assessment, this is also something of a closed view. There is good and bad journalism everywhere. What Bosnia has lately is better journalism. This tendency should be recognised and supported.

Bakir Sadovic, press spokesman for the office of President Izetbegovic, said there had been clear progress in journalism in Bosnia over the last two years:

> "The way of treating subjects is more serious because of the improved conditions and training of journalists and, of course, because of the new market circumstances. So the standard of journalism is higher than before, but there remains few journalistic instruments for monitoring or self regulation within the media. There is no criticism by journalists or their institutions about those who are failing to meet professional standards. In my opinion, there is still also a lack of well-researched work. Many journalists are lazy in ensuring an article is fully checked out in terms of details. In my capacity and contact with many journalists, I can say that many questions are asked only to defend an already existing thesis on some subject."

Sadovic's view is in many ways a typical example of observing journalism through a political lens. Instead of politics serving as a safeguard for the free press, and promoting the media as a conciliatory forum, journalists are expected to fulfil high professional standards without any proper protection or security. Furthermore, surely the purpose of "well researched" journalism would often be to "defend" a legitimate thesis or position, even one that might contradict the existing political set of values. Questions are the instrument of proving or disproving a particular thesis and remain the journalist's principal tool. How well that tool is deployed is clearly subject to many conditions and limits. Like most politicians, Bakir Sadovic speaks here from a position of power. All too often, those in such high places hide behind a set of "sacred cow" values, refusing on the vaguest of principles to offer any explanation to the public. Nijaz Durakovic, a former high ranking communist official, and opposition Social Democratic Party leader, was once asked by a journalist whether he drank alcohol. "Why do you ask me that?" he blurted out in angry response. Such an attitude is a long way from either Watergate or the Lewinsky affair. Politicians in Bosnia-Herzegovina all too often hide both their public blunders and private sins beyond a thick wall of arrogance.

Journalists also told IWPR that Bosnian media lack specialists or beat reporters. Too often the few really talented journalists fall into the trap of wearing too many hats at once. Struggling to make ends meet, journalists often have to work for various media organisations on divergent topics at the same time and develop no expertise in a given subject. Assigning regular beats and enabling

reporters to develop knowledge and experience in a particular category would be of tremendous benefit.

According to most Bosnians interviewed in and outside of journalism, the print media came out best in terms of credibility and professionalism. Television, however, was assessed as the most influential medium, with the vast majority of viewers perceived to be relying on "their" respective mono-ethnic broadcasters (*RTV BiH* for the Bosniak community; *RTRS* for the Serb community; and *HRT* or local radio for Bosnian Croats).

What emerged from discussions with both "consumers" and media "producers" was a belief that journalists would contribute to democracy and tolerance by taking a step back from any one political faction or perspective. By pursuing their craft to the highest professional standard, journalists would bolster peace and inter-ethnic dialogue. The media, they said, do not need to tell people what to do but only to give them the material with which to form their own opinions. ❍

*Ahmed Buric is a freelance Bosnian journalist*

# Media in the New South Africa

*By Dr Jannie Botes in Baltimore*

## Introduction

The media establishment in South Africa is undergoing a phased revolution. These fundamental changes relate to media ownership, the racial composition of the media corps and representation of the diverse communities in South Africa in the news. The role of the media in the new South Africa is also changing. Journalists are expected to move away from any political agenda and towards more traditional media roles of providing information and a forum for debate on the issues of the day.

At the same time, there are expectations from inside and outside the media industry that all forms of news media should assist in some way towards resolving the country's social and political problems. According to some journalists, their industry is suffering from the deteriorating economic situation. Meanwhile, they feel great pressure to help South Africans comprehend why, four years after apartheid, there is a level of violence over political rights and resources in the country that is in some ways worse than anything at the height of the apartheid era. Clearly, South African journalism is going through a learning process as to how to investigate and report current societal conflicts. The quality of the product has suffered, because newsrooms are being forced to scale back while at the same time going through a process that has

been referred to as "juniorisation." Despite these difficulties, South Africa is experiencing a freer press than ever, with national and city newspapers openly criticising and debating many government policies.

## Focus Group Research

Twenty-seven South Africans who are journalists or who work for organisations that use media techniques as part of conflict intervention were interviewed for this report. The interviews were conducted in August and early September 1998. Among the interviewees, 17 were reporters and editors who either work or have worked formerly for either print or electronic media. The journalists were selected according to their knowledge or experience reporting conflict, or because they were deemed senior members of the media with relevant information on the topic. Ten of the interviewees were either working for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) relating to the media and their role in conflict and conflict resolution, or spokespeople for community and governmental organisations who interact with the media regularly. Many of the interviewees will not be identified in this report due to the serious level of intimidation experienced by South African journalists. This has been especially true of journalists who cover social conflict, such as "People Against Gangs and Drugs" (PAGAD), but a number of journalists also requested anonymity before giving their consent to participate in this study.

The semi-structured interview protocol was developed in London in May 1998 as part of the larger IWPR project. The duration of each interview ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. Interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed. The results are presented below.

## Journalistic Roles in the New South Africa

The more senior the journalists in South Africa, the more wary they are of any media roles that involve journalists in anything that goes beyond observation and the surveying of information. Anything more, they normally argue, crosses a line into advocacy journalism and journalists becoming news-makers instead of recorders of news. A new generation of journalists, however, many of them coming out of the "apartheid struggle," reject the notion that the media have no role in reconciling groups in conflict. The notion that the media should only debate issues in the widest sense, and not have roles in attempting to end the violent conflicts in South Africa, is often regarded as an older style of journalism.

