The Media Role in the Israeli Palestinian Conflict; Can it Promote Peace?

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Introduction

The whole world is watching Israel and the, oPt, occupied Palestinian territories, news from this region fill the headlines in media all over the world - and yet the media consumers in Europe and in the United States hardly know the most basic facts.

A study in Great Britain showed that the majority of Britons think that the word "settlers" refers to Palestinians and that the "occupied territories" have been occupied by Palestinians. When asked where the people in the refugee camps in the Middle East come from, many of the respondents guessed that it was from Afghanistan.

Such examples show that mainstream journalism is not suited to effectively inform about the reality and the background of the conflict in the Middle East. But it is even less suited to present the perspectives for peace in a comprehensive way. There are countless initiatives on both sides, and also internationally, that often never even get to hear about each other. Effective peace work is not made easier by the media.

Instead, due to its focus on violence and sensation, journalism today more often hardens the conflict, reinforces the concept of the enemy and robs the people of the feeling that they can act effectively.

For the past seven years, and since the outbreak of the Intifada, media in the Middle East has been engaged in reporting on conflict rather than on conflict prevention and some media may even, voluntarily or involuntarily have added to the conflicts. Exercising considerable influence over public opinion, Middle East media may be seen as having contributed to the escalating cycle of violence through incitement, stereotyping and supporting the growing disillusionment with the peace process.

Challenges facing good Journalism in Israel and OPT

In the midst of the Israeli Palestinian conflict, it is really hard to talk about anything related to Peace. You can't talk about good small stories of Israeli and Palestinians getting along somewhere, in this joint project or in that seminar abroad, people would look at it in a very doubtful and cynical way because the big issues have to be mentioned, you might have to talk about, number one, ending the conflict, number two, ending the massive amount of information that are convincing the people against the other. Even if one reporter tries to implement the "whole story" approach in his/her report, it doesn't usually succeed to convince the audience.

Many media professionals from both sides are responsible professional and very serious in following the basic journalism rules such as truth, accuracy, and neutrality. But these rules become only words and terms when we try to apply them to our conflict for example … if an explosion happens in Israel? Is it a resistant or a terrorist act? The same thing if Israel bombed the Palestinian side is it self defense or is it a state terrorism? How many killed and injured? When journalists try to present reports about what happened, how many resources do they need? These are basic questions for any journalist around the world but the answers for them are quite different, it all depends on who you ask, when and where.

For example, if a suicide bomber attacks in Israel and an Israeli journalist or "Peace oriented" reporter tells the whole story covering this act of violence as well as the developments and the background that led to this bombing and the consequences and what actions should be taken to reduce the violence. This kind of report will not be perceived as neutral or objective because most of the audience does not wish to listen to explanations in the heat of the moment but

would rather hear more of the bloody incident. Israelis have become very cynical and even become more politically right-oriented in the face of such reports.

Whereas on the Palestinian side, it's not acceptable or possible to bring the other's side story of this bombing attack as a human suffering story; the incident appears only as news of what has happened reporting on the number of causalities. It is covered exactly like in a war situation, where you give numbers without names and imply that it was only a reaction and retaliation of what the "enemy" has done to us. The Palestinian media is conservative regarding this issue, there is no criticism or different views discussed or shown in public.

A good number of Palestinian journalists think that the profession is kind of a national patriotic task, for them to play a role in the struggle for freedom through the press and to take a direct political role while they are active as journalists. This, I think, has to do with how Palestinians came to understand the role of the press and media during the Israeli occupation. And it demonstrates that still a lot needs to be done to try to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the role of media.

On the other side, even if the Israeli media is growing in a relatively democratic state, it suffers badly from self censorship and is sometimes even highly censored when it addresses the conflict. In times of serious crisis Israeli media coverage adopts an absolute military agenda; the majority of the media gives an exclusive platform to military personnel and to military correspondence, justifying their attitudes and interpretations without offering alternative viewpoints. For instance, in the latest Lebanon war, the majority of the media facilitated the silencing of those who had a different point of view – those who were against the war and those who refused to take the media's military agenda for granted.

Regarding free and direct access to information in the field, few Israeli journalists travel to the Occupied Territories to visit the places and people they write about; the most critical problems they face are unreasonable self-censorship and constant stereotyping of the other side which appears in most reports.

Going back to the OPT, the Palestinian media faces many internal challenges which could sabotage any chances of practicing good journalism , such as a lack of unified code of ethics and code of conduct, harsh self-censorship, which is political motivated. In the Palestinian Media, the political level is higher than the informative one, the disagreements of the opinion takes a stronger course than the media role. Always the journalist motives are politicized. The journalist could be categorized as journalist from FATEH or journalist from HAMAS. So the censorship motive is political and not informative and moreover there is no law until now to protect journalists.

In addition to all of that everyone knows about the suffering of the Palestinian people in general and the suffering is used mostly by politicians and equally by journalists for political propaganda, while the human story of each victim is not really revealed to Palestinians, to Israelis or to others worldwide on one hand. And on the other hand there is an obvious lack of positive human-centered news and success stories of Palestinians which could empower people and give them a sense of hopefulness.

