CHAPTER 2

MEDIA, CONFLICT AND COMMUNAL HARMONY

2.1 DEPICTION AND CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNAL HARMONY IN THE MEDIA

Peace-building, relief, construction and reconciliation are some of the key components in the conflict management. Media is considered to be the one of the prime internal actors in controlling, portraying and constructing communal harmony at times of conflict.

There are media persons having strong faith in reputation of independence of media. For example, Martin Bell, former BBC correspondent and independent MP once wrote:

The way that broadcast journalism, and some print journalism, holds the government to account and never allows it to become too triumphalist, as it was yesterday, is important to our democracy - especially when the Labor government, while arguing for an unpopular war, had many cheerleaders in Britain’s foreign-owned press. It is important that the BBC, and indeed any news organization, does not allow itself to be bullied into submission. (Bell 2004)

It is a fact that the media can play a destructive role by kindling conflicts. It has done so many times. A wishful thinking is not going to change it. Our hope lies in realizing that if it can play a destructive role, it ought to be capable of playing a constructive role as well. Let us examine ways and means to make this happen.
This approach is also not without its detractors. They say that the reporting should be just matter-of-fact. Their viewpoint may be summarized as: “Say what happened truthfully and stop. You have no business to be judgmental. If taking side is wrong, taking the side of peace is also wrong.”

Any conflict is the expression of a problem of the people; imposition of peace cannot be a solution. The real peace is the proof of absence of problems among the people. We should, therefore, aim at the solution of the problems, which would entail peace. Just a parrot-like repetition of what others say would neither produce an interesting reading; nor would it generate meaningful social interaction. The idea is that the people should become aware of the right adjustments needed to solve the problem lurking behind the conflict. What the writers and editors add to make it all a connected account confers on them the role of actors; they cannot be mere spectators and recorders.

The idea that the journalists stay outside of the events they are covering, whatever may be their perspective on ‘peace journalism’ is misleading. The media, in this sense, are themselves actors or agents in the conflict and their work will have an effect on the way the conflict develops.

Policy makers therefore need to focus on the media’s role in constituting the public sphere of society – how that can be fostered and nurtured in such a way as to allow nonviolent resolution of conflict. By public sphere it is meant that range of communication outlets and media which enable a society to view its own representations. To function properly, a public sphere must have free flowing access to information and enable the voice of ordinary citizens to be heard.

For Habermas, the public sphere is “a discursive arena that is home to citizen debate, deliberation, agreement and action.” (Villa cited in Eastern
Hence as suggested by Habermas, media can either pacify or intensify the conflicts that arise in the country.

As it relates to governments and conflict:

Governments use media to help build or reinforce value consensus among key support groups, as well as to promote cooperation from integral state institutions in service of policy goals. (Zaffiro 2002)

Interestingly, the policies associated with media outlets often focus on the interrelations created by opposition, power across political bodies, and conflict. Hence media can act as a prime promoter of harmony at instances of communal conflicts.

The Indian media uphold the norms for the journalistic conduct prescribed by the Press Council of India. The Section 20 (ii) of the Norms for the Journalistic Conduct, 2010 stipulates:

> Journalists and columnists owe a very special responsibility to their country in promoting communal peace and amity. Their writings are not a mere reflection of their own feelings but help to a large extent in molding the feelings and sentiments of the society at large. It is, therefore, of utmost importance that they use their pen with circumspection and restraint. (Press Council of India 2010)

The Council also directs the journalists to be vigilant and restrained when dealing with issues of communal clashes. In the aftermath of the Gujarat communal carnage the Council revised the Norms for Journalistic Conduct by saying in Section 20 (iii):

> The role of media in such situations is to be peacemakers and not abettors, to be trouble shooters and not trouble makers. (Press Council of India 2010)
The Council adds in Section 20 (iii):

There is a greater moral responsibility on the media to do their best to build national solidarity and to strengthen communal harmony at all levels remembering the noble role they had played during pre-independence days. (Press Council of India 2010)

Considering the sensitivity and freedom of faith, the Council also prohibits the portrayal of religious figures and public characters in bad light. In Section 22 (iv) of the Norms for Journalistic Conduct, it says;

Newspapers should not publish any fictional literature distorting and portraying religious characters in an adverse light and offending the religious susceptibilities of large sections of society who hold those characters in high esteem, invested with attributes of the virtuous and lofty. (Press Council of India 2010)

The Council also rejects the argument of ’news value’ for the reproduction of any objectionable material. It says in Section 3 (viii):

The publication of defamatory news by one paper does not give license to others to publish news/information of similar nature. (Press Council of India 2010)

Of all these directions, what is especially noteworthy is the fact that though the Press Council of India suggests that media organizations should impose self-censorship when it comes to national integration and communal harmony, there is actually in general circumstances, no pre-control on media content by the Government or any other agency.