In general, the idea that the media could mediate between parties in conflict is still somewhat controversial in the mass media in South Africa. According to this more traditional school of journalism, the media should provide the public with information that will allow them to make decisions by providing a debate about issues, and nothing more. For them, the role of journalist is to provide a forum for all views in which society could empower itself to solve its own problems. Some journalists, however, acknowledge that this sometimes leads to "boxing match" journalism, with the reporting of accusations back and forth without actually helping resolve the problem or conflict. The idea that journalists should not become "players" in conflict, problem-solving, or peacemaking is still pervasive among many senior journalists in South Africa. At the same time, many concede that the media can be a catalyst in moving policy forward in a wide variety of situations.

On the whole, most media organisations are kept so busy with their primary roles of gathering information that they hardly ever consider their possible impact on the development of a conflict or its resolution. Reporting accurately and truthfully is a major task in itself that demands a lot of investigation and is difficult to sustain within the complexities of the South African context. Especially in the violence-torn parts of the country, the media is often accused of fly-by-night reporting that leaves its readers, viewers, and listeners without any real sense of the causes of the violence or of how the social fabric of such communities might be restored. Such superficial reporting is often accused of exacerbating or escalating conflict, and of not having any responsibility towards contributing to peace in a larger social context.

Especially in the conflict-ridden black townships of South Africa, the prevailing view is that the mass media not only do not understand the conflict, but that they err on an even more simplistic level, namely, in reporting the positions of all the stakeholders accurately. In areas such as Thokoza, outside Johannesburg, members of a focus group assembled as part of this research, argued that the mass media often had their facts wrong, and by so doing, seriously contributed to further tensions within the community. The news media, they argued, saw their community only through a conflict frame. The influential mainstream media never reported on anything positive or anything unrelated to conflict, thereby adding to the perception of hopelessness in the society.

At the same time, township citizens argue that the media had a direct effect on the conflict itself. Newspapers were used as "war intelligence," and, therefore, the reporting of rumours, biased information, or incorrect facts, could have

a direct impact on the number or intensity of violent actions following media reports. Ultimately, it was argued that the reporting on the violence in the townships was either over-simplified or did not reflect what was really causing the violence. More importantly, they noted that by not involving all the stakeholders in the conflict, and especially by not putting pressure on the government to solve the underlying socio-economic and political causes of the conflict, the media did not assist in ending the conflict.

Under a new generation of black newspaper editors and radio and television executives, this situation might be changing. Because of their relationship to South Africa's political struggle history, and their grass roots connections, many of these journalists are interested in linking the news media more directly to the community and to fulfil societal needs. This new crop of media professionals is more sympathetic to the idea of the media becoming facilitators for at least some of the more important dialogues that need to take place in the country. In short, they view the role of the media in society as more complex than having a single role of being observers or simply carriers of information. The notion that many in the mass media still adhere to – that the main role of the media is just to give the "facts" – is now being challenged. There is a greater realisation that the media do not only carry the message, but give voice and identity to the message. There is a growing recognition that media messages are never completely neutral. Beyond the basic facts of a story, the media can provide the kind of analysis that would assist with resolving conflicts at the local and national level.

## The Political Climate and Its Impact on the Media

To understand how the media in South Africa has fared over the last 13 years, one has to examine the political violence that reverberated throughout the country as far back as the 1976 Soweto riots. Veteran journalist and former newspaper editor, Joe Latakgomo, said that in the 1970s the media in South Africa was racially divided and that you could tell whether a journalist or publication was "black" or "white" by the way the article was written. The media, according to Latakgomo, took no position on the conflict:

> "I think that we failed quite dismally at the time, and I think that has probably carried through to the 90s, and I'm not quite sure, even now, [that] we are quite where we would want to be in terms of the media playing a positive role towards contributing to conflict resolution."

Journalists back then were divided along racial lines. The so-called "white media" were accused of being pro-establishment, while the so-called "black" media were anti-establishment at all costs. During those years, neither side managed to identify any positive aspects of the other. In effect, this meant that journalists increased divisions in society rather than attempting to breach them. Latakgomo said that South African journalism in the 1990s still has racial elements, but political affiliation has replaced race in defining journalistic bias:

> "[Back then], you still had people reporting really in terms of their own political inclination, towards a political party, and very specifically towards the ANC [African National Congress] … that obviously alienated the other parties involved in the conflict because they saw the ANC being just as guilty for the conflict as perhaps any one of them, and therefore, that the media were able to almost at all times apportion blame to the others which almost ensured that the violence was perpetuated."

Latakgomo said that there are still journalists in South Africa who are trying to define roles for themselves that would get them on the right side of the political parties. This kind of journalism, he said, perpetuates conflicts and contributes to violence in the country. The electronic media in South Africa do the same by carelessly broadcasting powerful, volatile images that could contribute to violence such as pictures of Inkhata Freedom Party members waving weapons. Latakgomo said that some journalists at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) appear to curry favour with the new government in order to ensure job security.

Various journalists said that the government in South Africa clearly would prefer the media not to focus as much on conflict and violence in the country, and to give more coverage to positive social programs such as providing housing for millions of homeless South Africans. Such positive reporting would not focus attention on serious conflicts in the country nor would it put pressure on the government to play its role in resolving these problems. Clive Emdon, the director of the Independent Media Diversity Trust said:

> "The government expects the media to reflect its policies and practices in a forthright way, and in a positive framework."

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According to Emdon, South Africa's first-world media, which serve a historically white audience and a new black middle class, do not adequately address development issues. They do not understand development matters and cannot report it in a way that makes development accessible to the two-thirds of the population that does not have access to print and electronic media, especially television. This, he said, leads to a gap in public expectations and media delivery. Emdon emphasised that the media are businesses that are out to make a profit and are, in essence, organisations "that have never displayed humanitarian objectives in the sense of providing universal access to print or to broadcasting."

