Conclusion: Media on Fire

Francisco Ferrándiz

The collection of papers presented in the HumanitarianNet/TNI 2001 Amsterdam Conference underscores the need for the continued dissemination of in-depth, well-informed, critical and independent information in conflict situations. If this war against ignorance (Marks) manages to break mainstream media monopolies in the war and humanitarian industries, it will contribute to a more nuanced knowledge of the structural conditions and evolution of conflicts, the changing faces and political strategies of the local and international actors, the cultural context and local meanings, or the mechanisms by which international solidarity and empathy are triggered or deactivated. This alternative information would, in turn, be crucial in the establishment and maintenance of relevant international coalitions, the articulation of more adequate and long term responses to disaster situations, and the empowerment of international and local peace building actors. Few of the journalists, activists and academics present in the meeting would not subscribe to such a formulation. Yet most would also agree that this aim remains a Herculean task, plagued with short-circuits, blackouts and raging fires of all sort. Maintaining a critical and revisionist approach throughout this process seems crucial if difficulties are to be overcome.

Due to the diversity and complexity of the industry, analysing the media is necessarily an incomplete and somehow unfair task. Generally speaking, some widespread limitations of the mainstream media in packaging conflicts for mass consumption are related to the shortcomings of news formats and the economic and political agendas that determine the timing, content and structure of the news. Referring more specifically to television, the accelerated rhythm of the most common news formats means that tragic conflicts are interspersed with trivial news, presented simplistically without context and have limited exposure in prime time;
their explosion on the screen, as Amanda Sans reminded us, is necessarily followed by silence and oblivion as other news spectacles appear. Also, contemporary televisual languages act as a deforming screen that further denaturalises events. In the news editing rooms, sound bites and images are scanned into high-tech formats where, as Caldwell writes, “scenes of reality, chaos and suffering are immediately rendered as pictures, reflective surfaces, and flying text-image projectiles. Social trauma and rebellion are turned into artifice” (1995, p. 159).

At the peak of media hype over conflict, military-media packages such as *Desert Storm* or, more recently, *Enduring Freedom* are here to stay, although their ability to metamorphose should not be underestimated. Media coverage uses technological and discursive sophistication to drastically twist an international conflict into a one-sided show. Enemies are thoroughly demonised as savages, societies and cultures are simplified to the point of caricature, landscapes become geographies of military targets, the historical and structural conditions of conflicts are obscured by the verbiage of so-called experts, weapons are transformed into artefacts of civilisation and disguised in a video game aesthetic, suffering and death are swept under a thick carpet of sanitising and high-tech metaphors. Given the blatant information control, manipulation and self-censorship displayed in these media spectacles, it is difficult to doubt the straightforward complicity of mainstream media coverage with powerful political and military agendas in conflict situations.

When economics, politics and audience ratings become the priority stock of media interests, when we find famous, well trained, sophisticated broadcasters competing with Pentagon briefers for the role of top spin doctor (CALDWELL, 1995, p. 111), when conflicts are systematically reduced to attractive fireworks by means of television, we have reached a point where sustained critique of the mainstream news industry becomes a necessity. Although the power and impact of the media should not be overestimated or simplified, the question raised by Firmo-Fontán and Murray is an important one: how much political, social, and economic damage is done by ill-informed, stereotyping, politically motivated and overhyped reporting of conflict situations? Research into this issue and exposure of distortion must continue.

The ways in which the mainstream media package conflicts for mass consumption were critiqued in the Conference through the analysis of diverse conflict cases. Virginia Montañés, writing about the links between drugs and conflict in Colombia, regrets how prejudices can be reinforced in the hegemonic media, often producing unfounded and indiscriminate criminal images of vulnerable populations in the third world - in her case, poor peasants cultivating coca for survival. These
misrepresentations eventually become accepted wisdom though their exposure in the media, and are liberally used to justify controversial programmes such as the Plan Colombia. Obviously, local populations have few chances of countering in kind and, unless alternative means for disseminating their interpretation of events are found, they will remain on the losing end of both international policies and representations. Similarly, in their paper on the Lebanese Hezbollah and its most widespread media representations in the West, Firmo-Fontán and Murray expose the ethnocentric nature of the stereotypes often found in snapshot reporting. These stereotypes ignore the complexity of the situation on the ground and project Manichean conflict schemes, breeding or justifying retaliatory military action. On his part Bizimana, both a journalist and an academic, goes one step further when he doubts the very possibility of average foreign media getting it right in situations as complex, volatile and traumatic as, for example, the Rwandan genocide. The common coupling of the commercial and ideological interests of the networks with insufficient knowledge of local history, meanings and social conditions and the use of second hand information by some journalists on the ground leads to oversimplified, fragmented and confusing reporting.

