

The need for strategic partnerships in post-conflict mediation

By Francis Herman, Fiji Broadcasting Corporation

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The increasing number of conflicts which are of global significance leads to a growing need for broadcasters who possess cultural sensitivity and experience in crisis management. We should not only be able to look more closely at cultural aspects, but must also be able to deal adequately with the issues being covered.

There is a tendency to see conflicts as a fight between good and evil. Since conflicts are never that simple, it is the very task of broadcasters to observe matters from all angles, duty-bound to serving the truth and reporting accordingly. The media, as an integral part of society, must play a role in resolving conflicts.

It is of central importance to raise and answer questions on how broadcasters can maintain credibility in a climate of cultural misunderstanding. While we need to work in conditions free from censorship and propaganda, our loyalties must be directed towards responsible reporting, unbiased news coverage and perspective.

There is a role for broadcasters in the area of post-conflict-mediation, with issues such as the way we can help reshape a nation after an ethnic conflict, and how we can help foster regional co-operation.

Broadcasters too have obligations which focus on

Workshop on conflict resolution



loyalties and credibility. The loyalties of broadcasters lie in the tolerance we are expected to have and the support we are expected to provide for violent activities. In general, there is no absolute objectivity and neutrality in publishing or broadcasting about public affairs. Everybody is subject to the impact of ideas, beliefs and assumptions, which influence people's view of the world.

Still, this cannot be seen as an excuse for neglecting or distorting facts. Despite the fact that broadcasters are entitled to be partisan, such loyalty should be neither unconditional nor unlimited. The primary obligation is to provide listeners and viewers with correct information and helping them to understand the implications of the news.

Credibility can be maintained by taking a step back from recommending editorial practices, which will jeopardise the credibility of a broadcast organisation. Still, there are many facets between appearing to have switched sides on the one hand and unconditional 'political correctness' on the other side. In a climate of cultural misunderstanding, small measures can have an impact e.g. trying to give a more balanced account of what happens, or trying to generate some understanding for what motivates the other side.

Broadcasters play a major role in creating the perceptions of the people. Depending on how information is passed on, it creates certain images of the event for people. We help to create both 'scholarly' and 'folk' images of situations. But broadcasters are not just simply an agent, we are also 'subjects' of the scholarly and folk myths present in our respective societies. Consequently, like everybody, we can be easily influenced by the imagery created by our respective states or organisations.

Difficulties may occur for broadcasters, which arise from the paradox of playing both an active and a passive role reporting conflicts. When covering conflicts we are emotionally involved in, it may be difficult for us to distance ourselves from a biased approach to a given situation. When we report on an issue, to which we have no emotional ties, we must make an effort to obtain the correct information and to bring this information to the public. But the very act of being a broadcaster means crossing borders imposed upon us by the passage of time and the exposure to information in the past.

Broadcasters can definitely play an effective role in conflict prevention and peace building. In earlier times, military battles played a decisive role in wars and conflicts. Today, information is just as important on deciding what happens on the home front. An example of this is the media coverage during the Vietnam war, and the media coverage in Bosnia and

Kosovo. Another case is also the role of the Indian and Pakistani media in the recent communal riots in India. Broadcasters must and can play an effective role in resolving the conflicts. But to fulfil this, we have to understand and rationalise the very nature and the root causes of conflicts.

Special problems

There are several special problems that are often ignored by those outside the media. These are:

The impact of the fledgling economy on media performance

Commercialization of news

The welfare of journalists

Concern with the possible impact of foreign media.

The state of the economy at any point in time has an impact on media performance. For example, equipment has to be maintained, and the cost of new technology is not any cheaper for developing countries.

In a related matter, there exists the practice by many broadcasters to ask contributors to pay for items that should ordinarily be aired free as news. Radio and television stations are forced to do this because of governments' commercialization and privatization drive. Obviously the electronic media rigorously pursues the more conventional ways of raising funds, for example, through product advertising. Advertising however is limited and unfortunately cannot sustain the operations.

Related to low revenue earning media outlets is the welfare of journalists. Media practitioners do not enjoy good salaries and remunerations. This increases the temptation to give in to corruption. Journalism also has its risks, dangers, and related discomforts.

Also linked to revenue streams is the growing reliance on foreign news services and programmes simply because it is perceived to be cheaper than local productions. This 'media imperialism' is now compounded by 'satellite tyranny' – the direct broadcast, through satellite, of television programmes to homes. The situation is particularly harmful with regards to Third World countries, which lack facilities to disseminate information about their own priorities to the rest of the world. While not endorsing the curtailing of information flow, there is need for balance as a fulcrum for fair reporting.

The birth of a growing number of privately owned radio stations in the Pacific is having an adverse effect on public service broadcasters. One may call