This is a quote from a media professor from Birzeit University during the UNESCO World Press Freedom Day in Ramallah: "We are facing internal and external walls, can we deal first with our internal wall? And can we reach the external physical wall? If yes, can we jump over it? And if yes, so what do we do then? How do we represent our case? We need a new speech, another language, and another thought in order to talk to the world and to our people differently". I'll put on other words; both sides need another state of mind. I believe that it's true saying about both peoples and not only about reporters. The "State of Mind" is a controllable challenge; Change it and you'll break a huge part of the internal wall and maybe the physical wall as well.

But on the external wall lies many external challenges which Palestinians have no control over. Palestinian journalists face daily physical difficulties in performing their job. They are very rarely granted Israeli press cards and they are often forbidden to travel inside Israel and to

Jerusalem, as well between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Access to these areas during increased times of conflict is severely restricted by the Israeli government; particularly during military operations or incursions to cities, and the best example is the Jenin battle in April 2002. The journalists were prevented to get there during the battle and 2 days after as well, so they didn't really see what they were reporting on most of the time of the fighting. It made the reporter's work nearly impossible, which lead most of the time, to misleading facts, or propaganda based on emotional reactions, and misleading declarations. This event for example had a tremendous negative influence on both peoples' feelings, the reporters believed that they "were just reporting the facts" but in the reality both sides were manipulated and each had his very different and extreme story. This reporting has promoted deeply to the hatred that was pictured and shown throughout the media from all sides, foreign, Israeli and Palestinian.

All the mentioned challenges which both sides are facing are causing both sides' media to fail from distinguishing fact from perception.

But many Israeli and Palestinian journalists, I met, would like nothing more than reporting in a different manner, however they are under pressure of quotas and demand for speed, they can't usually allow themselves to show compassion or humaneness.

This situation is leading to the general feeling of hopelessness in both places. An Israeli reporter expressed to me "I can no longer listen to the stories of sufferings and injustice if I have no way of changing it.

Opportunities for Change

The most elementary logic suggests that if the media is part of the problem that has led to the violent conflict, then the media must also be a part of the solution. However, just like pro-war propaganda did not alone cause the war, peace-oriented media cannot alone end a conflict. Despite the limitations, media appears to be a necessary element of every future peace operation. I suggest the five following ideas which could promote good Journalism in Israel and the OPT:

1. I believe that in order to provide reliable information to the public in time of violent conflict, the reporter (which includes journalists and editors) must be equipped with additional journalism skills. There has been little attention paid to education for peace and non-violent conflict resolution as an integral part of journalism training. Reporters need to understand more about what causes conflict, and how it develops and ends in order to provide the public with valuable information about the conflict beneath the violence. Having the skills to analyze conflict will enable a reporter to be a more effective professional journalist and a more aware individual.

2. Due to the physical, political and social obstacles that a journalist may face when trying to implement good Journalism rules or Peace Journalism principles in conflict areas, there is an urgent need to draw or design a Peace journalism version that can be sensitive to all above challenges but close to the main principles of the PJ that are practiced in some places around the world.
   ° This version should be a national or a local version and it may be called in our area "conflict sensitive reporting" instead of using "Peace".
   ° This version should translate the main principles to actual and practical steps.

    °   It should be realistic and aware of the nature of the long historical conflict.

    °   It should address the mentalities and the cultural codes in order to be acceptable by journalists in the Middle East...

    °   The local versions, which I'm aiming to, should be created separately in the OPT and in Israel, it would consider the Political sensitiveness of both sides but have some shared common ground.

3. There is a need for a peace relations agenda closely resembling a commercial public relations campaign. An integrated set of measures involving more than a single media channel or technique is vital to the success of the practice. In the absence of an integrated effort, a single broadcast program or even a single radio station (e.g. All for Peace Radio) is unlikely to make a significant impact in a sea of media messages and outlets

4. Media on both sides need to accompany the other social and political institutions in their pursuit of peace building. Many NGO's in Israel and the OPT have been working for years on joint projects that intend to bring to social change through the different educational program which eventually mean to lead to transformation of the conflict. But the media was not part of this effort. Media and media professionals in Israel and OPT should work harder to integrate with the other institutions that are trying to promote understanding and communication.

5. The most important feature of the immediate post-violence conflict state is the regulation of hate media or propaganda. There are very good documentaries on the conflict which could be categorized under the Peace Journalism approach and they are shown many times on Israeli channels, or on the private Palestinian TV stations but on the other hand and on the same channels there are lots of propaganda. Repetition of historical war films on certain dates during the year or the bloody reports during the news hour. All of this brings more victimization of each people. The ongoing environment on every channel and newspaper and radio, reminds every Israeli and Palestinian of his wounds, sufferings and wars. I believe this minimizes the chances of good media projects, like documentaries, positive lessons from war, etc. and the focus on the present and the future becomes very marginal and irrelevant.

What has been done so far by IPMF, a UNESCO funded project?

IPMF is the Israeli Palestinian Media Forum, establishes in 99 as a result of the Rhodes Conference in Greece, where a group of 120 Israeli and Palestinian media professionals gathered for a professional retreat. At the end of this assembly, the journalists requested from UNESCO to provide its assistance in setting up a Press House. Since then UNESCO is the sole sponsor of this office.