Regarding the coverage of conflict in Kenya, Ouma Lydia Radoli quotes Wolfsfeld:

The post-election crisis raised concerns over the ability of the state to protect citizen’s rights, and whether the media in
Kenya reflects the human rights agenda. The role of the media in Kenya’s political processes places it at a central position to guard the society against state infringements. (Wolfsfeld, cited in Radoli 2011)

He deplores that the media which ought to strive for dialogue, tolerance and interaction among the communities sometimes create negative influences.

History records occasions where the media has been used as a weapon destructive to fundamental human rights. Ouma Lydia Radoli lists a few such cases: (Radoli 2011)

- Adolf Hitler used the media to create hatred against Jews. (Thompson 1994)
- Rwanda’s Radio Television Libre des Milles Collines urged listeners ‘to kill Tutsis’ or what it called ‘the cockroaches.’ (Forges 1999)
- In the Balkans, broadcasters polarized local communities to the point where, violence became an acceptable tool for addressing grievances. (Thompson, 1994)
- In the case of Rwanda, the media was also used to guide the perpetrators of the genocide towards their victims.

The media may also incite violence through manipulative, negative presentation of facts that create the impression that the situation is worsening.

This type of reporting, more often than not, provides a justification for people or groups to take aggressive action, including violence. (Frohardt & Temin 2003)
Both local and international media in Rwanda failed to report on the impact of the conflict early in 1990. Local media ignored to report on massacres of political dissenters and those suspected to be Tutsi sympathizers. (Des Forges 1999)

The role of the media in the Rwandan genocide was a great blemish to the legal and moral principles of Journalism and human rights.

By instigating a genocide campaign, the media became an abhorrent institution. Its international counterpart failed to monitor escalating killings and rather pictured the crisis as a civil strife between the Tutsi and Hutus. (Chaon 2007)

Similar characteristics are visible in the coverage of the Darfur conflict in Southern Sudan. Since 2003, local (Arab) media has passively dealt with atrocities committed in Sudan. The conflict in Darfur was framed as an ‘Arab War’, a line quickly adopted by the local media. This kind of reporting is poisonous and only worsens the conflicts. (Radoli 2011)

What has been said so far would convince anybody about the precariousness of the media’s role, particularly where the societies are in a state of flux. The media can serve the causes of war or peace equally well. It depends on how it is used by the powers that be. It is also a fact that media can function well in the societies which value freedom of expression and the relevant rights. Only a democratic form of government is ideally suited to safeguard them.

2.2 ROLE OF MEDIA IN HARMONIZING THE SOCIETY

In the modern context the mass media’s role in any conflict has become significant. In some instances the media plays an active role in the conflict and we can say it participates in the conflict. In other cases it plays the role of a dignified umpire and contributes to stop violence and resolve the conflict.
The media do not act in isolation. It has to relate itself with the actors in the conflict. Its independence is decided by the nature and circumstances of this relationship. Normal belief is that independent media is a contributing factor towards peace and stability. For this belief to become a reality continual attention and experimentation are needed.

We cannot think of modern world without conflict. We have witnessed a continuous stream of conflicts in the world after the Cold War. They have caused loss of countless lives; and destruction of enormous wealth.

One striking factor is the growth in the number of conflicts which have fundamentally corroded the ability of the state to care for its citizens. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) has analyzed 59 major armed conflicts which occurred since the end of the Cold War. In this case ‘major’ means that they involved in excess of 1,000 battle-related deaths in one year. Of these, the majority were intra-state. As a result of these prolonged conflicts many states have literally collapsed or have become very fragile. (SIPRI 2003)

Conflicts exacerbate poverty, bring massive human suffering, destroy the environment, displace substantial numbers of people and create enormous problems for the humanity.

Not all the conflicts did gain the attention of the peoples of the world. International attention depended on the media action; and the media action depended on several local phenomena. But wherever the media did draw the international attention, it did not go in vain. Examples are the internal conflict in Rwanda that caused genocide; the wars in the Balkans and the breakup of Yugoslavia are also of similar category. The obligations of the international communities and the United Nations Organization came to the
fore and received serious attention all over the world because of the media action.

