



Mediators and the Media

William Thatcher Dowell¹

1. Introduction

This paper is intended to provide a starting point for a discussion amongst mediators of how to develop an effective strategy for dealing with the way the media approaches conflict.

Resolving any conflict is a difficult task in itself. Introducing a journalist, who is by nature a generalist and a quick study, involves a dangerous gamble. There is no guarantee concerning the journalist's motives, background or understanding of the issues. At best, the journalist's goal is to tell a compelling story to his readers, and the search for drama may have unforeseen consequences. Newsweek's recent report on allegations that a copy of the Koran had been flushed down a toilet at the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo is an example. The editors in New York never expected that an 8-line item in a minor news brief could trigger riots in Afghanistan resulting in the deaths of at least 17 people.

The dilemma is that if the mediator alienates the journalist, or simply refuses to talk to the press at all, he will lose control over how the mediation process is presented to the public. Ignoring the press is simply not an option. This paper is designed to suggest a few ways in which a positive relationship can be developed. With a small amount of effort on the mediator's part, the press can emerge as a powerful ally who can be crucial in helping the mediator achieve his goals. In fact, success at handling the media is almost certain to emerge as a critical factor in the success of the mediation.

2. The Mediator: defining the issues and keeping control over the public perception of the process

At least in the early stages, sensitive negotiations need to be carried out in private. Mediation involves compromise, which involves both sides giving ground on points that

they previously considered essential. No one wants to telegraph that kind of concession in advance. But, while the actual negotiating process is secret, the public perception of what the conflict is actually about as well as the background and issues leading up to it are anything but secret. An accurate picture of the true nature of the dispute is crucial to resolving it, and having the public understand the background is critical to mobilizing support for a compromise. The dynamics of the conflict resolution process guarantee that the mediator will be the only one who has an interest in framing the dispute in objective terms.

The opposing parties may genuinely want to see a resolution, but no one can afford to voluntarily give a public relations advantage to the other side without getting something in return. It is consequently up to the mediator to set the record straight and to make certain that the public gets a clear understanding of the issues.

3. The role and function of the journalist

In this process, journalists can serve two functions: first, they can disseminate information and analysis to the public and make penetrating criticisms of each side, without implicating the mediator in value judgments that might damage the relationship with the negotiating parties. Second, by informing the public about what is at stake, the media can dramatically increase the pressure on both sides to reach a resolution quickly.

The journalist has the advantage of being outside the negotiations. As a result, he can talk to all sides without affecting the process. In certain circumstances, the journalist may even be able to provide valuable insights to the mediator, and he can even be used to launch trial balloons. The trick is to develop a sincere relationship with the journalist while not betraying the privacy of the negotiation. An even greater trick is for the mediator to make sure that the journalist really does understand the issues and the background that underlies the conflict. This is easier said than done. The journalist is not only likely to see the conflict filtered through the prism of his own preconceptions, but he will also have to deal with public perceptions amongst his audience. One journalist who had been reporting in Iran for a month in 1993, casually remarked to one member of the European press corps who had flown into Teheran for a presidential press conference that he had the impression that Iranians had been so traumatized by the Iran-Iraq War that there was no longer any taste for expansionism, the reporter replied. "I know. But if I write that, my editor won't believe me."

4. How mediators can seize or define the agenda

The tendency, these days, is to parachute journalists into trouble spots on a moment's notice. The journalist usually gets handed a folder with background news clips as he is going out the door. If he is lucky, he may get to do some reading on the plane on his way to the assignment. What he reads will lay the initial foundation for his understanding of the story, and it is at this point that the mediation team can make a major impact on how the story develops. If the mediation effort has compiled comprehensive and convincing

background material, the chances are that the journalist will concentrate on that, rather than on a haphazard collection of news clips.

A comprehensive briefing book, which can be turned over to journalists, is likely to be the mediator's strongest card. Printed material has a more lasting impact than an interview, and if the briefing book contains genuinely useful information: lists of telephone numbers, biographies of key personalities, maps of the area, the chances are that the journalist will rely on it for the duration of his reporting in the field, and even afterwards.

