

# 1. Observer or participator?

## Diversity challenges for the role of the media profession

### ABSTRACT

In the post 9/11 era there is considerable opportunity for the media profession to give insight into what has compelled one side to act in a way that has enraged and empowered another side to act in a manner that further caused hostility or anger to become entrenched. When a crisis is on the rise, journalists, and the wider network of media, are often in a unique position to access areas where others are forbidden. Through skilful reporting journalists can elicit the specific points of justification from decision-makers and leaders. Where irony or illogic is discovered, seeking to discover the reason for this often identifies a vital link between ignorance and compulsion. When that connection is reported, the opportunity exists to inform.

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**D**IVERSITY challenges established media professionals to reconsider the very essence of their purpose. The challenge is to decide whether to part ways with the old notion of strict reportage frameworks and to embrace a new purpose for media in a complex post-9/11 world.

Diversity—and difference—has a richness that complements our multicultural existence. But sadly, when cultural, religious, and political diversity fail to interact, ignorance, distance, and intolerance is often the natural consequence—especially when there is a geopolitical or ideological axis at play.

Given the polarised state of today's globalised crosscultural struggle, it is no longer acceptable for the media to simply report on a crisis, to focus on

hostility, to seek only answers to the what, when, where questions. The practice of 21st century professional journalism now demands that media professionals consider, and give heightened emphasis to, the why and how questions.

Today's journalists must develop professional analytical skills and be encouraged to embrace that unique role journalism occupies within our modern societies. Journalists today are able to access places where intergovernmental officials and agencies cannot. There are exceptions of course, but largely journalists are able to interrogate the thinking of leaders, to balance one decision maker's logic against another, to inform leaders of the immediate situation and to report on how the other side is responding to it—to analyse the information, place it within an open-source environment and breathe relevancy into its purpose.

In simple terms, journalism and media's post 9/11 role, within a diversity/hostility/crisis context, is to advance understanding where the estrangement of traditional concepts of diversity breeds ignorance. The challenge raises uncomfortable notions for some: should the media play an integral role as information provider that is designed from a purpose viewpoint to advocate peace and to reduce conflict, and ultimately to be a lead player in resolving it?

Is it the right of the media to not only seek solutions to conflict, but also to encounter ignorance, inform and engage the ignorant, and advance or campaign for a culture of understanding by populations? If the answer to these questions is in the affirmative, the premise requires agreement by those who sit at the very heart of media organisations. The convention requires agreement that the purpose of today's Fourth Estate is to examine the cause and effect aspects of conflict, to consider the other side so as to provide a basis of informed debate, and ultimately, a universally accepted rationale.

If the premise is supported, then it follows that the media must challenge decision makers who often find themselves isolated within an arena of their own making and who may be entrenched within a mindset of intercultural and religious conflict.

For the media, this challenge is not so much being advanced from within the Fourth Estate, but rather from within global bodies like the United Nations and regional government powers that have identified, in the post 9/11 period, how essential the media is as part of a combined effort to raise the standards of developing nations, to advance democracy, assist in capacity building,

and to take on a 'responsible' information-gathering role, particularly where politics, religion, and culture intersect.

Let us examine the broad tent picture. On 6-7 April 2009, the United Nations' Alliance of Civilisations held its second forum in Istanbul, Turkey. Its aim was to advance intercultural understanding and compel 'key players' (including governments, the private sector, civil society, religious leaders, youth, and the media) to take joint action and promote intercultural cooperation. Those organising the event stressed the Alliance forum was not only about dialogue but rather it was about 'dialogue that delivers' (United Nations Alliance of Civilisations UNAOC, 2009). The UNAOC forum overview focussed on progress:

The Alliance Forum is also about innovation. The event will showcase the most original, inspiring and imaginative projects aimed at building understanding and trust among diverse communities and cultures. And it highlighted the role of the Alliance as a global matchmaker: 'It connects innovative, groundbreaking grassroots initiatives with policy makers and potential funders who can help scale up these projects and give them global prominence.' (UNAOC, 2009)

For journalists, the UNAOC had earlier created a database of 'experts'. The intention was to give journalists 'free, direct access to some of the world's leading commentators, analysts and academics.' (Global Expert Finder, 2009) The UNAOC lined up experts located around the world who are committed to finding common ground between diverse cultures. The experts are of course, selected by the UNAOC, although media and the public are encouraged to 'nominate an expert'.

The Alliance of Civilisations was launched by former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan in New York on 14 July 2005, after José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, President of Spain, called for its creation during the 59th Session of the General Assembly in September 2004. Turkey became a co-sponsor of the initiative immediately prior to its launch. Its purpose was to bridge the divide between cultures and to explore ways that accentuate positive debate and dialogue between diverse cultures.

