

Paper for South Asian Electronic Media Workshop, Breaking the Line

Television for peacebuilding: An impossible dream?¹

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Introduction

Criticising the media is never out of fashion.

There is of course much to criticise – the bias, the parochialism, the stereotypes, ownership – problems that those with experience in media reform are acutely familiar with. More difficult, however, than an exposition of the obvious problems facing the media is envisioning ways to make media more representative of the aspirations of all peoples. In South Asia, regulation and administration of media in some countries remain heavily politicised. Parties compete for influence on boards of management of television and radio. In others, elegantly expressed laws and regulations for the operation of media, which would normally bring public broadcasting into line with international public broadcasting norms, are distorted by continuing unhealthy relations between politics and journalism or simply by an unstable political context. Journalists and others find themselves stranded in a no-man’s land between commercialism and politically compromised state broadcasting structures.

In this light, journalists’ unions and associations from 13 Asian countries, meeting in Colombo from December 1-3rd 2003 under the auspices of the International Federation of Journalists global campaign *Public Broadcasting for All*, having considered the situation facing media in Sri Lanka, stated that:

“...media have a vital role to play and concludes that urgent actions are needed to reform the state media sector with the following objectives:

- *To remove all forms of direct political control over the public service media*
- *To create a framework for the administration of public service media, in line with international standards, through ethical, accountable and financially transparent structures*

¹ This paper complements a presentation made at the workshop and only serves as an introductory text geared to stimulate discussion and debate.

- *To support editorial self-regulation by journalists and media professionals that will promote editorial independence and high standards of accuracy, reliability and quality in information services.”*

How then can we make these words, a reality? Can we, as academics, journalists, theorists, sociologists, civil society actors and above all, as citizens, contribute to more accountable, professional media?

Envisioning peace through television

Speaking only of the travails of Sri Lanka, it is evident that media needs to step up to the task of creating re-energising hope for peace. A farcical and crumbling peace process, the parochialism of political leaders, the belligerence of the LTTE and the lack of any coherent strategic imperatives that guide the government’s approach to the peace process, coupled with the increasing and severe curtailment of the freedom of expression, all contribute to a rotting democracy.

How can this trend be reversed?

Electronic media play an especially important role in this regard. The visceral reality of war – the rotting brains, the entrails of battle, the brutality, the human pain, the very real suffering in the face of violence – can instead of being glorified, portrayed as the inescapable consequence of an out-break of open war to those who most volubly support it in parliament and civil society.

But media must not only show hopelessness. It must engineer hope where there is little or none. All media, and mainstream electronic media in particular, fail in this task in Sri Lanka.

Deeply instructive in this regard are initiatives using radio and television in particular in the Balkans to bring communities, torn apart by violence, reconcile their differences and develop shared futures. Children in particular are targeted through programmes such as *Nashe Maalo* created by the Search for Common Ground (SFCG) where families from three ethnic backgrounds – Macedonian, Albanian, and Roma –live together in a magical, talking apartment house. The building advises the children who live there on the problems and conflicts in their lives. The children of the three families become fast friends, despite differences among their parents.

We are also inspired by the Video Letters Project, one designed to further reconciliation among people from the former Yugoslavia who had once been friends and who had been separated and even alienated by the bloody nationalist conflict.

Apart from the peace-casting by Young Asia Television in Sri Lanka, it is unfortunate the innovative, engaging and creative television that engages with the dynamics of peace and conflict escapes

mainstream TV. YA*TV's productions, in English, Sinhala and Tamil, are in production values and content, a cut above the drivel that parades as serious programming in mainstream television.

This said, peace-casting itself is not a sustainable model over the long-term, pegged as it is to the availability of donor funding. Without mainstreaming the content produced in support of democracy, NGO driven media has little hope of supporting democratic social reform.

Public Service Broadcasting?

Why is PSB important for us to consider as a cornerstone for a professional and democratic media culture? A growing need for professional media, free of political interference, editorial bias and parochial ownership interests, re-affirms the need to promote a new culture of media that operates in the public interest, to act as a counter-weight to the obvious political bias of State media in countries such as Sri Lanka.

