

# Media as an Instrument for Reconstructing Communities Following Conflict

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It is more common to associate mass media with conflict than with social, political, or economic reconstruction. Ready at hand are examples of Holocaust propaganda, negative media portrayals of minorities during war and genocide in Bosnia, Serbia, and Rwanda, and ethnic propaganda via SMS and blogging in Kenya during its election violence. Media that incite conflict are not only attention-grabbing, they seem to work. For example, a recent analysis of Rwandan hate radio leading up to and during the genocide pins at least 9 percent, or 45 000 deaths, on hate radio broadcasts (Yanagizawa-Drott, 2010).

However, media are also used for building peaceful social relations and for reconstructing communities economically and politically. Psychologists, who have studied how media can promote stereotyping, prejudice, and conflict (e.g., Cantril & Allport, 1935), also study how media help to reconstruct communities (Bandura, 2004; Paluck, 2009). The social-psychological mechanisms supposed to underlie media aimed at reconstruction are in many cases similar to those thought to underlie conflict media. These mechanisms include individual cognitive, emotional, and motivational responses to media, in addition to facets of interpersonal communication and social influence sparked by media. This chapter takes the position that the design of media interventions should be informed by these psychological

theories, and that psychologists can expand on their theories through the study of real-world media interventions.

I begin by reviewing the types of media interventions most commonly launched to rebuild communities following conflict. I focus in particular on media that broadcast “public narratives.” Public narratives are stories portrayed by news media, films, theater, and in radio or television dramas (Brock, Strange, & Green, 2002). After reviewing examples of media interventions that use public narratives to rebuild communities, I review the social-psychological theories that seek to explain media influence. I then describe two studies of post-conflict media interventions that tested some of these theoretical explanations. The chapter concludes with recommendations for theory and research supporting media efforts to rebuild communities following conflict.

## **Media Programs Aimed at Rebuilding Communities Following Conflict**

Media programs aimed at rebuilding communities target multiple outcomes. Some programs attempt to increase social tolerance and cooperation generally, or toward certain stigmatized or previously victimized groups such as ethnic minorities or women who have experienced sexual violence. Programs also attempt to promote politically knowledgeable and active citizens who know their rights and who participate in democratic processes like voting. Finally, media are used to promote economic and physical health in the aftermath of conflict with programs that promote financial literacy and vaccinations.

Mass media interventions take different forms. While some media interventions are “home grown,” built by producers and journalists who belong to the targeted post-conflict community, many others are initiated by international non-governmental organizations that specialize in peacebuilding media interventions. Interventions might use radio, television, print, or the internet. Programming format also varies, and can be broadly classified as informational, entertainment, discussion-based, and participatory. Below, I describe interventions that exemplify each of these program formats, with the caveat that most media interventions include multiple formats (e.g., Interactive Radio for Justice, 2011).

Informational media interventions refer mostly to news programming. Providing accurate, reliable, and relatively unbiased information in a post-conflict community is critical, given that inaccurate rumors can often reignite conflict or alarm a traumatized community. For example, it

is now a standard part of the United Nations peacekeeping operations to open a radio station and to broadcast local news (Orme, 2010). The UN's acclaimed Radio Okapi service in the Democratic Republic of Congo hires local journalists and trains them to report the news under a strict policy of impartiality. Describing the value of Radio Okapi, a UN peacekeeping spokesperson noted: "The population generally doesn't know what to believe. So if we can get out precise information to everybody . . . [that is] is a net benefit to the peace process" (cited in Howard, Rolt, van de Veen, & Verhoeven, 2003, p. 115).

Entertainment media that weaves reconstruction messages into popular formats like radio or television soap operas and songs is another intervention strategy that is often used following a conflict. This form of education-entertainment (Singhal, Cody, Rogers, & Sabido, 2004) was developed using the principles of Bandura's (2004) social cognitive theory and of Freire's (1970) theories of popular education. For example, *Nashe Maalo* is a television soap opera for children produced in Macedonia by Search for Common Ground, a United States-based non-governmental organization (Brusset & Otto, 2004). *Nashe Maalo* intends to teach intercultural understanding and conflict prevention and resolution skills. The television show features an imaginary house where children of different ethnic backgrounds live together. When the children argue or fight, the house takes on a human form and speaks to the children, helping them to resolve their differences.