Discontent with mainstream media coverage and management of conflict was, thus, widespread. Nobody doubts that the control of media infrastructure, content and flows is and will remain a most powerful weapon in conflict situations (Oberg and Sollenberg). The question is more how partisan uses and misuses of the media can be minimised, and this should start with the gathering of information on the ground. For journalists, an important discussion regarding fair reporting is related to the controversial tension between Information and truth, and how foot journalists should perform in the field. While Dutch war reporter Arnold Karskens bluntly defended in the debates the existence of a truth out there to be recorded in a free-lance, detached and professional manner, Steele's contribution factored in the important role of emotions in the production of media content in conflict situations. For him, some emotion —specifically, a low-intensity, smouldering anger— is necessary in the practice of war journalism to prevent cynicism - in his words, journalists' biggest occupational hazard. But it should be a different kind of emotion from the one arising from media hysteria and sensationalism, the adrenalin of the moment, in Marks' words. Steele talks, rather, about a feeling rooted in injustice, cruelty and trauma.

Breaking through hegemonic representations of conflicts in the media demands rethinking the received wisdom on the production and
dissemination of information, and creating and encouraging fresh strategies of representation and informative agendas. Steele proposed that, out of anger, journalists’ main role in conflicts should be to bear witness to the suffering of the victims, beyond the commercial and political constraints that necessarily condition their work. One might add that anger and commitment to the victims is also an important motivation behind many activist and academic careers. Yet the relationship between victims, media—or academic—representations and peace building is far from straightforward. We enter slippery terrain. Steele himself affirms how easily former “victims” might become “perpetrators”, both on the ground and in media discourses, and how the victim for one group is the perpetrator for another. To him, due to the volatility of the situation during violent conflicts, empathy for the victims should not turn into full-fledged partisanship. Moreover, as Ignatieff suggests, understanding and communicating conflicts would not only demand empathy for the victims but also an effort to enter the minds of murderers in order to discern the power of conviction of the ideologies of death (1999, p. 29).

Steele’s reflections introduced into the discussion the crucial problem of the politics of victimhood, an exercise in power and representation endemic to conflict and constantly played out in the media. If the media can show or suppress incidents according to politically motivated allocations of guilt and innocence, we should never forget that, as Oberg and Sollenberg state, some events are also produced for the media by natives to convey particular messages of victimhood to the international community, in order to influence international reactions to the situation on the ground. This dyadic conflict between victims and perpetrators, or innocent and guilty, so widespread in the media, can be counterproductive for peace building. In his discussion of the Northern Ireland case, Ryan states that the promotion of senses of victimhood would only contribute to the crystallisation of tenacious states of reciprocal stereotyping and the perpetuation of conflict. For Ryan, the media - and as his paper shows, also academics - should rather play a more thoughtful role in the redefinition of the concept of victimhood and, ultimately, in the unvictimisation of conflict actors. This would imply an about-turn in the ways in which the media generally approach conflict and, definitely, an end to the simplistic binary plots in which it is constructed.

Unvictimising and discouraging vicious circles of blame attribution is one element in a broader strategy. Many comments stressed the benefits of promoting a media scheme akin to Galtung’s concept of peace journalism, as opposed to conventional war journalism. For
Bizimana, media actors should be committed to produce information that, instead of amplifying the sound of guns, as media operatives of the Enduring Freedom type so clearly do, is capable of enhancing long-term mutual understanding and dialogue in conflict areas—in short, one that truly contributes to peace building, has a preventive focus, explores the roots and transformations of the antagonisms, and does not abandon the field whenever the most dramatic shootout is over. Ryan, on his part, finds this formulation insufficient in that a new, more comprehensive and flexible concept of the media needs to be created and put to work; one that includes such spaces as peace museums, drama groups, children’s programmes, photography or the Internet. A multiplication and diversification of media spaces promoting cultures of peace would help to refresh conventional contents and formats, opening ways to overcome media monopolies over information and the reign of conflict over peace and reconciliation story lines.

Promoting peace in the media also implies denouncing and eradicating war, hate or racist propaganda. International lawyers remind us that there should be a legal barrier to what the media can transmit. Calls for a more democratic and open structure in the production and dissemination of information are limited by the many ways and situations in which such freedom can be, and has been, abused. Historically, the gross misuse of freedom of expression and the power of the media to promote hate and violence have called for the definition and implementation of significant regulation measures, as exemplified in the kind of international legal debates around free speech and freedom of expression discussed by Heintze. As he suggests, in such slippery terrain, there is a permanent tension between prohibition of hate propaganda and freedom of opinion.