But the Alliance has its critics. In an article entitled 'False Prophets' for Washington DC's *Foreign Policy* journal, Geneive Abdo argues that bridging the diversity gap between the world's major faiths seems like a worthy

goal, but states: 'By glossing over serious differences, the organisations at the forefront of interfaith dialogue confuse discussion with success—and end up leaving everyone at risk' (Geneive Abdo, 2008).

Abdo was hired by the United Nations in 2006 to travel the world collecting views of leaders of Islamist parties and movements with the intention that their views would be included in an Alliance document at the end of that year. She said the United Nations hoped it would attract press attention and 'generate funding for the solutions of "practical steps" it would propose to bridge the divide between Western and Islamic societies'. However, Abdo wrote that the result was disconcerting: 'Almost as soon as the project began, though, a fear of political backlash proved to outweigh any potential for mutual understanding.'

Abdo said the United Nations became more concerned that any meetings with Islamists would create a scandal for the UN. In conclusion, Abdo states that rather than dealing with extremism, institutions like the UN are deliberately dodging the discomforting work of addressing a global conflict that in hindsight makes the 'Cold War look like a small ethnic squabble'.

Promoting peace and understanding might comfort the Western body politic and convince Americans that Arab governments are doing their part, but it is simply window dressing.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of a decline in the West's relationship with the Islamic world, it still has no effective foreign policy strategy for engaging Islamic leaders and Muslim societies in any meaningful way. (Abdo, 2008)

Until the world's multilateral bodies address the root causes of today's cross-religion crisis, ('the devastating failure of US foreign policy and an Islamic world that is growing more conservative, religious, and hostile toward the United States...') nothing, Abdo said, would have been achieved to address the true conflict, 'one that remains threatening, enduring, and real' (Abdo, 2008).

But with the passing of the George W. Bush presidency, a new era of multilateralism is possible. The new US President, Barack Obama, was scheduled to attend the Alliance of Civilisations April 2009 forum in Istanbul. The encounter would have been a coup for the UN and its AOC, his attendance would have been news and provided an unparalleled degree of international

news exposure. Unfortunately for the UN, President Obama decided to use the AOC forum as a smokescreen, a diversion to ensure his planned visit to US troops in Iraq would remain secret.

However, since the Alliance of Civilisation's creation, considerable attention has been given to establishing an understanding of the thinking and values between Christian and Muslim faiths. But the concept has broadened out into regional interfaith dialogue forums, like that held at Waitangi in New Zealand in May 2007.

In her speech at the opening ceremony, then New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark stated that we live in a 'highly culturally diverse region where all of the world's major religions are represented' (Clark, 2007).

Clark said the intergovernmental regional bodies like the Pacific Islands Forum and ASEAN help build greater understanding: 'But it's important that regional conversations aren't restricted to the government level. To advance development, peace, and security our peoples need to engage.' She added:

Within our region there are places, such as in the south of Thailand and the southern Philippines, where communities face violence carried out in the name of faith and directed at those who do not share that faith. We have had serious incidents of terrorism—like the 2002 Bali bombing, fomented by extremists invoking the name of religion. The heightened tensions of the Middle East have spilled over into our region, in the form of religious radicalisation. (Helen Clark, 2007)

Helen Clark advanced the principle that most people seek the same things, that there is common ground, irrespective of race, culture or religion, that we all desire 'peace, security and opportunity for our families and communities'. The common ground principle is one of the ways those subscribing to the Alliance of Civilisations ideals wish to advance as a bridge between polarised and diverse peoples. As Clark said in her speech, it is up to 'responsible nations and people of good will to build bridges across the divides which have been created'.

In her speech to the Interfaith Dialogue forum in Waitangi, Clark concluded with a hope that a Waitangi declaration would help ensure extreme voices 'do not drown out those of moderation and reason'. What emerged was a Waitangi Action Plan. It stipulated that attention be given to education, media, security and inter-community relations and all levels of government.

In November 2008, New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) hosted a forum in Jakarta, Indonesia, titled the Asia-Pacific Regional Media Programme where senior journalists from throughout the Asia and Pacific region gathered to discuss how the media as a whole could contribute to advancing peace and understanding in the Asia/Pacific region. The subfocus of the forum was titled Journalism at the Intersection of Politics, Religion and Culture. Discussions gave significant attention to the diversity of religions and cultures in our wider region. Certainly much debate focused on the divide between a Christian-aligned West and states in Asia where the majority proportion of the population subscribes to the Muslim faith. But the round table media discussion also gave attention to Hinduism, Buddhism and other dominant faiths in the region.

The Asia-Pacific region is rich in diversity. But right now in India, Sri Lanka, the Indo-China states, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand can be found contemporary examples of how ignorance when mixed with diversity can breed hostility and violence. The conflicts within Indonesia's expansive borders, including the atrocities currently committed against the West Papua peoples, add to the challenge we as a media profession must embrace to play an active participatory role in resolving our region's conflict.

But it would be incorrect to assume all diversity is framed by traditional cultural/spiritual religions.