Discussion-based media programs feature discussions among citizens, politicians, or special interest groups. Discussion-based programs may be aimed specifically at illuminating facts like the terms of a peace agreement, or more generally at modeling open and peaceable interactions. For example, in Uganda, the station Radio Simba hosted a live talk show for gay individuals to discuss the problems they encounter as members of a stigmatized community, as a means of opening dialogue about discrimination against gays in Uganda. Unfortunately, the radio station was fined and ordered to make a public apology by the Ugandan government, a reminder that media interventions may need the blessing of the post-conflict country's regime (BBC, October 27, 2004).

Participatory media programs involve members of a post-conflict community in the production of the media intervention. Community members may participate by interviewing one another, by suggesting topics, or by writing, storytelling, or acting out the messages they wish to communicate regarding reconstruction. One very recent example of a participatory media intervention is the crowd-sourced website Ushahidi (2011). Ushahidi serves as a platform for citizens to report on unfolding events in a crisis, when access to information is sparse. The

platform is open to phone texts, emails, or tweets; it posts the location of the reported incident on a map of the geographical area on its website. It was used, for example, to report on violent events during the Kenyan election riots in 2008.

## **Psychological Predictors of Post-Conflict Media Influence**

In the previous section I reviewed prominent forms of media intervention. The question for this section is whether and how these interventions influence reconstruction in communities following a conflict. This section reviews psychological perspectives that identify possible mechanisms of media influence, generally and with respect to conflict-affected environments.

### *Cognition: Beliefs and Attitudes*

How can media influence individuals' beliefs about or attitudes toward issues or groups of people? Psychological research offers insights into the fundamentals of media persuasion, for example, that repetition can instill familiarity and liking (Zajonc, 1980), that messages should be easy to understand, and that media should repeat facts but not myths, since myths are often misremembered as facts (Schwarz, Sanna, Skurnik, & Yoon, 2007). In some cases, the media are not expected to change opinions about the topic, but instead the audience's judgments of which issues are important, an effect called "agenda setting" (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

Psychological theory predicts that narrative media messages, or messages contained in a story, are more reliably related to belief and attitude change compared to rhetorical or factual messages (Brock et al., 2002). Whereas individuals selectively expose themselves to facts or rhetoric with which they agree and avoid those with which they disagree (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2002, p. 282), narrative may "circumvent defense mechanisms" (Strange, 2002, p. 280) because it is perceived as entertainment rather than assertion, and because involvement in a story can disrupt the process of counterargument against new messages (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Circumventing defensiveness and counterargument is particularly important for media addressing conflict. These principles of learning and persuasion from narrative also hold for messages embedded in *fictional* media narratives (Gerrig, 1993).

*Motivation and Emotion*

Media audiences are often active participants in media programs, drawing on the same basic processes involved in everyday social interactions. Accordingly, Polichak and Gerrig (2002) call media audiences “side participants.” Side participants might, for example, attempt to problem-solve for media personalities, or mentally simulate alternatives to the situation presented in the media. Media that motivates these kinds of responses also intensifies the emotions experienced by audience members (Gerrig & Prentice, 1996).

Psychologists discuss this type of motivated engagement in media as absorption or transportation. Specifically, transportation is when “all of a person’s mental systems and capacities become focused on the events occurring in the narrative” (Brock et al., 2002, p. 352). Greater personal involvement with a message also makes it more persuasive (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and memorable (Schank & Abelson, 1995). Being transported by a media story does not necessarily mean that individuals lose touch with the real world. Rather, “a story’s success in drawing us in might be gauged by the extent to which it resonates with our prior experience” (Strange, 2002, p. 278).

*Social Interaction and Social Norm Perception*

Media can simulate vicarious, or imagined, interaction with media personalities (Oatley, 2002, p. 65), and stimulate real social interaction in which people discuss the media program. Social-psychological theory predicts that each kind of social interaction increases the influence of media messages, in particular by altering audiences’ perceptions of what is socially typical or desirable (in other words, altering perceptions of social norms; Miller, Monin, & Prentice, 2000).

*Vicarious Interaction with Media Characters*

Whether real or fictional, media personalities become “alive” and emotionally evocative to audiences. Both real and fictional media personalities inspire empathy and identification (Zillman, 2006). Audiences may feel they are experiencing a real relationship with a media character, with the major emotional and cognitive hallmarks of an actual relationship. Importantly for conflict situations, vicarious relationships with outgroup media characters may serve to reduce prejudice

in the same way that real-world contact can reduce prejudice, for example, when a beloved media personality befriends an outgroup member (e.g., Cameron, Rutland, Brown, & Douch, 2006).