Also, if historical experience calls for the development of international legal regulations, as definitions of terms are in contention—what for one side might be propaganda for war might turn out to be liberation propaganda for the opposing party—legal clauses are open to interpretation and the implementation of the obligations differs form country to country. Legitimate worries arise about the political, partisan or double standard use of these prohibitions. The danger of hyper regulation or legal inflation, where the complication of the legal landscape creates increased power for a restricted body of experts to muse over esoteric and redundant covenants, appears also as a drawback to adequate regulation. For Heintze, despite the setbacks and controversies, the continued development of international law regarding the regulation of the media and the removal of legal gray
areas remains crucial, and a balanced tension between freedom and responsibility should be a key to overcome the obstacles.

Discussions pointed also to the need of reassessing media influence on both international audiences and local communities. Regarding the impact of media coverage of conflicts on international audiences, Nunes raised the important point of the media role in the manufacturing of world-wide empathy, a fundamental mechanism that has resulted in the formation of, in Ignatieff’s words, a “World Humanitarian Community” (1998) committed to do something whenever a conflict bursts onto the TV screens, transforming western audiences into tourists in a landscape of anguish (1999, p. 17). The characteristics of this media-based community —volatility, short attention spans, shallow understanding— are obviously linked to the range and structure of media markets and languages. The transformation of wars into what Echeverría calls telewars, and the conversion of the living room into a domestic front (1995, pp. 168-175), has diversified the scenarios where wars can be won or lost. While many recognise the potential of public opinion in the shaping of international policy, Nunes questions the very legitimacy of such a humanitarian community, often structured around superficial information and dubious criteria for organisation and action, to become a relevant actor for such matters.

Moreover, the conditions in which this world-wide community initially took shape are changing. Generally speaking, the conflict media market seems to have reached a point of saturation. The proliferation of armed struggles and humanitarian disasters and the increasing media hype surrounding them (AGUIRRE, 2001) have already produced a fatigue of empathy and solidarity, one with overly anaesthetic effects in the short and long run (FELDMAN, 1994; IGNATIEFF, 1999). As the accumulation of corpses, refugees or high-tech images of smart bombs becomes routine, tolerance for sorrow and misery increases and empathy disengages from concrete humanitarian causes, blurring into a looser sense of global injustice. Media excess may already be transforming conflict into a full-fledged demobilising, domesticating entertainment. With all the drawbacks that the building of international solidarity might have, this is a most discouraging outcome of information surplus, and alternative media have to struggle for original ways of re-enganging audiences with the predicament behind conflicts and humanitarian crisis. The exhaustion of current humanitarian narratives, following the hegemony of what Ignatieff calls the chaos narrative in conflict coverage (Nunes), also seems to demand new plots that overcome the anaesthetic effect of news reporting.
If world-wide audiences are very significant, if controversial, actors in the unfolding of global modes of solidarity, and rightly demand access to information, the population trapped in conflict situations has an even bigger stake in being fairly informed. Marks calls for the importance of correcting, if partially, the imbalance of the information flow that leaves the most vulnerable inhabitants of conflict areas in dangerous information blackouts. Starting from the inalienable right of information for human beings, Markiewicz remarks how access to trustworthy news can make the difference between life and death for vulnerable civil populations displaced and traumatised by conflict. In environments where rumours, propaganda and all kinds of misinformation run wild, and where the alliance between multinational media corporations and the arms industry becomes particularly harmful, the availability of reliable information becomes an important instrument of survival.

This proposition is crucial. But, is it truly possible to break the cycle of news elites monopolising the production and circulation of information? Then, who is to provide this kind of information to the people at risk? And how to go about it? For Markiewicz, radio is the key medium to perform this duty. It is comparatively cheap, unspecialised, portable and thus accessible to the widest audience possible. Also, for him, NGOs should play a relevant role here. In general, NGOs have failed in not considering information a priority in humanitarian action and have mostly surrendered their responsibility in this crucial matter, a statement supported in Montañés’ summary of the ENCOD research. A critical re-evaluation of the role of NGOs regarding their communication strategies in conflict situations —that should involve not only reinforcing those communicative strategies oriented to international audiences, but also providing the victims with credible news about the events taking place and the decisions and actions of the very relief community— can not only contribute to the amelioration of the conditions on the ground during emergencies, but also to the promotion of more stable political environments and the prevention of conflicts.

In response to this challenge, Sans’ contribution to the book acknowledges the extent to which communication is becoming crucial for NGOs, and offers some suggestions for the development of long term alliances between NGOs and the media in the production and dissemination of reliable information in conflict situations. Given the fact that journalists already use NGOs’ infrastructures and gather information from activists in long term missions on the ground, and that the NGOs increasingly need an international visibility that allows them to tell their stories and bring important issues to the international political and humanitarian agendas, more structured cooperation is
mostly a matter of optimising existing relations. Her call for NGOs to assume responsibility for rescuing chronic conflicts and crises from oblivion also points to an important drift of alternative media away from the routines of mainstream media.

