

## Chapter 6: The Role of the Media and Communication

### Media messages convey important influences

163 Mass media and other forms of communication technology have an enormous influence in helping to shape public opinion and underlying sentiment. Newspapers, TV and radio are all important sources of basic information about other people and other places and this can itself help to engender understanding if presented in a fair, even-handed and non-inflammatory way.

164 The media is also an important accountability mechanism: it raises important issues, corruption for example, that might otherwise never be publicly debated or addressed. The media also has an important role in stimulating governments to take action on social policy: although stories about migrants or refugees might reinforce prejudice in some quarters, they also expose problems that need to be addressed, for example poor living conditions or lack of access to services, the citizenship status of migrants, the response of local communities to their settlement and so on.

165 But the media can also, in some cases, become an instrument for the dissemination of false and inflammatory messages and values that do not promote respect or well-tempered dialogue and discussion. Negative messages can divide communities and can help perpetuate the stereotypes that nurture violence.

166 Media portrayals can sometimes serve to exacerbate the narrative of oppositional forces and irreconcilable, value-based differences. The media often prefers to dwell on conflict, since conflict and drama sell newspapers and attract an audience. This inevitably means that the more extreme points of view get airtime rather than the feelings of the majority of citizens that may have more accommodating and balanced perspectives. For example, during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the state-supported Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) station broadcast hate propaganda against Tutsis, moderate Hutus, Belgians and the United Nations, and was used as a tool to organise massacres. And even when the media are truly independent, there can be a tendency by some (though not all) of the media to oversimplify the complexity of current problems and reduce the news to catch phrases and sound bytes – on the assumption that people want drama and entertainment rather than informed analysis. An emphasis on the constructive role of the media, which we strongly support, has to go with a realistic recognition of the problems that the media have reason to guard against.

### And new media serve to shape outlooks more directly

167 The internet has radically changed the way in which people communicate and connect with each other. As a means of social interaction, the web brings people together –

friends, family, young people, or complete strangers that share interests or objectives – and this can foster a sense of belonging and identity. The web, however, has also been used to target people, mainly young users, to radicalise them into specific belief systems and divisive ways of seeing the world.

168 Some constructive means of linking like-minded peaceful groups across dispersed regions already exists – including those such as ‘Youth for a Sustainable Future’, an email discussion group founded by young people in the Pacific to discuss issues affecting themselves and the region.

169 However, the riots in Cronulla, in southern Sydney, Australia, in December 2005 are an interesting illustration of the role of the media and modern forms of communication like text messaging in a less peaceful direction. For some time, there had been a growing escalation of hostilities between some members of the local Anglo-Australian community and Middle Eastern people at Cronulla Beach. Over a 36-hour period there was a rapid build-up of violence, and a reaction 24 hours later by those who had been subjected to violence, to a great extent using organised text messaging.

170 Cronulla beach became the contested space between people of Middle Eastern background on the one hand and the ‘traditional’ Anglo-Australians for whom Cronulla was the home of their traditional surf beach culture. In the weeks leading up to the conflict, the media reported stories of beachgoers who complained that they had had sand flicked in their faces by young men of Middle Eastern background while they were playing soccer, and there were other reports of Middle Eastern men who made offensive remarks about women who were wearing bikinis and other clothes that the men considered immodest and offensive. The conflict escalated one Saturday afternoon in early December 2005, stoked by a huge proliferation by white youths of text messaging up and down the coastal beaches of Sydney.

171 On a more positive note, the riots caused a great deal of reflection about the nature and impact of some media coverage, and soul searching about how to mitigate a sense of exclusion and hostility by some groups. Surf lifesaving clubs, the bastion of surf and local community culture, have been opened up to members of different groups. There has been a successful programme to encourage young Muslim people to train as lifesavers, and modesty-driven adaptations to traditional women’s swimming costumes have been designed for young Muslim women who want to enjoy the beach and participate in community activities.

172 Sometimes the internet has been used for fomenting group violence. Taking the rough with the smooth, an awareness of this problem is important, while building on the constructive role of the media and public dialogue.

## The media can have innovative roles in breaking down conflict

- 173 Other media initiatives have been successful at increasing the inclusion of previously marginalised groups by providing them with a means of expressing their views. Positive results have also resulted from the creation of channels through which older, familiar binary disputes can be broken down and re-imagined in ways that highlight common interests that transcend warring boundaries.
- 174 In the occupied Palestinian territory, an on-going Palestinian initiative aims to promote gender equity through media capacity-building and outreach. The programme created networks of local media professionals (male and female) in the different communities, trained them to produce, print and broadcast programmes on women's lives and issues, and fostered relationships, collaboration and information-sharing between women leaders and media professionals. Training was provided to women leaders in media presentation skills, and to public information officers in media advocacy campaigns. As a result, several long-term relationships were established between women's organisations and television and radio stations, enabling women to continue sharing information and informing broadcasts. This initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH) is supported by UNIFEM.
- 175 Another interesting example of a direct effort to promote goodwill between nations was the US government's sponsorship of the band *Audioslave* on a tour of Cuba. In what seemed to be a sort of peace offering, few were able to discern exactly what the US government was trying to achieve, or what the Cuban government was receiving in return. The spectacle of *Audioslave* trying to 'make friends' with Cuba with the endorsement of the US government, in a way that US foreign policy had failed to achieve over almost half a century, is a powerful reminder of the influence of music.
- 176 The world of journalism has also grasped opportunities to promote understanding in conflict situations. In Northern Ireland, just before the Good Friday Agreement, the editors of a Catholic nationalist newspaper and a Protestant unionist newspaper developed a joint initiative. They asked their readers to 'Call this number if you say "Yes to Peace"'. The fact that the two main newspapers on opposite sides of the divide ran the same text with the same notice was very powerful. A total of 145,000 calls were made, and with a local population of only 1.5 million people, this amounted to a significant one-in-ten response rate.
- 177 This initial success led to another interesting venture where each editor wrote an editorial in favour of peace for the same day, and sent it to each other in advance, working on the drafts until they had a single editorial to which they could both sign up. As a result, Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland could read the same words in 'their' separate newspapers, and know that the editors they trusted had been able to express the same sentiments, while remaining true to their interests. It was a powerful piece of innovative journalism and became something of a story in itself.

178 A broader task, jointly faced by Commonwealth members and media professionals, is to develop a more critical understanding of international issues. The *UN Alliance of Civilisations* report highlighted this area for special concern, and noted that taking corrective measures would greatly help to inform publics in various countries in a balanced way about international issues. Professional schools of journalism and media are particularly important in achieving this kind of wider orientation of the role of journalists and other media professionals. Media responsibility is the ethical correlative of media freedom.