In some ways the media coverage of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) gave South Africans unprecedented access to the conflict of the apartheid years and to this attempt at reconciliation. Market research, however, found that the majority of whites did not think that the TRC contributed to reconciliation,

and that it hardened black political attitudes. An argument can be made, however, that the SABC's coverage in particular – with more than 80 programmes over two years on this highly emotional topic – had a constructive effect in the long-term by allowing the country to undergo a form of national ventilation. Through in-depth coverage of the stories behind the hearings, investigative journalism in South Africa was taken to new heights by the television coverage. Clive Emdon said that this was mostly true of Max du Preez's weekly Sunday night broadcasts and that the same could not be said of the coverage that most newspapers gave to the TRC.

By comparison, the NGO-run conference on poverty in South Africa that soon followed the TRC, but that did not have the same high government profile, received far less attention and coverage. Hence it also had far less of an emotional impact on the country. This occurred in spite of the fact that over 10,000 people gave evidence before the poverty commissions. Clive Emdon attributed this to what he called the media's lack of understanding of development issues. He said that this also illustrates how local problems and local conflicts are better addressed by local and community media. According to Emdon, it is at the community level that the media can play a constructive role in building dialogue and understanding:

> "Community media are ideally placed for the kind of discussion that is going to inform communities themselves and create the debates within those communities about such issues as violence, particularly political violence. It's only at the community level that things can be resolved and worked out. No national police force in the world seems to be capable of dealing with real violence on the ground at a local level except by marching in and wiping everybody out."

Emdon said that violence at the local level can only be resolved through discussion, debate, and negotiation, and that local media can play a role in assisting communities to resolve their differences. The mainstream media now recognise the need to transform not only their organisations, but also the way in which they present the news to a large part of South Africa's population that has been neglected. The media are beginning to make an attempt at bringing in people with alternative views and different perspectives. There are efforts underway, especially within South African newspapers, to better reflect the larger society. This, however, will not occur overnight and is part of an ongoing process of discussion about the role of the media in the new South Africa.

## The Mass Media and Their Roles in Conflict and Conflict Resolution

Any discussion of media roles is complicated by the fact that the mass media are broken down into many entities: newspapers, news magazines, radio, television, reporters, editors, talk show hosts, television anchors, cameramen, etc. Within the framework of this report, it is only possible to discuss the media's relationship to conflict resolution in either the broadest sense or within a specific case study. This report will focus on the crisis in the Cape Flats, the area around Cape Town where drugs and gangs have become endemic. Frustrated at the South African police's inability to control this phenomenon, a primarily Muslim organisation calling themselves People Against Gangsters and Drugs (PAGAD), was created in 1994. Their tactics consisted of marching on the homes of drug dealers and gang leaders and demanding an end to their criminal activity.

PAGAD's activism received support from public and media circles until members of PAGAD allegedly killed Rashaad Staggie, the co-leader of the notorious "Hard Living" gang. This event propelled PAGAD into the national and international spotlight and led to widespread accusations of PAGAD becoming just another "vigilante" group. This media portrayal, as embodied in Lynn Duke's article about the incident on August 17, 1996, in *The Washington Post* entitled "Vigilante Justice in S. Africa," has led to death threats directed at journalists who used the term "vigilante." The media, therefore, appears to have played a role in both PAGAD's phenomenal growth and its current image problems. This makes it worthy of study.

## PAGAD and the Media

According to a report from the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) in Johannesburg, media coverage of PAGAD "open[ed] up a can of worms:"

The lynching of Staggie was splashed across newspapers around the country the next day [August 5, 1997]. One of Johannesburg's leading newspapers, *The Star*, carried a front-page photo of Staggie on fire, minutes before his death. An inside page of that same edition was devoted to the PAGAD story, with frame-by-frame photos showing parts of the lynching. Several readers complained, some of whom described the coverage as "insensitive, sensational and counter-productive." The newspaper defended its position in terms of its policy of "telling it like it is." In an editorial, the newspaper said:

> "It is not in the public interest for a newspaper, or any media, to try to obscure important public events from public understanding of their import, even if a subject is absolutely shocking."

*The Star* contributed to making a stunned public aware of an extremely grave new development, to which society needs to react urgently.[1]

SABC television reports the next day were considered even more inflammatory, showing Staggie stumbling down the street with the upper part of his body on fire. FXI cites the Media Monitoring Project (MMP) that noted that the PAGAD issue was problematic:

> "No warning was given to viewers of the violent and graphic nature of the footage which was shown. Whilst it is integral for the media to represent all aspects of the story, it is the viewer's right to choose to watch images such as those which were shown, and to be warned of their violent and disturbing nature."

The Staggie murder had two immediate affects for the media in Cape Town. A number of journalists were intimidated and threatened by PAGAD supporters who demanded coverage favourable to the PAGAD cause. Secondly, the media soon found themselves facing Section 205 subpoenas, an attempt by the Western Cape Attorney-General, Frank Khan, to uncover information and photographic material connected to the Staggie murder. FXI deplored the action, asserting that:

> "The media cannot act, or be perceived to act, as an informant of the police because it destroys the media's credibility and their independence. Media credibility is a vital element in the exercise of freedom of expres-

sion and without it democracy is placed at risk."

Media organisations noted that succumbing to this request would greatly endanger the lives of journalists in covering situations of conflict. The subpoenas were retracted, but they resurfaced earlier in 1998 to be again resisted by the media. This matter is still unresolved.

Media involvement in PAGAD activities also extended to radio broadcasts in the Cape Town area. The week of the Staggie murder also happened to coincide with a hearing by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) concerning reports aired on *Radio 786*, a community station serving the Muslim community in the Cape. The IBA examined whether *Radio 786* had somehow stepped over the line of informing and had actually incited violence on the streets. At this licence review hearing:

> "Questions were raised about *Radio 786*'s role in mobilising people to be part of PAGAD-inspired events, including the one that led to the death of Staggie. This followed actual complaints from members of the public that *Radio 786* had played this role by announcing the times and places of the PAGAD protests and actively urging people to participate. The matter was raised in the course of the IBA licence review and the station was quick to point out that the announcements were made in the context of news broadcasts and community announcements and were no different to similar "advertising" of PAGAD-events on other stations."[2]

*1 & 2 http://fxi.org.za/*

While *786* was cleared of all allegations, there is still a widely-held perception that *Radio 786*, and indeed the media at large, played a role in mobilising public support for PAGAD actions and subsequent violence. At the same time, mass media outlets clearly had a hand in the phenomenal growth of the organisation, partly from the high-profile coverage it received at its inception.