The journalist will eventually want to interview the mediator, but there are advantages to having a press spokesman or media consultant take over the initial background briefing. Besides saving the mediator's time, an informal briefing by a knowledgeable media consultant gives the consultant an opportunity to explore where the journalist is coming from, and to brief the mediator on how to handle his interview. Even more important, if the initial interview with the journalist takes a wrong turn, the mediator can always blame the misunderstanding on the consultant without endangering the negotiating process.

Journalists are naturally sceptical, so it is very important not to engage in overt salesmanship or overdose on optimism either in the briefing material or in interviews. In fact, by tossing in a few negative admissions of past errors, the mediator can increase his credibility, and the sense that he is not trying to hide anything. Unrealistic optimism can be expected to put the journalist instantly on guard. As a result, he is likely to discount both the mediator and the entire process.

In dealing with news media, it is increasingly important for mediators to think globally. They are not only dealing with the journalist on the spot, but also with his editors halfway around the globe. If a sudden development takes place in Aceh, Indonesia, for instance, editors in New York, Washington, London, Paris, Tokyo, Hong Kong and other major news capitals may need to issue a bulletin within a few minutes. They are likely to assign a reporter on the news desk to try to piece together what is happening from available sources. The first place the reporter or an editor will look is the Internet. If the mediator has had the foresight to create a website devoted to the conflict resolution process, and if his team updates it regularly, the chances are that news organizations around the world will turn to the mediator's version of events first. The critical point here is to update the website immediately as events take place. In the heat of the moment, a mediator may mistakenly think that maintaining a web site ranks at the bottom of his priorities. He is wrong. The website, more than any other means available, can transmit an unfiltered version of events instantaneously. The information will be picked up and repeated in stories around the world. The most important point is to keep information on the site updated on a daily basis. This where ponderous organizations like the United Nations often fail. A journalist will check into one of their sites and see that nothing has been changed in months, and then make a mental note not to bother looking at the site in the future. The information on the site does not have to be particularly important. The point is to let journalists know that the site is alive, and that they can turn to it when a critical event takes place. An excellent example is the USAID web site that provides

coverage of Darfur. The U.S. has its own national interests in Sudan, and any information it provides may have an agenda behind it, but the quality of the information that USAID provides is so straightforward and timely that it ends up trumping the other players in the region.

If the mediator wants to take a low profile approach and distance himself from the material that appears on the site, an option is to assign its operation to an independent contractor. The contractor can be disavowed if something goes wrong.

Providing such essential information is one of the most effective ways for the mediator to place himself at the centre of the news flow. But a significant advantage can also be obtained by offering informal services to journalists covering the story. Help in transportation, making connections to both sides in the dispute, finding a place to stay, is especially important to the journalist. Providing internet and phone access is even more important. While covering Saddam Hussein's efforts to annihilate Kurds in Northern Iraq in 1993, one journalist was only able to travel through the region because the UNHCR had made a vehicle and driver available. By providing a few basic comforts and a place to hang out, the mediation team can make itself the hub of journalistic activity in the area. There are obvious advantages to having the mediator control the information flow rather than ceding that to the opposing parties in the conflict. If the mediator wants information to get out, he may be able to help coverage by agreeing to take a reporter along on a trip into a difficult area.

a. Role and function of the spokesperson

While coverage is desirable, the mediator needs to make it clear to his team that only an authorized spokesman or the mediator himself should be allowed to talk to the reporter about matters of substance. If various members of the team allow themselves to be interviewed on the negotiations, you may end up with conflicting accounts, which creates the impression that the mediation is confused.

It is very important to realize that anything said to a reporter is likely to end up in print. Before any interview is given, and even in casual conversation, the mediator should set down the rules for attribution with the reporter. In general, "On the record" means that anything said can be quoted directly. "On background" means that the information must be attributed to a relatively anonymous source, i.e. a western diplomat, senior official, etc. "On deep background" means that the information can be used, but not attributed to anyone. "Off the record" means that the information is embargoed, and cannot be used at all. Despite the fact that these are standard definitions, it is a good idea to make sure that the reporter is using the same definitions before saying anything.

A standard technique for making sure that the reporter does not discover critical information on his own and broadcast it prematurely is to offer a press conference "on background" or on "deep background." All the reporters attending must promise in advance that they will abide by the rules, or henceforth be cut off from any further

information. Once the briefer gives the critical information, the reporter is obliged to abide by the agreed to terms of attribution.

