

Media, Peace and Conflict

Contexts for research

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This paper was presented at the *International Conference on Media Support* in Oslo 3-4 November 2003, where politicians, academics and media representatives from various countries and international organizations participated. The title of the conference was 'Does support to media further democracy, peace and human rights?'. The paper addresses issues facing peace researchers on media and conflict, stressing the complexity of media as a cultural phenomenon. In doing so, it briefly comments on two of the contributions to a panel discussion held the previous day on 'Media support: building democratic societies or another way of furthering Western interests?'. The conference was arranged by the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO).

Media in the cultural sphere

From a historical perspective the media have never been only an institutional or technical resource. They are not merely a set of journalists and a means to transmit their reporting of social reality to their respective audiences. Media are part and parcel of a *sphere of culture*.

There are, of course, many ways of defining *culture*. Traditionally it has been defined by sociologists and

anthropologists as the meanings, values and ways of life of particular nations, groups, classes and periods. I believe this definition remains viable. To it, however, must be added the more newly developed idea of *praxis*: culture is not only what we do but how we do it.

Now despite the overt importance of media in the development of modern society, study and analysis of culture has remained a difficult task. Culture is often regarded as something intangible, too fluid, imprecise and subjective to be amenable to rigorous analysis. On the other hand, the relative importance of culture is often disputed. Some see it as a bi-product—in good Marxian tradition—of more core realities, such as political economy and political institutions. It is understood as an alibi for, or a simple legitimization of, dominant social relations, dependent on social structure and thus not worth the effort to study (Lury, 1992: 368).

A look at the development of the European media in its cultural sphere is, in this sense, instructive.

Clearly the European public debate of the 18th and 19th centuries was marked by an emerging sphere of culture. This sphere was an area of exchange and negotiation in which different groups struggled over the implications of the new means of cultural production. During this period the state was increasingly dependent upon the use of written forms of culture, upon governing them and insuring that they were available, in the proper form, for the necessary uses of information. At the same time new methods of control were developed. New forms of censorship emerged along with new legislation defining the terms of libel law. The state's systems of control were initially applied to the right of printing, but were eventually expanded to cover a wide variety of cultural fields. In the long run this included all media, broadcast and print (Lury, 1992: 376).

The point is that the confluence of technology, culture and state power produces media as a cultural phenomenon. The consolidation of a cultural sphere goes hand in hand with the

development of democratic institutions. The cultural sphere can be understood as a field of forces, which has its own internal logic and hierarchies. It is through analysis of and research on the changing relationship between the economic, political and social spheres that the paradoxical links between cultural practices and power relations can be opened up and studied (Lury, 1992: 401).

In a now classic work from way back in 1974, Raymond Williams charted the social differentiation, which has typically characterized the emergence of the autonomous cultural sphere (Williams, 1974). Quite predictably Williams sees in the development of literacy, print culture and the first privately owned presses, a new set of relations of production, essentially an extension of primary forms of production. Others, like Elizabeth Eisenstein, see the emerging cultural sphere as a technological means for reordering, codifying, retrieving, and transmitting information and ideas (Eisenstein, 1979).

Media culture

Yesterday's closing discussion was marked by two particularly insightful remarks. Together they tell us much about the limitations of the debate on aid to media, but they also give us an indication of a research agenda on media, development and conflict.

First, Prof. Helge Lønning developed the important and insightful notion that aid to media should be understood as integrated into a larger context and thus that donor programmes that seek to assist in the improvement of media should not attempt to do so by isolating media in order to contribute directly to its development. Most of the debate had been focused either on what concrete tools were necessary in order to directly and immediately improve the conditions for the press (such as training or bolstering of institutional and technological know-how) or on ways for getting

funding directly into the hands of those who need it in order to directly improve the financial well-being of newspapers, radio and television.