Various journalists – none of whom will be identified in this paper due to allegations of media intimidation by PAGAD and its supporters – have said that there is a thin line between reporting conflict and allowing the coverage to feed violence. Some journalists in Cape Town are now so aware of the possible effect of their coverage that they attempt to protect not only themselves and members of the public but even police officers. Reporters have essentially been asked to downplay the PAGAD-related violence in the belief that dramatic, high-profile reporting begets retaliatory violence.

## Media as a Megaphone for PAGAD

It is evident that the media were initially unaware of the true nature of PAGAD. One journalist said that the media "did not make it their mission to find out who these people really are." Reporters instead focused on "the news" of the conflict between PAGAD and drug dealers as illustrated by marches and drug-related violence leading up to the Staggie incident. As a result (as some journalists now acknowledge), an essential task of the media – to educate the public about the parties, their background and their intentions – was neglected.

At first, PAGAD was very effective at mobilising itself around issues of crime, gangsterism, and drug dealing. The media were highly effective in conveying this voice of frustration over the inability of the police to deal with these growing problems. In effect, some journalists believe that the media did not only carry PAGAD's message, but that PAGAD itself managed to employ the media in its own image-making campaign. One of the journalists that covered PAGAD from the very beginning described the initial relationship between PAGAD and the media as follows:

> "They were initially received positively, and as an antidote to crime they received good publicity. All this positive publicity changed when they got violent and torched and shot up homes and so on. This happened about a month after [their inception], and then we viewed them in a completely different light, and we also made that known in our papers to such an extent that several of our reporters and photographers were threatened and barred from covering their protests and marches."

Most journalists now seem to be totally disillusioned about PAGAD's initial "humanitarian" goals of ridding the community of gangs and violence, and doing so in a non-violent way. They also said that the coverage of PAGAD has been complicated immensely by the allegations that the organisation split into various factions and that some have connections with Islamic extremism. The reporters acknowledged that their initial shortcoming was in treating PAGAD as a "sexy" issue, which soon had "a large portion of Cape Town living in total fear of what's going to happen next." They said that the media have to accept some role in that. Some journalists acknowledged that they "hyped" PAGAD, and often used it to enliven a "dead" front page. Some argued that that is simply the way the media works, while others felt that journalists have to accept some accountability for the effect of the coverage.

Not all journalists agreed with this depiction. Some said that it is not realistic to argue that the media glamorises parties in conflict merely by reporting on them. In retrospect though, there is a perception among journalists that the media gave PAGAD too high a profile initially, and that much of the coverage could have been toned down, "by cutting [stories] down, and by sticking it on page six, instead of on page one in huge letters." Looking back, journalists also wondered whether they should have been so willing to "launder" some of the combative language between the parties. As journalists, they were adhering to the ethic of reporting people's words as precisely as possible. But in retrospect, they said that inflammatory statements on either side could contribute to aggravating tensions and feeding violence. On the whole, these journalists were uncomfortable with the idea that

their reporting could propel conflict forward, and most rejected the notion that they should take responsibility for exacerbating conflict or violence simply by giving it coverage. Some reporters agreed that the media had inflated PAGAD's status somewhat, out of its own commercial interest to boost readership or audience share.

## The Media and the Police

One actor in this conflict – the police – said openly that PAGAD has the media to thank for its high profile and that the media lack consistency in how they treat various players. For example, in a front-page picture of a PAGAD member firing a weapon in a municipal area, the face of the gunman was hidden or "blurred" by the newspaper. When the police queried newspapers about this practice, they were told that it was done in order to protect photographers. For the same reason, many newspapers no longer publish by-lines on PAGAD stories. The police said that PAGAD had successfully intimidated the media and protected its lawless behaviour as prosecutors could not use the "censored" photos.

The police also complained that the media do not always verify information and that under deadline pressure they often use inaccurate stories. Moreover, media spokesmen now maintain that PAGAD's intimidation of the media has led to journalists writing stories from their offices and from police reports rather than gathering "on the scene information." The authorities said that the views of the police are often ignored or neglected while the opinions of PAGAD, the gang leaders and members of the community are covered in detail. One police officer said that the media ignored early warnings from authorities that PAGAD was not as pure and altruistic as it appeared at first glance.

The police complained that they are expected to protect the public, the media included, but that the same courtesy is not extended to them. PAGAD has also attempted to intimidate the police. After a series of death threats, the media communications officer for the police in the Western Cape, Wicus Holzhauzen, decided to take a holiday. The media got wind of the story, and in spite of police requests not to publish the story because it would give PAGAD a "moral victory", a story implying that the police were fleeing PAGAD received front-page treatment. Since then, various members of the press, including the journalists that broke the story, were taken off the assignment, sent on overseas holidays, or just left Cape Town for a couple of days to allow PAGAD intimidation tactics to subside. By failing to report its own response to PAGAD threats,

the media appear to set a hypocritical double standard, police said.

Various members of the media said their relationship with the police regarding the PAGAD story is immensely complicated by allegations that some senior police officers are involved in drug smuggling and gang activity. Some gang leaders openly boast about having "police officers in their pocket." The official police response to these allegations is that all police corruption can and should be front-page news, but that there is an urgent need for the media and the police to cooperate on stories that have immense social impact – such as the conflict around PAGAD.