Bandura's (2004) social cognitive theory predicts that media personalities also serve as educational role models, transmitting "knowledge, values, cognitive skills . . . new styles of behavior . . . [and] emotional experiences" (p. 78). Research guided by this perspective has demonstrated that media audiences vicariously learn from media personalities' behavior. Bandura's theory also emphasizes that media characters can instill confidence or "self-efficacy" in audiences by modeling the successful mastery of a behavior, for example learning how to vote. One challenge in the application of this theory is to find ways to encourage audiences to identify with positive rather than the negative role models in the media (e.g., Singhal & Rogers, 1989).

### *Real-World Interaction*

People gather to consume media together at the movies or around a television or radio, and media programs become discussion topics and cultural reference points. Theory and research on media influence highlight the centrality of real-world interaction in media influence. Two-step flow theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), for example, demonstrates that the impact of news on opinion is mediated by conversations with friends, acquaintances, and opinion leaders. Discussing media figures or messages helps individuals to figure out what is considered typical or desirable by their peers. Social psychologists call these perceptions of typical or desirable behavior social norms (Miller et al., 2000). Media theories propose that mass communication is very successful at conveying what other people are doing or thinking (i.e., a descriptive norm; Mutz, 1998).

### *Behavioral Channels*

If we expect media to change behavior, there must be a relatively obstacle-free avenue for the expression of the behavior (Lewin, 1951). Specifically, the forces that drive behavior (whether they are beliefs, attitudes, or perceived norms) are often blocked by opposing forces, psychological and material. A behavioral *channel* is the path created when the opposing force is removed. Behavioral channels allow the motivating force of a belief, attitude, or perceived norm to be expressed.

For example, a media program might persuade an individual that corruption should be reported to a local authority. However, if she does not know how or where to report corruption, this influence is blocked. In this instance, the media program could provide a behavioral channel by broadcasting an address where corruption can be reported. Media programs that target behavior should not forget to include these kinds of behavioral channels.

## **Evidence from Two Field Experiments**

In this final section, I review evidence from two year-long field experiments on the effects of media interventions aimed at post-conflict community reconstruction. The first experiment was conducted in Rwanda with a reconciliation-themed radio soap opera (Paluck, 2009), and the second in the Democratic Republic of Congo with a radio soap opera and talk show about community conflict and cooperation (Paluck, 2010).

### *Rwandan Reconciliation Radio*

Radio played a key role in the war and genocide that ravaged the small Central African country of Rwanda in 1994. Ten years following the genocide, the Dutch non-governmental organization La Benevolencija launched an education-entertainment radio soap opera *Musekeweya* (“New Dawn”) designed to promote reconciliation in Rwanda. The show’s fictional story of two Rwandan communities paralleled the history of cohabitation and conflict between Tutsis and Hutus, with each community representing one ethnic group (direct mention of ethnicity would have been censored by the government). Tensions arise from a land shortage, government favors are granted to one community and not the other; intercommunity relations crumble, and the more prosperous community is attacked. The result is casualties, trauma, and refugees – a story that parallels, without directly referring to, the lead-up to and aftermath of the 1994 genocide. However, the story also featured characters who banded together across community lines and spoke out against leaders advocating violence.

Within a year-long field experiment, I tested three questions regarding the impact of this program. Do the mass media have the capacity to affect listeners’ (a) personal beliefs (here, regarding the soap opera’s messages about prejudice, violence, and trauma), (b) perceptions of

social norms (depicted by fictional soap opera characters), and (c) behavior (open communication and cooperation)? I used a group-randomized design in which communities were randomly assigned to the treatment (the reconciliation radio program) or control condition (a different entertainment-education radio soap opera about health). Forty adults from each community gathered each month to listen to the program.

With this design, the selection and the subsequent experience of the two groups of health and reconciliation radio listeners were comparable in every way aside from the messages they heard in the radio soap operas (i.e., conflict- versus health-related). With systematically collected observational data, we could see that both groups were intensely engaged with the radio soaps. In every listening session, researchers documented various reactions like crying out in pain for a character's bad fortune, laughing and clapping when it turned for the better, and calling out in encouragement (i.e., "participatory responses"; Polichak & Gerrig, 2002). In addition, listeners discussed the program during and following the broadcast (an average of 63 percent ( $SD = 25$ ) of the time they were together following the program). Thus, we find evidence that in both cases audience engagement was high and that viewing stimulated further content-related interpersonal communication.