Second, Bo Brekke from the Norwegian Broadcasting made the pregnant observation that a very narrow understanding of the media marked the discussions of the day. The treatment given of the media by practitioners, politicians and academics, Mr. Brekke claimed, is based on a very one-dimensional perspective. In fact, he noted, the media landscape in any of the developing countries dealt with in our discussion has a far more heterogeneous character. The category media covers a wide variety of different levels of professionalism, institutional culture, technological sophistication and socially and culturally related backgrounds.

These two points of critique, combined with consciousness of the historical perspective give us an indication of where the tools and insights of peace and conflict research can contribute. What is peace and conflict research?

Peace and conflict research

Peace and conflict research focuses on why violent conflict begins, what sustains and spreads it, and what is necessary in order to end it. It therefore studies economic systems and conditions, social structures and mechanisms, political institutions and systems, cultural codes, meanings and identities, law and normative systems.

Peace and conflict research is thus by nature interdisciplinary, drawing together fields as diverse as economics, sociology, political science, ethnology, social anthropology, psychology, philosophy, geography and environmental studies.

Likewise, peace and conflict research is both descriptive and normative. Through the methodologies of the social and political sciences it collects and analyzes relevant data and correlates it to

various social, economic, cultural and political aspects of conflict. Through the tools of legal theory and philosophical ethics, it seeks to formulate and analyze the norms and codes involved in legitimating and channeling power through and around situations of conflict.

Media and its correlates

The insights of Prof. Lønning and Mr. Brekke can be combined and formulated as a critical hypothesis: Media must be understood in its correlation with other dimensions of the cultural sphere. These 'other dimensions', this 'alterity'—to use the philosophical jargon of the day—is both outward and inward, extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsically, media must be situated in the outward cultural sphere: that is, together with questions of social and political systems, legality and rights, technology, development, and democracy. Intrinsically, media must be situated in relation to the internal heterogeneity of media culture. It must be related to the broad landscape of diverse types of media and to all that this landscape entails in terms of structures of power, prestige, rights, financial issues. And, it must be related to the diversified field within each type of media. In other words, with the various forms within the field of press journalism as well as with the various forms of broadcast journalism, internet and other high-tech media.

Based on this working-hypothesis, a number of correlations might be proposed and explored between media and other dimensions of the cultural sphere, dimensions that are related to the creation, sustenance and resolution of violent conflict. For example, the media-finance correlation, the media-political economy correlation, media-democracy, media-poverty, media-law, etc. Obviously more and different relations are possible

All of these relations must be placed into the cultural sphere and interpreted in that context. None of these colorations should be considered as static. None of them should be considered as isolated or linear. All of them function and produce meaning in network with the others. Yet we must disaggregate them in order to study them. We cannot take the world as our research object. We must dismantle its elements, analyze them, then do our best to reassemble the meaning. This is where the task of interpretation comes in, the hermeneutic dimension, if you will. The interdisciplinary challenges are considerable. Sociology must appreciate economics, analysis of finance must be given historical depth, ethic considerations must respect quantified measures of social phenomena. The list of possible interactions could go on.

Un-reflected dis-aggregation of elements in a conflict situation can be disastrous. For example, studying food production as a measure of poverty without considering the religious meaning of food and production. Indeed such mis-understandings are not academic alone. Bungled analyses have even been known to even cause armed conflict.

The methodological difficulties involved do not however surpass the complexity of the problem. Violent conflicts are almost never the result of discrete or simple causes. Nor do they lend themselves to rational discourse and rational analysis. This is because they so often mark the *suspension* of rationality. Instead of the Clausewitzian adage that 'war is the continuation of politics by other means', one might counter that war is the utter *failure* of politics and the suspension of meaningful analysis.

As has been pointed out in a number of contexts during this conference, free expression and the spread of information are not unambiguously the keys to peace and harmony in any given country. In some cases they actually cause conflict. Media, like the cultural sphere in which it emerges and functions, is a loaded weapon, to be handled and researched with great care.

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