There is a feeling in Cape Town that the violence related to PAGAD and the gangs has the potential to make the city ungovernable, to create the de facto "Lebanon-isation" of the Western Cape Region. One police officer argued that not only is PAGAD a media creation, "but that it seems that some journalists think that by overly criticising the police they will further their own careers." He pleaded for cooperation, and not competition, between the media and the police, saying that an adversarial relationship is neither in the interest of either side nor of the society at large. In an effort to further a better working relationship between the media and police around the reporting of violence and conflict in Cape Town, the police organised a workshop between media professionals and police officers that was held in a west coast town away from Cape Town.

## Media Analysis of PAGAD

As a rule, journalists are not comfortable with addressing their own role in a conflict or crisis. The one area in which media and other social actors

(police, political authorities) clearly share a professional interest is in their ability to analyse the underlying causes of a crisis. How the media describe or frame a conflict clearly defines its analysis. The conflict between PAGAD and the drug dealers has been described as "drug related violence," as a "conflict situation," and as "a war on the Cape Flats." Each of these depictions carries different implications for analysis. Terms such as "drug dealers" and "gangs" offer a vague outline of the actions of these socio-political actors without really analysing their social context and identity.

After giving PAGAD substantial publicity without really explaining who they were, the Staggie murder forced the media into in-depth analysis. The media then had re-examine PAGAD and clarify its origins and practices. As one journalist said, the media had to explain:

> "Who they are, where they come from, why this sudden vigilante phenomenon of taking the law into their own hands, going around bombing and killing people. Also how they fit into this [Cape Town's] community life, how as gangsters they have such a powerful force, how the leaders have managed to acquire all this money, large properties, how they have been able to buy off senior police officers in the justice system."

Getting the real story on PAGAD was easier said than done. While most journalists who covered the story received death threats from both sides of the conflict, Muslim journalists were especially vulnerable because of PAGAD's expectation that they would be sympathetic to its cause.

Media coverage was further complicated by the perception that both sides of the conflict were looking to manipulate journalists. The rival parties exploited the needs of news organisations, especially their competitive requirement to get the news "first," and played newspaper organisations off against each other. Journalists would quickly be told that "either you cover the story or I'll call the competition," or would be informed that the competition had already been called. This contributed to media organisations blaming each other for the way this conflict was covered. As one journalist asked about the work of a competitor, does a two-page picture spread make a hero out of someone, such as Rashaad Staggie, who was previously thought of as a drug dealer?

This question was asked in reference to *The Cape Times*, which had journalists with extensive contacts among the drug dealers. The newspaper's sources with that side of the conflict were so well-established that it led to accusations that the newspaper had become clearly biased. While most journalists maintain

that the media should not take sides in reporting a conflict, some organisations – such as *KFM-News* (the news division of a Cape Town commercial radio station) – have definitely taken a position against PAGAD. The station decided to refer to PAGAD as a "vigilante" group instead of an "anti-gangster" group or "supposed vigilante group." The station said that PAGAD's use of unlawful methods and intimidation of *KFM* staff led to its decision not to provide any kind of public platform for PAGAD. This move did not make *KFM* a "pro-gang" news organisation but the station does enjoy better relations with the gangsters.

Due to deadline pressures and the urgency of having to get information on PAGAD-related stories, the media has been unable to devote proper attention to the underlying sources and causes of the conflict. Some journalists said that they have failed to hold anyone responsible for the underlying social, political or economic problems that feed the conflict. They have been even less successful at getting third parties, such as the government or the police, to come forward with options or solutions to bring some conclusion to what seems to be an intractable crisis.

## A Community Organisation's View on the Media and Violence on the Cape Flats

Members of a community organisation said that the media have "tunnel vision" when it comes to crime and violence in the Western Cape, and that terms such as gang violence are used when what in actual fact is happening is "vigilantes attacking gangs." Gang violence, they said, is a different phenomenon. They expressed immense respect for "individual journalists who are prepared to stick

their neck out to get the story covered, even risking their jobs to report on the other side." They also said that "it is the editors who often change the content of such stories." It is this perceptual gap between reporters and editors (especially the editors' insensitivity to the "types of issues that have been raised") that often leads to distortions in conflict stories and their possible negative impact, they said.

According to this group of community activists, many of the journalists have become so involved in the story that it has affected them psychologically. The reason for this, they said, is that these reporters have come upon a wealth of volatile information and are not sure what to do with it. For these journalists, covering the regular cycle of violence has left them traumatised. They also have to report in an environment where most people refuse to be quoted on the record. Worst of all, reporters are faced with repeated intimidation and threats. This climate of fear and silence explains why so many journalists eventually refused to work on this story.

Community organisations share the opinion of the police that PAGAD has a political agenda to make the Western Cape "Islamic," an accusation that was only examined after the Staggie murder. Community activists said that the media's initial uncritical coverage of PAGAD not only mobilised supporters but that it created a shift in the dynamic of the conflict itself. The focus on PAGAD meant that gangs such as "the Americans" and the "Hard Livings," joined forces with other gangs, forging a singular political force. They said that media focus on PAGAD helped consolidate the gangs.

According to members of this community organisation, the media tends to see crime and violence "through white eyes." They said that many of the media organisations in the province have black editors, but that these organisations are still mostly white-owned and maintain a culture that devalues the lives of black people (especially poor people). They said that this outdated perspective encourages a certain type of superficial reporting. In covering the conflicts of the mostly non-white citizens of Cape Town, the media's portrayal has not caught up with the new, non-racial South Africa, the local activists said.

Outside the realm of race, but still within the purview of how the media do their work, community organisations complained about how the media define what is actually news. They said that community activities designed to combat crime are routinely ignored, unless a dignitary – such as a cabinet minister – attends one of these activities. In terms of the media's actual role in creating peaceful dialogue, one of the community activists had the following to say:

> "The media must create the conditions for peace talks. They must set the stage. They must not be physically involved in getting the parties together because when such people talk, they talk for the media, and not for the issues that are facing the community. That sometimes causes further conflict. In spite of this, I think the media can create the conditions for bringing the parties together."