At the end of the year, we compared the two groups using individual surveys, focus groups, and role-plays. We found that the reconciliation radio program did not change listeners' beliefs, but did substantially influence their perceptions of social norms. Another way of putting this is that the soap opera changed listeners' perceptions about what other Rwandans believe rather than their personal beliefs. For example, listeners stated that while they did not believe that intermarriage led to peace, they thought it was socially expected that they would allow their child to marry someone from another ethnicity. They also reported that it was normative to speak out if you disagree with something.

These shifted normative perceptions were mirrored by the participants' actual behavior, such as active negotiation, open expression about sensitive topics, and cooperation. One way in which we measured behavior was to record group deliberations about how to share and manage a common resource presented to each group at the party held at the end of data collection in their village. Discreetly recorded transcripts of these discussions measured spontaneous behavior that participants believed to be "off the record." The transcripts revealed that deliberations among the reconciliation radio listeners involved significantly more negotiation and, ultimately, cooperation. Participants would



challenge suggestions to involve the authorities, for example, claiming that the group should be collectively responsible or should elect one of their members to manage the resource. Comments about the group's ability to cooperate also came up more frequently.

This modulated pattern, whereby beliefs did not change but social norms and behavior did, increases confidence that the results were not artifacts of experimental demand. Of more importance, the pattern carries a provocative implication for theoretical models of media influence: namely, that to change behavior it may be more fruitful to target social norms than personal beliefs. This finding mirrors claims made by some scholars of media effects on conflict, specifically that violence often did not reflect the killers' personal prejudices (Straus, 2006) but that along with other factors, their authorities, peers, and the media made killing seem socially appropriate and necessary (Yanagizawa-Drott, 2010). The nuanced and sobering suggestion raised by these analyses is that normative pressure applied in a targeted manner through the media and other sources can promote or restrain violence.

The interactive nature of the radio program, in which listeners became involved with the media characters and in discussions with one another, are likely mechanisms by which social norms and behaviors were altered. The particular mechanism of peer discussion in response to media content is one that other researchers have investigated (e.g., Mutz, 1998), but that warrants further experimental testing.

### *Talk Show Intervention in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo*

The year following the experiment in Rwanda, I launched a field experiment in the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) that used random assignment of a radio talk show to gauge the effect of encouraging citizen discussion about antiviolence media programs. In eastern DRC, the intergroup situation was only nominally post-conflict. Militias and the national army fought one another and targeted civilians during the broadcast of the talk show, which was aired in conjunction with a radio soap opera. Both the talk show and the radio soap opera were produced by the Dutch non-governmental organization with which I worked in Rwanda, La Benevolencija (Vollhardt, Coutin, Staub, Weiss, & Deflander, 2007).

The talk show was designed according to a number of theoretical predictions regarding the benefits and dangers of discussion about an

active conflict. Specifically, because the group polarization literature (e.g., Brauer & Judd, 1996) anticipates that listeners in a high-conflict context will select similarly minded, ingroup discussion partners, we used two theoretically driven techniques to expose them to differing views. The talk show broadcast a range of tolerant listener reactions, following the prediction that repeated exposure to different opinions can reduce opinion polarization. Also, the talk show promoted extended intergroup contact that was portrayed in the accompanying radio soap opera. The soap opera featured fictional ethnic groups that correspond to eastern DRC's ethnic groups; this allowed all of the show's various listeners to identify with some characters as ingroup members. Moreover, over the course of the soap opera, many characters formed cross-ethnic alliances and friendships. We expected listeners to experience the fictional ingroup characters' cross-ethnic friendships as a form of vicarious extended contact. The talk show asked listeners to discuss instances of intergroup cooperation and dialogue among the characters.

Finally, the talk show used "imagine-self" perspective-taking instructions in the talk show's discussion guidance. This technique asks listeners to imagine themselves in the situations of the fictional outgroup characters (Batson, 2009), which should enhance the effects of extended contact. We also hoped that imagining the self in the characters' situations would make outgroup arguments appear more valid, which is one route to depolarization.

I used a year-long posttest-only field experiment to test the impact of the soap opera plus radio talk show as compared to the soap opera alone. Of six non-overlapping broadcast regions spread across the provinces of eastern DRC, I matched the regions most similar in rural or urban status, violence, and road accessibility. I randomly chose one broadcast region in each pair to air the 15-minute talk show directly following the soap opera (talk show region), and the other to air the soap opera only (baseline region). Thus, the manipulation strategy is an encouragement design in which the talk show encourages face-to-face listener discussion using questions, prizes, and an on-air broadcast of listener reactions. I predicted that the discussion inspired by such a talk show would increase perspective-taking, tolerance, and helping behaviors.