In both of these conflicts the media played a pernicious role – directly inciting genocide in the case of some Rwandan media (and organizing it in the case of Radio Mille Collines) while acting as a vehicle for virulent nationalism in former Yugoslavia. This is not just a modern phenomenon – both the Nazis and the Soviet Union used the media to create a hegemonic climate in which they could more easily exercise power. However, policy makers have been slow to understand the importance of media in shaping modern conflict or how, with proper support, it can help create the conditions for peace.

Violent conflicts occur in the world with alarming frequency. Developed democracies become concerned about the speed with which failure of states happens in many parts of the world and how badly the democratic forms of government are weakened by the corrupt social and political structures in many countries. For the enlightened few it is clear that most of the conflicts are deliberately created by the selfish pressure groups in many countries but they are helpless to prevent them. There is no common understanding at the global level about the causes of these ‘modern’ conflicts; let alone development of a mechanism powerful enough to nip them in the bud.

If only a regular flow of correct information and analyses could develop into sound knowledge in any field and if a sound knowledge is the prerequisite to mold intelligent systems and mechanisms to prevent untoward happenings like conflicts, then it is easy to understand that conflict prevention is unthinkable in the absence of high-minded media action. Local media play to their local galleries and international media play to their own gallery of the peoples of North America and Europe; and hence the common understanding
of the problem of modern conflicts and the preventive mechanism therefore evades the humankind.

One consequence is that while some conflicts have acquired global attention through exposure in the media, others have failed to receive significant attention through neglect. Many of the African conflicts of recent times in which millions have died – whether it is the wars in the Congo since 1997, the renewed civil war in Angola, the inter-related conflicts in Sierra Leone, Cote D’Ivoire, Guinea and Liberia – have passed almost without notice under the international radar. The wars in the North and South Caucasus are of a similar category; hundreds of thousands died, dwarfing for example the deaths in the second intifada involving the Palestinians and Israelis, but with little expressed international concern either from governments or civil societies. (International Media Support 2006)

2.3 ROLE OF MEDIA IN THE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The term Media stands for a collective pool of knowledge and work of innumerable people, primarily the field reporters and editors that goes by the name ‘media.’

A journalist mixes the knowledge he gains in various places with his own observations and experience and conveys it as a message to the people. His fairness and independence are often hampered by the stakeholders concerned. It may be high-flown ideologies or a corrupt leader’s scheming command, - the net result is a twisted version of the facts.

Conflicts are articulated by the media. And, media is most of the times orchestrated by the pressure groups with vested interests in the conflicts. For them the media is as important as the field of conflict.
Thus the media is somewhat an elevated arena of the conflict, in which parties to the conflict participate without the distinction of state or non-state links.

It would be ivory tower thinking to hold that all conflicts are always out of place or to hope for a society sans conflicts. The conflicts are to the society, what the fever is to the body. Something is bound to go wrong and when it does it is good to have a symptom in time. Ignoring or mishandling the symptom should be carefully avoided. Media provide a beneficial outlet for the suppressed emotional content in the society and throw light on the way out that could be acceptable to all concerned. So the positive step would be to create appropriate media structure and empower it intelligently.

The Media and the policy-makers should, therefore, get busy with planning and creating a media structure and strengthen it by infusing commitment to social harmony; for this, the media should first of all avoid becoming a slave for those criminal pressure groups, who are eager to fish in the troubled waters. The task of the policy-makers has become intricate because the media has grown into a multifaceted gigantic global amalgamation, though knitted somewhat loosely. Once it simply referred to newspapers but now there are umpteen features like cinema, radio, television, internet, telephones, mobile phones and whatnot! Now we need an umbrella policy wide enough to cover all the wings of the modern media but not punctured by loopholes.

The gauntlet has of course been picked up by several organizations and attempts to crystallize the ideal environment for the media and constructive role that would enable it to facilitate conflict prevention and conflict resolution are in full swing. Growing realization of the media’s
potentials in rooting out violence has strengthened these attempts to formulate a holistic media policy.

The Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society, Vancouver, B.C. of Canada (IMPACS), has taken praiseworthy initiatives in this subject. Ross Howard (for IMPACS) in his work *An Operational Framework for Media and Peace-building* (January, 2002) has described five types of intervention by media. (Howard 2002) They are:

1. Rudimentary Journalism Training
2. Responsible Journalism Development
3. Transitional Journalism Development
4. Pro-Active Media-Based Intervention
5. Intended Outcome Programming

Broadly this attempt involves means only a better professionalization of the journalism.