What the mediator needs to avoid at all costs is the creation of an information void. If no information at all is coming out, the field is open to rumours which can be infinitely more destructive than the actual facts. As soon as any official refuses to talk to a reporter or hides behind a declaration of “No comment,” the reporter is free to make any kind of speculation that he wants. The usual assumption on the reporter’s part is that the official is trying to hide something, or that the worst case imaginable is true. The reporter may also conclude that the mediator is not up to the job, and is simply trying to hide the fact that the negotiations are a sham.

The secrecy surrounding the U.S. detention camp at Guantanamo is an example of the danger. U.S. troops may or may not be torturing prisoners, but the fact that everything at the prison is done in secret opens the door to speculation about the worst. This is something that the mediator should avoid at all costs.

5. The Journalist’s perception

The journalist is basically trying to obtain information under difficult circumstances. Every story he covers has an element of uncertainty. How long will it take him to reach the right people? How long to figure out what is going on and to boil it down to a few easily understandable points? The Reuters Middle East bureau used to advise reporters to have their story written before they arrived on the scene. While that runs counter to standard journalistic ethics, it’s closer to the truth than most journalists would like to admit. Most reporters have at least roughed out the structure of what they think the story is about, and then they amend it after they are on the scene. This is another reason why clearly written and easily digestible briefing material can make a major difference. Obviously, if the mediator facilitates the process for the reporter, he will likely have the reporter’s gratitude. If he sets up obstacles, the reporter may retaliate in frustration by deftly discrediting the negotiating process. In general, the reporter understands that there are certain things that the mediator cannot say, and he is likely to respect that. While the mediator cannot reveal private details of the negotiation, he can show genuine interest in the reporter and his problems, and that can prove very beneficial, especially over a late night drink or dinner. If the reporter sees how hard the mediator is working, his evaluation of the operation is likely to improve noticeably.

Every reporter is looking for an exclusive that no one else has. On the other hand, editors are cautious, and want to know that a story is within the general parameters of the public understanding of what is happening. As one editor used to put it, “You want to be on the cutting edge, not the bleeding edge.” An old trick with some foreign correspondents was to give a story to the wires a few minutes before calling their editors. The editor would see the story moving on the wire and take that as a confirmation that it was true. Some stories may gain or lose value once they are run by the wire services. A mediator or media consultant may want to think carefully before deciding how to place a story or a piece of information. For instance, an exclusive interview given to a powerful paper, or a

key television interview on a popular channel, can be a great deal more effective than a general press conference. First, it may be possible to negotiate prominent placing for the item, and second, other journalists will be forced by their editors to follow up on the story. Once one journalist starts getting scoops, the pressure builds on the others to match the scoop. A skilful media consultant can play one journalist off against another to build up interest.

6. The modern media

Improvements in technology and growing economic pressure on news organizations have dramatically changed the way news organizations handle foreign stories. The rise of cable TV all news channels like CNN, means that political players, who previously had to depend on journalists to interpret their ideas, can now bypass the reporter in the field and go for a direct interview via a satellite hook-up on CNN, the BBC or another major television news network. The TV channels like this approach because it gives the impression that their star news presenter or anchor is on top of every story, and that the news channel is omniscient. The advantage to the politician is that the news presenter at the other end of the line in London, Paris or New York, probably knows considerably less about what is actually happening than the correspondent in the field. That means that there is likely to be a larger percentage of soft-ball questions and that the politician will have added leverage in shaping the message. Before his fall, Saddam Hussein was a master at using CNN to get his message out.

Satellite communications have reached the point now where reporters can go live on TV using their cell phone as a camera. During the final days of the struggle over East Timor, an American reporter for a string of left-wing radio stations in the U.S. was arrested and held in a central jail facility by the Indonesian military. The reporter had a mobile phone in his pocket and managed to call New York. Within minutes, he was broadcasting live over dozens of radio stations in the U.S. and describing the collaboration between Indonesian authorities and government-financed militias who were attacking U.N. facilities.

On the down side, the increasing immediacy of modern communications means that reporters have less time to work at actually finding out what is going on. The result is a greater reliance on preconceptions and stereotypes. The dilemma for many journalists is that his editor is likely to be watching the same action that he sees through a variety of television feeds. The increasingly activist role played by editors, who may be half way around the world from the events unfolding, is another reason for developing a coherent presentation on a dedicated website.