To gauge the outcome of the weekly broadcasts, we surveyed a random sample of 842 individuals in all broadcast regions. The surveys assessed whether the talk show actually encouraged interpersonal discussion about community conflict, and the effects of such discussion: tolerance for disliked ethnic groups, perspective-taking, and cross-

group cooperation. We also used an unobtrusive behavioral measure to test whether listeners would act on the soap opera's central message to collaborate across group lines. Specifically, we asked participants if they would like to donate any of their compensation from the survey (a 2 kg bag of salt) to a disliked ethnic group.

Talk show and baseline listeners reported experiencing the same level of human rights violations during the conflict, and both also reported discussing actual situations in eastern DRC following the radio broadcast, although discussion about the conflict was, as predicted, highest among talk show listeners. Talk show listeners, however, described their discussions as more contentious, and contrary to expectations their intolerance of disliked groups was stronger across a variety of indicators. Specifically, talk show listeners demonstrated *more* negative attitudes and *fewer* helping behaviors toward disliked groups. As an example of the latter, talk show listeners were less likely than baseline listeners to donate some of their survey compensation to a disliked ethnic group (although, notably, 63 percent of all study participants donated). When the talk show listeners did give, they were significantly more likely than baseline listeners to state that the gift was strategic; for example, that they were attempting to convince the other group to leave the region.

Why did the increased discussion provoked by media lead to less tolerant attitudes and behaviors? One straightforward explanation is that listeners did not follow the talk show's instructions to consider other positions, groups, and perspectives. Although the data cannot definitively refute this interpretation, the fact that talk show listeners' discussions were more contentious suggests the presence of differing opinions or of the negative affect that can arise when people imagine themselves in others' shoes (Batson, 2009).

If talk show listeners did follow the show's discussion guidance, there are a few different explanations as to why the media program was unable to promote positive discussion in this case. For example, the talk show guidance was light-handed, and listeners were not forced to entertain different views during discussion. Future media interventions of this kind might benefit from stressing alternative views rather than simply encouraging talk. With respect to their discussion partners, it is possible that the extended contact provided through media content was not strong enough to make other views salient, since participants were discussing this content with friends with whom they are likely to share group membership. Future interventions could test the effects of facilitating actual cross-group interactions using the media. Additionally, the talk show did not provide listeners with a behavioral channel for

acting on the ideas set forth by the radio soap and talk show. Talk for talk's sake can make discussants feel impotent, and this sense of "cheap talk" (Bland, 2006) can fuel frustration and anger.

## Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to illustrate what can be learned from psychological theories describing media influence, and from the study of real-world media interventions. There is much more to be learned about how best to operationalize theoretical recommendations, and to reconcile theory with contextual constraints. The following four general recommendations summarize some of the recurrent themes of this chapter, with the expectation that the list will grow longer as more scholars and practitioners collaborate to study media interventions.

1. *Media programs should engage attention.* This principle encompasses lessons that public narratives garner more attention, are remembered better, and are more resistant to counter-argumentation compared to rhetorical or factual media messages (i.e., assertions and logical arguments). It also encompasses the message to use engaging media personalities who are similar or socially desirable to the audience, to promote identification, empathy, and vicarious or extended contact.
2. *Media messages should be subtle (although not too difficult to recognize, or numerous).* This principle balances the basic ideas of cognitive and attitudinal persuasion that fluent (easily recognized and straightforward) messages are most influential, with considerations from conflict situations that efforts to persuade or to present views from the "other side" of a conflict can provoke backlash or disengagement. Messages that are not overt but are rather modeled by media personalities or threaded throughout interesting factual or fictional narrative accounts should be relatively more influential than overt messages.
3. *Media programs should tell audiences what other (influential) people think, rather than telling people what to think.* This principle picks up the previous recommendation that overt attempts at persuasion are often ignored or actively resisted, and carries it a step further by urging programs to think about how media personalities, through discussion programs or storylines, or real-world opinion leaders, can model the attitudes and behaviors recommended by the program. This may involve organizing real-world discussions of

the program, having real people endorse the program, or using the media personalities themselves to model the behaviors and attitudes.

4. *Media programs should create “behavioral channels.”* That is, media programs should link audiences to ways of expressing the beliefs, attitudes, or perceived norms that are promoted by the program. A straightforward way is to broadcast resources, locations, and other information to facilitate behavior, or to use media to link people socially who can help one another, for example by asking some audience members to volunteer to help other audience members.

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