The term Peace Journalism is also frowned upon by some traditional journalists for whom nothing more than efficiency and truthfulness are needed for the journalists, whose bounden duty is to inform and spread knowledge of happenings. Promotion of peace by media reminds to them the USSR’s ideologically committed journalism and its efforts to establish ‘Peace as defined by it.’

There is a school of thought that the journalism should care for nothing more than efficiency and truthfulness to serve the cause of peace and conflict resolution. But there are several advocates for the media’s active participation in conflict resolution. Bill Blakemore of ABC-TV News is known to have frequently noted the structural similarities between the roles
and tasks of journalists and conflict resolvers. Vladimir Bratic and Lisa Schirch have emphasized the positive role the media could play in conflict prevention and peace-building:

Conflict prevention and peacebuilding practitioners can best utilize the media if they are clear about their goal (their product) and also know who, specifically, they want to communicate to through the media. Social marketing is never aimed at the ‘general public.’ A sophisticated and strategic use of the media is more focused on particular target and segment audiences…. The media can help achieve goals in conflict prevention and peace building when paired with approaches or strategies. (Bratic & Schirch 2007 p.13)

There are striking similarities between conflict resolvers and journalists. Both of them begin with analyzing the conflict, identify the parties to it and their motives and try to understand the root cause of the conflict. Both of them are obliged to be impartial and balanced; they try to judge as accurately as possible the prevailing trend of the conflict, i.e. whether it is likely to escalate or de-escalate. They need to formulate ideas on how to facilitate a meaningful dialogue among the parties concerned and shape an agreement for lasting peace.

Normally, even a conflict should contain in its theoretical base some ground common to all the parties; a level up to which they are in agreement. Beyond that facts and fiction crisscross making the appearance hazy leading to suspicion and anger of the stakeholders involved in the conflict. In dealing with this nebulous area local media is relatively in a better position. It is by twisting this segment of knowledge or ignorance the mischievous elements play their tricks and sow the seeds of dissension. It is in this unholy exercise they would like to involve and exploit the media. By widening the area of clarity, by clearing the cobwebs in the hazy areas of history, and by proving the irrelevance of the ‘issues’ raised by those having vested interests in the conflict, the media can contribute to conflict resolution.
Despite the volume of evidence that suggests that the media play an important role in the coverage of conflict, media planning by the international community is still haphazard.

The Practical Guide: Tips for Conflict Reporting suggests some steps for handling conflict reporting. It points out:

It is important for media to understand what conscious and unconscious role it plays in its routine work reducing or at times aggravating conflicts. (Intermedia 2009)

In the process, the media perform the following roles that can eventually lead to peace-making:

- Bridging communication gap
- Educating the audience
- Confidence-building
- Correcting misperceptions
- Making them human
- Identifying underlying interests
- Emotional outlet
- Framing the conflict
- Face-saving and consensus-building
- Solution-building
- Encouraging a balance of power

2.4 MEDIA GUIDELINES FOR COVERING CONFLICTS

While a considerable amount of analysis has focused on the media’s potential to support democratic efforts and build sustainable peace, no similar effort has been given to analyze the role media can play in conflict
prevention; nor has the media’s capacity to incite conflict been sufficiently analyzed.

Only a few have shown concerns on what a possible role media can play and how it can be utilized at times of conflicts especially those involving riots.

Cate Malek’s user guide on Beyond Interactivity Website on conflict reporting suggests the following checklist of the ‘Things to Consider when Covering Conflicts.’ (Malek n.d.)

- **Do you really understand what is going on?** Deep-rooted and intractable conflicts tend to be very complex. Good journalism requires that you do a conflict assessment to understand who all the parties are and what role they are playing in the situation.

- **What are the underlying causes of the conflict?** Disputants often frame the conflict in relatively simple (and often self-serving) terms. Very often the sides see the underlying causes as very different. Sometimes they don’t even know what they are, as the conflict has gone on so long and become so embedded in the culture, that raw emotions of fear, humiliation, and anger overlie earlier substantive concerns. Good journalists will explore both the superficial and the underlying causes of the conflict from all points of view.

- **What are the full effects of the conflict on different constituency groups?** Conflict participants, particularly those most directly involved in the struggle, often don’t really understand the full cost of the conflict and the potential
benefits of settlement or resolution. Doing an assessment of the human, as well as monetary costs, of the conflict on the primary parties, the by-standers (people caught in the middle) and on allies and neighbors of the disputants often reveals an overlooked picture of the conflict situation.