The pressures of globalisation—just as politics and loyalties to establishment's various orders—also give rise to unrest when interregional economic growth is seen to erode a state, or region of a state's ability to preserve the livelihood and wellbeing of its peoples. The impact of free trade agreements between Thailand and Australia, for example, has arguably placed thousands of Thailand farmers at a disadvantage when attempting to sell their produce. Imported agricultural goods from Australia cost less and are therefore more affordable to the average Thai consumer. The local consumers' preference for Australian goods over local Thai produce has created a division that could be entitled a religion of economy and which is as diverse from the nationhood ideal of buying locally made goods as the established and organised civilisation's religions.

Crises in the Pacific is rooted in complex precolonisation or pre-modernistic times. The arc of instability stretching from Melanesia in the western Pacific to Tonga in Polynesia expresses a diversity of its own. In Tonga,

(a non-colonised state) unrest was born within a struggle by commoners to establish democracy proper, while the nobility, supported by those loyal to customary title, and the monarchy were determined to remain the power-elite. We witnessed a flashpoint of sorts where law and order broke down on Black Thursday in November 2006, resulting in 80 percent of Nuku'alofa being burned to the ground. While the riots of that afternoon and subsequent evenings were largely out of the control of the pro-democracy movement, the establishment moved to implicate the movement's leaders. Only now is understanding of the cause of this conflict emerging, through the works of journalists like *Taimi 'o Tonga* publisher Kalafi Moala (2009).

Put simply, diversity has many faces, is forever changing, and the challenge to media is for it to attempt to understand the complex undercurrents that today's conflict rests upon. At a time when polarisation of the globe's cultural communities is wide, the challenge is often to search, as Helen Clark considered, for common ground on cross-cultural issues. The principle is to consider one's audience and to inform it of the other side. The concept arguably can connect polarised communities to consider and see issues from a completely different viewpoint.

At its best, this media practice to search for common ground can advance awareness of what lies central to conflict.

When the media plans an assignment that involves reporting on crisis, it is worthwhile to structure the reporting plan to focus on how the crisis originated, how the crisis was organised by both sides, and to what degree it was advanced from a cause and effect bias.

In the post 9/11 era there is considerable opportunity for the media profession to give insight into what has compelled one side to act in a way that has enraged and empowered another side to act in a manner that further caused hostility or anger to become entrenched. Networking information rather than holding to the strict old news structures is also a new way of disseminating information for maximum effect. The world wide web-born media has long held a view that value is not supported by holding on to information but rather in its syndication and distribution to multiple outlets.

Coordination of burgeoning syndication models remains a challenge for many, particularly where new media seeks to have its work published within old media publications. But the trend is being established, often led by new media/broadcast media relationships where new-media journalists are seen to

have analytical expertise and have developed a multi-skilled practice.

Where syndication organisations have been lacking between new and old media, non-government organisations like the Common Ground News Service have been created to assist in distributing high value works to global mainstream media, new media, and academia outlets.

The organisation states its purpose is to promote mutual understanding and offer hope, opportunities for dialogue and constructive suggestions that facilitate peaceful resolution of conflict. The service is a 'non-profit initiative of Search for Common Ground, an international non-governmental organisation (NGO), headquartered in Washington and Brussels' (Common Ground News, 2009). The service lists an impressive array of media outlets that have published articles sourced from its database. Many of the articles are marked as free to republish, or stipulate republishing condition.

In New Zealand, Scoop Media has published numerous articles from CGNews that analyse inter-cultural complexities that aid understanding of what lies beneath crises in the Middle East and elsewhere. (Scoop Media, 2009)

'CGNews articles have been republished over 10,000 times by over 1000 different media outlets and websites' including *Al-Ahram*, *Al-Ayyam*, *Ha'aretz*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *International Herald Tribune*, *The Washington Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Washington Post/Newsweek Online* and *The Guardian* (Common Ground News Service, 2009).

The purpose of this article is to focus on how ignorance so often lies at the heart of crises. Ignorance can be skewed by cultural, political, and nationalistic alliance. Justification for hostility in turn often relies on ignorance by those who seek to manipulate a population so as to sustain a wider political campaign.

But the emphasis is on seeking solutions to the symptoms of ignorance, and for today's media to define a new meaning, to develop the profession, and to become a true participator in resolving the world's problems.

To summarise, when crisis is on the rise, journalists, and the wider network of media, are often in a unique position to access areas where others are forbidden. Through skilful reporting journalists can elicit the specific points of justification from decision-makers and leaders. Where irony or illogic is discovered, seeking to discover the reason for this often identifies a vital link between ignorance and compulsion. When that connection is reported, the opportunity exists to inform.



When such conditions exist, the media's role is arguably elevated to identify those iconic moments when opportunities develop that lead to an easing of hostility. Identifying the opportunities is a worthy challenge for media, and once identified to report, again, how the other side is affected.

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