As the Media Charter signed and ratified by journalists in Sri Lanka in November 2005 states:

A professional media with a responsibility to the public interest, independent of government or partisan influence and interference, is a vital part of the series of checks and balances central to democracy.

True Public Service Broadcasting goes beyond lip service to a declaration.

For television, this means a deep introspection into the qualitative nature of programming. Broadcasters need to examine whether they wish to promote the cheap thrills of sensationalism or explore, through innovative programming, issues related to democracy, reconciliation and co-existence, central pillars of any peace process. The former is the norm. The latter, more difficult, but central to the media's role in a peace process.

The central challenge

Workshops and meetings in international and national contexts are useful in concretising ideas for change and ascertaining existing initiatives that can be strengthened. They are, at their best, a meeting place of minds and ideas. At worst, they are no more than enervated monologues, to which people come to with pre-determined ideas and memorised speeches, with no intent of learning from the experiences of others or sharing one's failures, which are oftentimes more useful than the promotion of success.

Media reform, like any other reform movement, has its share of rhetoric tempered by harsh reality on the ground. This then is the central challenge – the need to move from rhetoric to action, from design to practice, from talk to actual change on the ground, from theory to application.

So much of media reform is writ on paper and trapped in the mind of theorists. We must ensure that the change we seek to engineer is communicated to the journalists. Without adequate trust between those who wish to promote media reform from outside, and the journalists who work within established media structures and institutions, there is little hope of sustainable change.

There is also the challenge of new media – citizens who are using the ever expanding footprints of internet access and digital media to create their own stories, which have been marginalised by mainstream media for decades. Television programming that doesn't involve those who create such new media will, in the future, run the risk of deeply alienating its audience, who are better able to get the news and information they seek by tuning into local, community driven, media.

For television, as with all other mainstream media, the challenge is to capture audience interest in programming that eschews sensationalism and instead, like the examples in the Balkans, promotes messages that support peace and creates hope.

Creating hope does not mean to ignore the drivers of conflict, or glaze over the serious differences of opinion that colour any appreciation of a peace process. Television, given its increasing reach and highly visual nature, has a unique place in shaping minds to carefully critique a peace process through content produced to stimulate discussion.

Hope is multi-faceted, multi-cultural, diverse, multi-ethnic and shows gender difference. This large spectrum of opinion needs to be captured and presented, explored and contested. The creation of hope is the single most important role of media in a process of peacebuilding. From the personal actions of journalists and producers to the decisions taken by institutions and governments, from regulatory frameworks to content selection and editorial guidelines, the packaging of media deeply influences levels of public awareness and confidence in a peace process.

To do this, we need to:

- Ask questions and capture the richness of the answers we receive
- Celebrate difference, unity in diversity
- Learn from international initiatives that have used television for peacebuilding
- Change our mindsets from a mercenary market orientation to that of media in the public service
- Collaborate with civil society initiatives to engender media reform

- Recognise and highlight the courage of individual journalists who have stood resolutely for human rights, democracy and peace. Tell the public their life stories. Celebrate their lives, without waiting to bemoan their death.
- Be creative – old studio techniques pale in comparison to cutting edge production techniques using digital media
- Produce persuasive content for democracy and rights, not propaganda for peace which can be easily shafted as having its own agenda
- Use local stories that surround us – stories of courage, patience, sacrifice.
- Highlight the voices of the youth – the new generation of peacebuilders
- Advocate for change based on strong social & media research on comparative case studies

More than anything else, television and media in general need to heed the voices of the people. Not just give them what they want, but to help them understand that what they want may well be to see their aspirations reflected in the media they consume, so that they too feel part of society. Television needs to seed this sense of belonging amongst all communities. It is only then that we can talk of a true democracy, wherein the voices of all are recognised as equal.

It is to this goal that we must re-dedicate ourselves.