## Community Radio and Its Potential For Resolving Conflict

Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has gone through a process of undoing the SABC's near total control and ownership of broadcast media. As part of this process, the IBA granted more than 80 licences to community radio stations. According to IBA councillor Libby Lloyd, community radio is thriving beyond expectations. What was unforeseen, though, is that most of these community stations would eventually identify themselves as "religious" or "interest-based" with a political or social agenda. The IBA's ideal of a high number of stations that are purely defined by their geographical boundaries might at this point be difficult to achieve. As some of the critics of the IBA's licencing policies have pointed out, withdrawing any of these licences, or not granting new four-year licences, will be problematic. To a degree, these stations have become vested interests in terms of the groups and organisations that they represent.

Religion and interest-based radio, therefore, has the potential to create social conflict by advocating ideas that "polarise" rather that unite South Africa's multi-racial society. In contrast, the people who originally lobbied for the licencing of this kind of radio station promoted their ability to address

community issues and conflict on a local level, something that a national broadcaster such as the SABC cannot do with the same efficacy. In addition, the process of starting a community station is an act of consultation and negotiation in itself. Various sectors of a town or region have to resolve their differences by applying for one community licence and, in so doing, unite the community itself.

Some of these radio stations have, indeed, attempted to resolve conflict directly. According to councillor Lloyd, at least three radio stations have played a somewhat mediatory role in dealing with issues such as the violence that has occurred around issues of competition and control over mini-bus taxi routes in the townships. The stations tried to address complaints and allegations about fraudulent permits and pirate taxis that have led to hundreds of taxi-related deaths over the past decade and to hundreds more injuries. One radio journalist who wished to remain anonymous said:

> "Often there is a huge pressure to ignore the issue, because no matter what you do, if you call in the passengers or you call in the taxi owners or the taxi drivers, when you've got violence and people being killed, everyone accuses you of having treated the other better … But there have been stations that have played a mediating role outside of being on air. And I think that when a station has been able to earn the [parties'] respect, they are able to do that."

At subsequent licencing hearings, some of these community radio stations have not only indirectly asked the IBA's permission to play mediatory roles, but even asked for the organisation's help in getting mediation training – a request that falls outside the mandate of this licencing body. A mediation role for community radio stations is not something that the IBA envisaged, but it is something that has emerged within community radio stations. The IBA anticipated these stations would have a more traditional broadcasting role, such as discussing issues openly on-air and allowing members of the community to come to their own conclusions.

The possibility of radio stations playing a more direct role in resolving community disputes raises ethical questions and is fraught with potential risks. Many of the on-air personalities in community radio are young, and are not established community leaders. More importantly, it is unclear who would take responsibility for attempts at "media mediation" that turn out badly. Training community radio workers in mediation skills and how to apply such skills on air is essential. Community radio stations cannot avoid getting involved in commu-

nity conflicts and therefore they should be equipped with the ability to analyse disputes and some understanding of how to mediate between opposing parties. To reduce the risks of inexperienced radio employees plunging into local disputes without adequate knowledge, some stations have been encouraged to consult and seek guidance from conflict resolution mediators and similar organisations in the area.

The fear of getting embroiled in community disputes has actually prompted some community radio stations to avoid any discussion of conflict or politics. To some degree, this avoidance of adversarial debate on-air runs contrary to the original vision of the IBA in granting local radio licences. For example, part of the role of community stations during elections is to inform the public about the positions of the various parties. The role that community radio should be playing in community conflicts is still being defined. Some local activists have made clear their opposition to allowing radio to serve as a forum for opposing gang members to sit at a desk in a studio and discuss their agendas. Community radio should not glamorise bullies or criminals, but it should help the public understand the root causes of violence. Likewise, community radio should not serve as a platform for a particular group or political point of view and it remains vulnerable to being intimidated into doing just that.

What community radio stations generally agree on is that they have some role in assisting the resolution of local disputes, but there is no clear direction on exactly how that should be achieved in practice. There is some agreement about the educational and healing roles that community radio stations can perform. In the current campaign for the next elections, the International Committee of

the Red Cross (ICRC) is funding a training programme for community journalists around these issues. Part of the training consists of helping these journalists demystify conflict and to humanise both sides involved. Community radio, therefore, offers some key elements for building reconciliation and carries potential benefits that have yet to be fully exploited.

Many community radio stations in South Africa are under-funded and their journalists are often volunteers who are in desperate need of training. NGOs are now starting to fill the gap. Community radio is probably the best-suited form of mass media to contribute to resolving social conflict without directly encouraging or "hyping" the disputes.

## The role of NGO-sponsored Media

In troubled countries around the world there are now a number of local and international NGOs that use media and journalistic tools in order to alleviate or resolve conflict. The biggest difference between such organisations and the mass media is that their "interventions" are aimed specifically towards conflict resolution. In other words, their brand of journalism has a specific "outcome" in mind. When journalistic tools in radio, television, and print are used to assist parties in conflict to encourage dialogue, mainstream journalists often perceive this as a violation of professional boundaries. The line between NGO journalism and mainstream media is, however, not absolute. For example, some of the video dialogues that the Media Peace Centre (MPC) has produced as a method of intervening in conflicts in South African townships, were later shown on the SABC and other countries in Africa.

The history of NGO media in South Africa dates back to the late 1980s with the creation of the MPC. At the time, former journalists Hannes Siebert and Melissa Baumann collaborated with conflict specialist Ron Kraybill to see if any models could be created through which either the mass media in South Africa or a form of journalism produced by NGOs could further peacemaking in what was then still apartheid South Africa. Against the background of this concept, NGO media projects emerged. For example, as a result of the National Peace Accord, and the work of the National Peace Secretariat, MPC created *Peace Radio 2000*. Its goal in the run up to the first post-apartheid election was to:

> "... try to set up communication networks that gave access to people on the ground and that would draw people into immediate dialogue and communication systems."