The guiding principle was that this new Press House would be open to all media professionals without discrimination. IPMF's strategy is straightforward and clear: once journalists meet and become familiar with each other and their culture, cooperation and collaboration can begin, factual information can be shared, and bridges will be built instead of being destroyed.

➢ Since its creation until the second Intifada in 2000 the IPMF has run many activities to promote communication between both sides: We organized special press conferences and briefings in which Palestinian and Israeli decision-makers were introduced to

journalists. We believed in field visits: exchange visits to media organizations as newspapers and television/radio stations, Palestinian journalists visited Israeli press houses and vice versa to the OPT. We worked with editors and field journalists as well, through seminars and workshops on media issues.

➤ But one of the most important activities we have done as an exemplary activity for Peace oriented journalism was a field visit to the Balata refugee camp, near Nablus, in the OPT. We organized a trip for both Israeli and Palestinian journalists who were writing about this very crucial and unsolved issue of Palestinian refugees. It was in the year 2000 just few months before the explosion of the negotiations between both sides. Our aim was for them to see what they were writing about regarding the refugee issue. To see in their eyes and listen from them what are the real issues and problems of the refugees, how they live, and what they are hoping for. It was a remarkable visit, as it was a first time for most of them; and right after this visit they wrote and expressed their opinions across many Palestinian and Israeli newspapers on what they saw, the problem and possible solutions.

➤ Another exemplary peace oriented media project which was done is a documentary. UNESCO through IPMF have initiated and sponsored and produced a Joint Israeli-Palestinian German television co-production **"On the Road to Dialogue".** It was the first TV co-production documentary between the official State Palestinian TV PBC (Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation) and the Israeli private Channel 2 (Keshet) and a third party the ARD, Bavarian German TV.

The main idea behind the film is to show that the road to dialogue is long, difficult but it is worthy to try to see/understand the other side: the director on each side brought the story of the other side. Both directors travel from one city/village to another and show the social, economic and political situation while meeting with people. The film brought also some of the positive sides of this conflict showing happy people living ordinary lives besides the misfortune ones. The third side was the German ARD channel who documented the two sides behind the scenes. Our real achievement was to convince both Israeli and Palestinian channels to broadcast the film jointly and simultaneously at the same hour which they did in November 2004 and that was a strong message to both peoples.

In the year 2002, IPMF and UNESCO decided to change our scope of work due to the difficult political atmosphere in the area. Since then IPMF run mainly empowerment projects for the media for each side separately. So we had numerous trainings for journalists in the OPT and in Israel addressing several issues, related to media empowerment of young journalists, radio and TV, training productions, media languages courses and so on… We have been conducting several language courses for journalists - Israeli journalists are learning the Arabic language, media and culture and the Palestinian journalists were learning the Hebrew language, media and culture. The latest course is conducted for Aljazeera channel 25 people staff.

We are finalizing now a Hebrew-Arabic Glossary together with Birzeit University media center which is designed especially for Palestinian journalists use. It is a journalistic political book which provides journalists with a learning tool that can accompany them everywhere assisting them when listening and reading Hebrew news.

Lately, we had our first pilot Peace Journalism training in Switzerland, under UNESCO and Lassale Institut sponsorship. Veteran journalists from both sides joined this training with two Peace Journalism coaches from Europe. It was a remarkable training in spite of many difficult

discussions; their main focus was on how the PJ principles can be applied each in his work. There was lots of self criticism, especially when we exercised PJ language and made comparisons on current Israeli and Palestinian newspapers. In the end they elaborated ten practical steps to improve quality of journalism, to diminish concepts of the enemy and to discuss solutions.

Some of the results that were agreed and wrote by both sides:

- Not to report only on the atrocity, put it in the context of the history of the conflict and of it possible consequences and alternative reactions

- Report on successful conflict solutions from other regions, like North Ireland or South Africa

- Mention the names of victims of both sides (not only of the own side)

- Report on positive events, like meetings and reconciliations of the sides

- Find "Heroes of Non-Violence" and report about them

- In the case of conflict and violence, have a checklist of the words you use, and abolish exaggerating words. Double-check the correctness of the facts

- Know the peace visions and the peace workers of the regions and consult them in cases of a conflict

- As far as possible replace the official version through own research

- Examine and asses one's self censorship

Our aim today is to conduct Peace Journalism trainings for both sides:

I believe that a two to three day long training on this issue with practical exercises would provide a good guide for those journalists who wish to learn this approach and apply it in their work. As I suggested earlier, a Palestinian version and an Israeli version of PJ is needed in order to help them work in this spirit in a practical way. Trainings, I believe should be done separately, in order to be able to address the local media problems of each side and to create something convenient for each culture.

To support journalists in their pursuit for Peace oriented media I'm suggesting creating a Forum for Peace Journalism which can start as a small forum for all those journalists who wish to apply their knowledge, abilities and contacts to give publicity to perspectives for peace oriented media. So you are all invited to join this initiative to create **the "Peace Media circle of the Mediterranean countries".**