Beyond the future role of the NGOs in becoming more relevant media actors, and the role that international media should play in conflict areas, in some of the contributions to the book and in the debates that followed the presentations it became clear that the development and empowering of significant local media should continue to be one fundamental link in the construction and maintenance of independent media networks that can promote long-term stability in conflict regions. Due to the globalised structure of media circuits, this effort calls for both the strengthening of local infrastructures and specialised personnel, and the development of flexible and fair forms of cooperation between local and extralocal actors in the media sector.

These issues are also plagued with controversies. Drawing from his knowledge of the Rwandan case, in his paper on “humanitarian news” Bizimana warns us of the difficulties that local media might face in their route to professionalism and relevance in peace building. Lack of resources and training (both in journalism and in conflict analysis and resolution), or partisanship, hinder a proper development of independent and well-informed local media. The experience of Radio Netherlands discussed by Marks, on the other hand, brings in some elements that would seem to overcome Bizimana’s pessimistic view. For Marks, a believer in the importance of building partnerships between global and local media, a crucial departure point is the building of trust between indigenous communities and international media professionals. The training and promotion of local staff, the use of local languages in broadcasting, and the relevance of media content to local communities are all steps in this direction. In Rwanda, according to Bizimana, Radio Agatashya itself increased its relevance on the ground when it modified the programmes to include native languages and information regarding the daily experience in conflict areas.

Finally, as an emerging and rather unique medium, the Internet appears to hold some clues to overcoming the mainstream media monopolies over information and reporting, and is bound to become the crucial link in the interfaces between the local and the global. This is not to deny that gross misinformation or extremist contents are and will be rampant on the net. But, for example, the intelligent and efficient use of the Internet’s slippery networks by the zapatista and the antiglobalization movements points to the availability of a totally new
environment where communicative strategies can be thoroughly refashioned. It is clear that much more research has yet to be done in this matter.

Hudson’s analysis of the use of the Internet by the Serbian intelligentsia during the NATO bombing of their country raises some important issues in this respect. On the one hand, the Internet’s ability to escape censorship and its instant access to global networks is bound to transform the traditional battle landscape in issues as important as the control of the flow of information and propaganda, or the definition of the lines between friends and enemies. In terms of content, the flexibility of the Internet’s tools allows for the production of powerful counterhegemonic images and messages. The way in which Serbians reaffirmed their cultural identity by humorously manipulating symbols and iconographies with little more than a computer and their fingertips demonstrates the emergence of new ways of empowerment with an undeniable potential to circumvent information short-circuits and build new types of world-wide allegiances and networks of solidarity.

While mainstream media were busy broadcasting high-tech images of the smart bombing of Serbia interspersed with political propaganda, Internet images provided concerned surfers with an unprecedented glimpse into the hardships and perceptions of the civilian population under the bombs. Obviously the Internet is as yet only accessible to elites in many regions in the world, especially in those places where conflict is endemic. But its irruption into the media system is bound to break into the current hegemonic network’s monopoly over information and thus, over the construction of reality.

Although most of the participants in the conference share a critical assessment of the current situation regarding the entanglement of media and conflict, this book is more an invitation to further discussion and cooperation than the formulation of a coherent alternative media project. The exchanges that took place in the conference between actors situated in different structures of knowledge, commitment and action showed us to what extent we are all forced to operate in somewhat impermeable environments with different projects, expectations and even languages. A certain sense of reciprocal mistrust has developed on top of this situation. All agreed that further discussion and cooperation between the three different actors present at this meeting is necessary.

What is the homework left for all of us? In every case, consciousness of our goals, ranges of action, strengths and limitations should be the base for further debate and cooperation. Journalists should keep on
questioning the ways in which information is produced, disseminated and consumed in the humanitarian media market, as well as the consequences of the current state of affairs. Alternatives to the prevalent hegemonic media structure should be imagined, put into place and then sustained, both in conventional and new media, both in relation to international and local audiences. NGOs should re-evaluate their media policies and bring in information and education closer to their fundamental humanitarian goals, optimising for this purpose their current infrastructure, their knowledge of situations on the ground and the rapport they are able establish with local communities. If academics want to increase their relevance in raising public awareness and providing doctrinal and conceptual tools for international actors in conflict situations, as suggested by Bizimana, they should find strategies and formats to make the kind of knowledge they produce more accessible to broader audiences - from global to local - contiguous, if always critical, to the projects of journalists and NGOs, as well as pertinent to policy oriented action.

References