*Peace Radio 2000* had 900 correspondents and a two-hour "peace" radio programme every day. It received wonderful reviews, although the project was never formally evaluated. Market research estimated that the programme's audience began at 200,000 and reached 800,000. The station pursued worthwhile tasks such as educating journalists and editors about the dynamics of social conflict, the project's true impact can never be fully measured. The constraints and pressures under which NGOs operate often mean that projects do not get systematically evaluated – a phenomenon that seems particularly true of organisations that engage in media activities.

## Video Dialogues

As part of the mandate of the National Peace Secretariat, MPC had to undertake a near-impossible task, namely to ensure that the process of the transition would be transparent and that South Africa's 40 million inhabitants would have equal access to information. Believing that local media have the most legitimacy in reporting on local conflicts, the organisers decided to deal with this enormous challenge on a community level. It quickly led them to Crossroads, a township on the outskirts of Cape Town, where political in-fighting over housing and other resources fuelled a violent conflict. In analysing the situation, it became apparent that the media play different roles at different stages of a conflict. For example, during the pre-settlement stage when most of the violence occurred, the media were carrying messages between the conflicting parties. Due to the fact that the conflict resolution efforts on the ground were unsuccessful, the media by default played some kind of "mediating" role between the antagonists.

Furthermore, MPC's assessment of what was happening on the ground in Crossroads unearthed an element of anger and outrage from the township inhabitants about how the mass media were defining and portraying them. In an attempt to make these inhabitants feel "heard" MPC provided guided media tours through Crossroads. Siebert's team took the media to the major players, essentially to introduce them to the people that for one reason or another were neglected by journalists. The NGO effort also took another route, which eventually led to the video dialogues project. Negotiations between the police and township leaders often turned out to be contentious because both sides would later contradict each other about what was agreed upon at these meetings. The MPC put an end to this type of dispute by documenting these meetings on video. This step brought a degree of much-needed accountability to the negotiating process.

Through a period of violence in Crossroads, MPC started mapping the issue on video in an attempt to explain its history and to demystify the conflict for all those involved. Under difficult circumstances – the participants did not want to surrender their weapons – a new mediation effort was born and violence subsided. It is important to note, however, that the benefits of this project, as well as many others, were not embedded in a sustainable form because the government ended its funding for such efforts. Violent conflict returned to Crossroads three years later, in essence undoing much of the funding and work that had been done.

Siebert said that the sustainability of such projects cannot be the only measurement of their success or lasting impact. This NGO media project was the tool that ended the violence at that time, after more formal interventions failed. The success of the project can be measured in the lives that were saved, and in the lessons that MPC learned from this groundbreaking experience. Moreover, the project exposed members of the mass media in Cape Town to their shortcomings as well as to their possible influence on community conflicts.

The video dialogue model that was first implemented in Crossroads is now utilised as a form of conflict intervention in other areas of crisis in South Africa, such as in Alexandria and Thokoza outside of Johannesburg. The MPC has conducted such a project in Thokoza and it is now consulting with the Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation about attempts to create dialogue and reconciliation over housing disputes. Video dialogues were introduced to overcome the unwillingness of the various leaders to allow workshops to be held in their constituencies. These leaders wanted to control communication channels

with their followers but eventually agreed to allow public release of these videos. Video dialogues are extremely time consuming and NGOs have to spend a significant amount of time, sometimes upwards of two or three years, to win acceptance for their activities. Only when community leaders and the commanders of armed factions have actually agreed that they can cross each other's *de facto* boundaries does it become possible to introduce video cameras. Once both sides agree to document and map the conflict with the aid of a video professional, the actual video dialogue process has begun.

The video dialogue process is still at the stage of trying to create a replicable model. As a conflict prevention tool that uses media techniques it tends to be expensive and time-intensive precisely because it involves significant groundwork with community leaders. It could ultimately be a process that replaces other conflict resolution projects that have failed. The project in Alexandria has a secondary objective of documenting the process of war and peacemaking between the parties, recording the cycles of violence that have become pervasive in South African townships. At their core, these attempts at conflict prevention seek to establish a shift in the attitudes of the parties involved in order to assist them in solving their own conflicts. It is indeed "outcome"-oriented journalism.

One primary issue that must be dealt with regarding video dialogue projects is their scope and planning. According to Philip Visser of the Wilgespruit Peace Fellowship:

> "The video dialogue initiative must be seen as a process, not a project ... A video dialogue process must be deliberately designed ... to benefit the community."

To maximise the value of the project, Visser said that one must secure video dialogues in a way that can complement whatever issues come out of the viewing process. (A facilitation process, a mediation process or a political process may be the correct step depending on the situation). This joint venture between journalistic methods and conflict resolution techniques must begin with community needs. With the starting point linked to community needs, the media professionals can contribute the critical production skills and the conflict resolution professionals can provide a strategic view of how this can contribute to peaceful dialogue. To ensure that this is done in a manner that meets the needs of the community, media-oriented NGOs should devise an evaluation component to their project from the outset. This will not only help monitor progress along the way (which can be used as a confidence building measure for the participants), but will also provide a concrete outcome that can serve as a model for future intervention and assist funding decisions.

Ultimately, said Hannes Siebert, video dialogues should be appreciated for their intrinsic value. Video dialogues help the parties to understand the structure of their conflict and enable them to contemplate how to resolve it. This can only be achieved by breaking the conflict into manageable pieces and by giving all the voices in the community a chance to be heard through the video.