The need for caution means that most editors will check to see how a story is playing in other news outlets first, and will then look for a new angle that will advance the story without moving so far out of line that it loses credibility. As a result, certain news organizations play a pivotal role in placing news. The most influential international news sources tend to be the BBC, CNN, Reuters, the Associated Press, Agence France Presse, The Financial Times, The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, The

Economist and the International Herald Tribune (which now acts as an overseas outlet for the New York Times). The BBC's World Service remains the most universally influential source for news around the world. Most local news rooms will also keep CNN running, just to be tipped off when a story is breaking. The New York Times and to a lesser extent the Wall Street Journal, which runs regional editions in Europe and Asia, will provide in-depth articles analyzing all aspects of a story. The editorial director of Le Monde, France's leading newspaper, once told me that he always checks the New York Times' internet website to see how a story is playing before running stories about the United States.

Until recently, most regional media seemed content to pick up its international news from the major English-speaking news organizations. The breakthrough that may be changing that situation now has come from the Qatar-based TV network, Al Jazeera, which grew out of a proposed joint-TV deal between the BBC and Saudi Arabia. When Saudi Arabia began to back away from the idea of running a genuinely independent news operation, the Emir of Qatar stepped in and picked up roughly 100 news reporters who had originally signed on for the project. Al Jazeera aims at taking the model for all news cable television which was initially developed on U.S. channels like CNN, and orienting it with an Arab point of view. The network is noteworthy for giving a voice to a variety of views—some of them extremist—which previously had little or no access to the airwaves. While much of the establishment in the Middle East is uneasy about Al Jazeera's readiness to include extremists on talk shows, and to air video tapes from Al Qaeda, there is no question that the Arab countries are proud of Al Jazeera's impact. "Al Jazeera was a revolution," an Egyptian television executive recently remarked. "Until Al Jazeera, we had always been quoting CNN. Now CNN was quoting us."

The bottom line is that Al Jazeera, and a growing number of other networks, have finally cracked Western, and primarily U.S. domination, of the media. In the Iraq War, U.S. networks maintained a few correspondents each, most of whom were imbedded with U.S. troops and reporting a specifically American point of view. Al Jazeera flooded the country with dozens of reporters and camera crews who were more than ready to show what the Americans were refusing to acknowledge.

Financially, the enormous number of channels available on cable television has fragmented news coverage, and reduced the revenue available to news organizations by cutting increasingly thinner slices of the advertising pie. As a result most American news organizations have reduced their overseas bureaus and now rely increasingly on parachuting a few overseas-based journalists into trouble spots on short notice. These journalists often rely on hiring local stringers, fixers and interpreters. Knowing who the stringers and fixers are and maintaining a relationship with them is a critical step in influencing the news flow. Guidance and support from the mediating team can play an important role in putting the journalist back on the right track.

a. The Internet

The Internet has literally revolutionized journalism and the way news stories are reported. Nearly all news reporting now begins with a search of the Internet for background material. Search engines like Google insure that even reports in minor publications are likely to come to a reporter's attention.—A major change created by the Internet is the persistence of news. The Internet is in a sense a giant living archive, and increasingly the Internet is accessible virtually anywhere.—From the news media's point of view, the Internet is rapidly encroaching on the territory of traditional print media. A few weeks ago the readership of the New York Times on the Internet passed the readership of the print edition.

Even more interestingly, the Internet has emerged as a communications vehicle for political opposition groups. Al Qaeda and other movements have regularly used the internet to communicate changes in doctrine. Terrorists now use the Internet to announce the capture and execution of hostages and to make demands.