- **Wherefrom are you getting your ‘facts’?** Factual disputes are rampant in complex, intractable conflicts. Sometimes this occurs because facts are hard to obtain or understand; sometimes it occurs because each side claims different "facts" are true and the opposing sides’ facts are false. Journalists should take care to do balanced and careful fact-finding before believing any facts about what is or has been going on.

- **Are your stories contributing to conflict escalation?** Media coverage often contributes to escalating a conflict. Sometimes this is desirable; constructive escalation is sometimes the best way for lower-power groups to gain power to effectively advocate for themselves. But often, escalation gets out of control, and leads to increasing polarization, violence, and costs to all sides.

*Practical Guide: Tips for Conflict reporting* suggests the following guidelines on conflict coverage:

In countries facing a violent conflict and in post-war countries, journalists are often victims of human rights violations. Journalists therefore need to know about their rights and means of protection, and the safety of journalists must also be addressed by international organizations.

On the other hand journalists often support hatred propaganda and war journalism, which ignore balanced, independent
reporting. They are part of corruption in media and do not stick to an ethical code of conduct for journalists.

A conflict reporter must:

1. Be familiar with the rights of journalists.
2. Know whom to address when journalist’s human rights are violated.
3. Know about the means, how to ensure the safety of journalists.
4. Be familiar with important “Codes of Conduct for Journalists. (Intermedia 2009)

2.5 ETHICAL REPORTING ON CONFLICTS

War journalism often reduces the number of parties to two, so anyone who is not a friend is considered automatically an enemy. It requires clear winners and losers. It also ignores or conceals peace initiatives from the other side or third parties, particularly any option for a nonviolent outcome which does not give total victory to its own side. Ethical reporting of conflicts does not only question the possibility of ‘objectivity’ of journalism, but underlines the positive role journalists can play in order to prevent violent conflicts and to promote peaceful settlements and reconciliation. Ethical journalism also contributes to the empowerment of civil society.

A conflict reporter must:

1. Know about the different self-images of journalists and the different approaches in covering conflicts (war journalism versus ethical reporting of conflicts).
2. Be aware of the importance of building an alternative framework for the process of social change.
3. Be aware of what journalists and mediators can have in common.

4. Know what a journalist would try to do in order to prevent violent conflicts and to promote peaceful settlements.

5. Understand the importance of media for cultural exchange.

6. Be familiar with guidelines and means for inter-ethnic reporting in conflict situations.

Ross Howard in his *Hand Book for Conflict Sensitive Journalism* says: “Professional journalists do not set out to reduce conflict. They seek to present accurate and impartial news. But it is often through good reporting that conflict is reduced.” He suggests the following checklist for conflict reporting: (Howard 2003)

- Avoid reporting a conflict as consisting of two opposing sides. Find other affected interests and include their stories, opinions and goals. Interview merchants affected by the general strike, workers who are unable to work, refugees from the countryside who want an end to violence etc.

- Avoid defining the conflict by always quoting the leaders who make familiar demands. Go beyond the elites. Report the words of ordinary people who may voice the opinions shared by many.

- Avoid only reporting what divides the sides in conflict. Ask the opposing sides questions which may reveal common ground. Report on interests or goals, which they may share.

- Avoid always focusing on the suffering and fear of only one side. Treat all sides’ suffering as equally newsworthy.
• Avoid words like devastated, tragedy and terrorized to describe what has been done to one group. These kinds of words put the reporter on one side. Do not use them yourself. Only quote someone else who uses these words.

• Avoid emotional and imprecise words. Assassination is the murder of a head of state and no one else. Massacre is the deliberate killing of innocent, unarmed civilians. Soldiers and policemen are not massacred. Genocide means killing an entire people. Do not minimize suffering, but use strong language carefully.

• Avoid words like terrorist, extremist or fanatic. These words take sides: make the other side seems impossible to negotiate with. Call peoples what they call themselves.

• Avoid making an opinion into a fact. If someone claims something, state their name, so it is their opinion and not your fact.

• Avoid waiting for leaders on one side to offer solutions. Explore peace ideas wherever they come from. Put these ideas to the leaders and report their response. As journalists, our most powerful tools are the words we use. And the pictures and sounds. We can use our tools to build understanding instead of fears and myths.

Though it is true that solving the conflicts is not the direct responsibility of the journalists, they would be rendering great service to their countrymen by keeping the points given in this checklist by Ross Howard.