Siebert said that there is still much to learn about the dynamics of the video dialogue process and that judging these projects merely on their sustainability in order to satisfy donors may be imprudent. The technique is valuable because it helps end violence and bolsters ongoing reconciliation efforts that cannot be interrupted for evaluation purposes. Video dialogues not only define the conflict, but also humanise those people involved in it. Siebert said that the media – in whatever form – never control a peace process or its outcome, but that without the media enabling a free flow of information between warring factions, these peacemaking processes often fall apart.

## Simunye News

The idea for this monthly community newspaper, published every two months, came from former fighting factions (supporters of the ANC and the Inkhata Freedom Party), which expressed a need to have a newspaper that would have one community voice. There was no newspaper or radio station that exclusively served the Kathorus region outside of Johannesburg. One of the main tasks of this NGO-funded and produced newspaper was to present information that would guard against rumours and in so doing prevent further conflict and

misunderstanding.

The newspaper was the beginning of more formal communication structures in this community, structures that are owned and controlled by the community itself. At the moment, the role of *Simunye News* should be viewed within the context of the post-agreement phase of conflict. Its task is to report about daily issues that are critical for growth and sustainable long-term peace. The belief of the supporters of *Simunye News* is that without this information, conflict and crisis would return.

***...video dialogues not only define the conflict, but also humanise those people involved in it...***

The paper's critics said that *Simunye News* is simply a community newspaper that reports on local news and that it is not functioning properly as a conflict intervention tool. It has also been said that the paper's coverage in the Greenfields area, where more than 50 people died in disputes within the last two years, has not been adequate. These critics said that because the paper only appears every second month, it is overtaken by events in the interim.

Small local newspapers have the ability to get access and create understanding of community conflicts in a way that is difficult for the mainstream press to achieve. However, a survey of the paper's readers indicated that the paper has yet to realise its potential for preventing or resolving local disputes. *Simunye News*' main value lies in the commitment of former foes to work together on a project that provides much-needed information and as such is a vehicle for community empowerment. As with other NGO media interventions, this project also opens up a number of ethical questions. At what point has the project reached its goals? Should these NGO media programmes become self-sustaining mainstream media projects, and if so, how can that be achieved?

## Conclusion

The mass media in South Africa are still in the process of undergoing major changes regarding ownership and in attempting to represent the diverse communities in the country. Media organisations have moved away from being part of an institutionalised system of injustice in the country. Some journalists have expressed a fear that in post-apartheid South Africa some of their colleagues tend to follow a political agenda first, and a journalistic agenda second. Others are concerned that the quality of journalism suffers because the industry has to retain standards while pursuing affirmative action appointments and equitable practices. News organisations are trying to raise the quality of their product while taking on people who have not been trained as journalists.

The media in South Africa are finding it difficult to reflect the monumental changes that have occurred in the country since 1990 when then President de Klerk initiated the end of apartheid. Both the "alternative" press and the mainstream media have been affected by social change in the country. Many of the alternative publications that were in the vanguard against apartheid, such as *South*, *New Nation* and *Vrye Weekblad*, have ceased to publish. Many of the mainstream newspapers lost a substantial part of their leadership after the elections in 1994. The public was interested in the anti-apartheid developments and the transitional negotiation talks, but, to a degree, lost interest in daily news after the elections. Since then, a number of news organisations have conducted extensive market research to figure out what audiences are interested in after the end of apartheid.

Tensions in South Africa will inevitably start rising again as the country nears the next election, sometime in 1999. The transitional period has been characterised by political intolerance. Critics of the media have argued that news organisations have made money by covering rivalries as hard news, without attempting to contribute towards ending such political divisions in the country. The upcoming election period could easily explode into violent incidents. In the words of one journalist, "the nature of South African society is very volatile, and it has become a national response to resolve conflict and crisis through violent means."

News organisations are walking a tightrope between their ethical obligation to report fully without self-imposed censorship and their duty to avoid inflammatory or hate speech that could incite violence. The election campaign period will pose a democratic test for society generally and for the media. The aforementioned NGO community radio project has prepared a plan designed to

bolster democratic dialogue in the most volatile areas. It has divided the country into five areas where political violence might occur prior to the elections and targeted community radio stations that could produce programming to prevent violence.

There is a view among some journalists that their profession has failed to identify the real social issues and complexities underlying violence and social conflict. This statement is frequently heard about the reporting of the violence in Richmond, in the province of Natal. It was often noted that much of the reporting on the violence in Richmond was "hit-and-run" journalism, illustrating the kind of superficiality that plagues South African journalism. The reporting never created a public understanding of the conflict, but merely conveyed what so-called ANC and Inkhata supporters were doing to each other. The reporting of the conflict in Richmond was often described as less than "objective." The coverage perpetuated the conflict by creating the perception that one party (Inkhata) represented the "villains," and the other, (the ANC,) the "good guys."

While many senior journalists remain wary of a conflict "mediation" role for the media, nearly all journalists agree that their contribution to the resolution of problems lies in explaining the situation thoroughly. There are some journalists who say there is a role for the media in South Africa "in bringing the parties together." They say the public is no longer satisfied with a journalism that only presents the five Ws and H (Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?). As Joe Latakgomo said, the media should assist in creating an "environment" within which conflicts can be resolved and that includes giving solutions a chance to work or

fail before condemning them. As a proponent for some peacemaking roles for the media, Latakgomo said that journalists "should be looking at why peace has been sustainable in certain places." He also described a potential role for news media in identifying hot spots, underlining the need for early intervention and finding experts that could identify options, solutions and alternatives. Latakgomo said a conflict resolution reporting beat would allow the media to stick to its journalistic role while helping to address social tensions:

> "In exactly the same way that we have the political beat, development beat, the crime beat, surely there can be some other beat where people actually have that responsibility ... To say, 'look out for hot spots'. What are the problem areas? What can be done? What kind of interventions are necessary, and by whom?" ❍

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