One of the more intriguing developments on the Internet is the development of the blog, or the Internet Weblog. This is basically an inexpensive approach to self publishing. The typical blogger writes an essay concerning his thoughts on a topic and includes HTML hyperlinks to other sites on the internet that relate to subject being discussed. There are well over ten million blogs currently active on the net. A website, Technorati.com measures the influence that a blog has by counting up how many other websites make references to it. What the blogs have done is create a kind of emergent journalism in which the public using the Internet gradually drifts to the sites that it finds the most interesting and credible—effectively bypassing the traditional gatekeepers. An example of the power of bloggers was provided by an irreverent and talented young Iraqi who called himself “Salam Pax,” started a blog called “Dear Raed,” and wondered who would kill him first: Saddam's secret police or the invading U.S. troops. Salam Pax eventually attracted two million readers, was offered a job as a columnist by the Guardian, wrote a book and starred in an award-winning documentary film. The result of all this is a growing realization in the U.S. , especially, that Internet media can have as much or more impact than traditional media. Bloggers were accredited to the political conventions in the U.S. for the first time last year. The so-called “Swift Boat” campaign against John Kerry in the last U.S. presidential election demonstrated how effective the Internet can be in mobilizing the public

7. The Impact of Asymmetric Conflict

Public perception has taken on a much greater importance with the growing prevalence of asymmetric conflict. In contrast to conventional disputes between national powers, an asymmetric conflict, which usually pits a small group against a larger, established authority, the public is often the major target. The attack on the World Trade Center was tragic, but the real impact came from the psychological reaction to the event.

In this new approach to conflict, perception counts for more than truth or reality.

8. Alternative Approaches to Information

Several relatively simple approaches can be very effective in disseminating information in a conflict situation. When the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue was negotiating a ceasefire between the Indonesian government and the Aceh independence movement in late 2002, it became apparent that the mediation was in danger of failing because the veil of secrecy had removed the pressure to reach an agreement. The decision was made to organize a “road show” to visit the principal population centres in Aceh. About two dozen Indonesian reporters were invited to come on the trip along with several Indonesian personalities who supported the negotiation efforts. In each town, the Centre organized a series of extraordinarily frank “town meetings” with military, police, public officials and leading citizens to discuss the pros and cons of signing a ceasefire. The meetings provided an opportunity for local citizens to express their desire for peace to government officials, and it also provided an excuse for airing arguments in favour of a ceasefire. By the time three or four towns had been visited, the Indonesian reporters, who were paid a minimal per diem allowance to go along on the tour, were repeating the arguments in favour of a ceasefire to each other. In addition to the “town meetings,” the Centre also organized talk shows on local radio stations. These required a minimal payment for broadcast time, but they had the added advantage of involving the local population in a dialogue about peace which added to the pressure on the government to sign the agreement, which it eventually did.

A similar project was developed by Media Action International in Kosovo. In this case the NGO produced 15-minute radio programs which interspersed popular rock music with brief interviews with Serbian and Albanian youths talking about their problems. The idea was to use music to show that youth on both sides of the conflict had similar concerns and interests. The Asia Foundation in Afghanistan used comic books to explain Afghanistan’s new constitution. Other organisations like Fondation Hirondelle develop radio dramas to communicate information to areas where illiteracy is normally a barrier.

9. Conclusion

The bottom line to this discussion is that having accurate information and managing its deployment intelligently is an essential prerequisite of any attempt at conflict resolution. The media play an important role in amplifying information and communicating it to the public at large, and that in turn can contribute to nudging both sides in a conflict to accept a compromise resolution. The mediator plays a critical role since he is the only one who is in a position to make sure that the media has an accurate, unbiased picture of the issues and what is actually happening. While the actual negotiations in a mediation have to be carried out in secret, the mediator can play a crucial role in making sure that the media have reliable background material on the conflict and that inaccurate preconceptions are corrected. By handling the media astutely, he can also protect the process and its parties, to some extent, from it. An essential new tool to accomplishing that is the Internet, but that comes with the warning that information now has a global context that extends beyond the geographic area of the conflict.

Essentially, the media is not a headache that needs solving, it is a tool that needs wielding in the interests of achieving peace.

¹ William Dowell currently edits a website on international affairs and teaches journalism at New York University. He previously reported on the War in Vietnam for NBC News, the Iranian Revolution and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan for ABC News, and he worked as a Middle East correspondent for Time Magazine from 1989 through 1993. During that time he reported extensively on the War in Iraq from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and he also covered a number of conflicts in Africa, including Liberia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia. He subsequently served as Time's Southeast Asia Bureau Chief, covering Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Burma. In 2002, he participated in the Henri Dunant Center for Humanitarian Dialogue's successful effort to negotiate a ceasefire between the Indonesian government and GAM, the Aceh Independence Movement.