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❖ **News: Structure and agency**

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"The winds of change are blowing through American media". So say the enterprising campaigners for peace and social justice at Avaaz.org, an independent not-for-profit organisation with offices in six countries. Avaaz means 'voice' in many languages and their team "works to ensure that the views and values of the world's people inform global decision-making".

Like many of us, they detect an opportunity for positive change with the election of Barack Obama as US President. After all, long before he emerged as America's choice, he was being willed on to victory by publics around the world. And, like many of us, Avaaz believes the top priority in foreign policy for the Obama White House should be to shift to a far more even-handed approach in the Middle East. Without using the term, they slot this issue into what is known as the 'constraints theory' of policy decision-making in international relations, and they identify as the biggest constraint, the way the conflict is represented in the media.

Only four percent of stories reaching US readers and audiences so much as mention the fact that the Palestinians are under military occupation, Avaaz note. The shape of public understanding of the issue reveals the clear imprint of this and other notable omissions: in opinion polls, fewer than 25% of Americans say they can sympathise with both sides. "Given domestic pressure, even Obama will find it difficult to be fair," they say.

This is welcome because it is a (still) relatively rare example of someone in the peace and social justice fields treating media representations as a concern in their own right. History – certainly my history – is littered with unsuccessful applications to charitable trusts and the like, with ideas for campaigning, not merely *through* the media but also *on* the media, as a way to create a public discourse more conducive to non-violent responses to conflict. The latest rejection came through just the other day, from the James N. Kirby Foundation here in Australia.

Having then decided that media represent a problem in its own right, what do Avaaz intend to do about it? Despairing perhaps of persuading the plenipotentiaries of charitable giving to share their analysis, they've issued a grassroots call for small donations – imitating the signature style of the Obama campaign itself. "Media experts tell us the best way to seize this opportunity is to fund a small number of highly respected individuals to engage top journalists and editors on this issue." They say: "providing facts, information and opportunities to hear sensible voices for peace from both Palestinians and Israelis."

To this end, they're appealing for funds to hire specialist staff and lobby the media: "As a start,

\$40,000 would be enough to hire a respected advocate; \$15,000 will pay for an opinion poll in Gaza and Israel that challenges prejudices and is released to US media; \$50,000 will build a 'peace wall' in Gaza, Jerusalem and Washington DC for citizens in each place to post messages to each other and the media".

Their strategy covers several distinct types of media activism, a form of endeavour that has been divided into three strands, summarized thus:

- Change the media;
- Create new media;
- Change the audience.

Assuming they succeed in raising the money, how far are they likely to succeed in changing media representations for the better?

Agency

To adopt a tactic of advocacy with senior journalists is to work on the assumption that editors and reporters have unexplored scope to change the way they approach their job. In academic language, some journalistic 'agency' can be brought to bear. It resonates with some of the responses to a global survey of journalists, carried out a few years ago, which asked editors, reporters and others from 28 countries, what were the major impediments to them and their colleagues doing a better job? Some respondents picked up on this sense that, while there are structural constraints (of those, more later), many who operate within them do not push hard enough at the limits.

So, for example, Jon Snow, one of Britain's highest profile TV presenters at *Channel Four News*, blamed "laziness and self-censorship" for media shortcomings. Baffour Ankomah, UK-based editor of *New African* magazine, accused his fellow editors of being "lazy, ignorant and operating with pre-set ideas". Supara Janchitfah, a reporter at the *Bangkok Post*, was frustrated that Thai media did not make the most of their notional freedom of expression: "Our organisation has no clear vision of what we want to achieve. Sometimes to play safe, we often sided with the government. Criticising the government is not our nature. Thus most of the time, we do the self-censorship."

The survey was carried out under the banner of 'Reporting the World', a journalism think-tank based in London of which Annabel McGoldrick and I were co-directors, operating from 2001-2005. This took the form of a series of meetings for invited journalists – including a residential roundtable – to discuss the reporting of particular stories about conflict, supported by publications, a website and regular newsletters (material stored at www.reportingtheworld.net). According to the project report, the process was "intended to fortify reporters, producers and editors alike in overcoming self-censorship and the constraints of consensus and inertia, in favour of thinking through stories for themselves."

Perhaps the clearest success of 'Reporting the World' came in the discussion we held about the reporting of conflict in the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia in April, 2001. There had been an outbreak of fighting in the Albanian-speaking north of the country, involving the NLA, or National Liberation Army. Many in the media interpreted this as the beginning of an attempt to secede, following in the footsteps of the KLA, which won western support in its campaign for Kosovo independence from Yugoslavia a couple of years earlier. Understandably, given Britain's prominent role in the NATO bombing of Serbia, much of the reporting in UK media applied the same frame to the conflict in Macedonia. However, no-one in official circles ever gave it much encouragement. Reports therefore, tended to be divided into those whose authors were determined not to let the facts get in the way of a good story, and those who mentioned the possibility of a repeat performance, only to pour cold water on it. In either case, it became a

standard and self-validating frame for reporting the conflict, bearing out the words of George Lakoff of the Rockridge Institute: "Even negating a frame evokes a frame, and evoking a frame reinforces it."

The discussion was scheduled in the middle of what turned out to be a lull in the violence, so – true to the war journalism convention that when the guns fall silent, reporters leave for another war – many of those deployed to the story had returned to London, and several turned up in person. We had also invited journalists from the Macedonian language section of the BBC World Service, who shed some interesting light on debates over the coverage taking place within the corporation, and a *bona fide* peacemaker, Eran Fraenkl, then country director for the international NGO, 'Search for Common Ground', who flew in from Skopje.

Fraenkl spoke memorably, emphasising in particular the ample evidence, as he saw it, that Macedonia's mixed communities were not about to be rent asunder, and presenting well-attested complaints about the divisive and simplistic coverage offered by international media. To his distress, there were further episodes of violence a week or two later, whereupon the same reporters returned to the country. However, many of them now took a very different line, and the overall tone of the coverage was much more likely to play down the previous excitement about a new conflagration in 'the Balkans'.

One particular aspect of the first phase of reporting, which saw the majority Macedonian population referred to as 'Slavs', came in for considerable criticism at the 'Reporting the World' discussion, both for appearing to essentialise the conflict to an inborn enmity of antinomial ethnic groups, and for effectively depriving one of the parties of their own self-defined identity. In the second phase this was gone, to be replaced by more thoughtful forms of reference.

So, working with senior journalists, if done respectfully and in timely fashion, can be effective. The nature of the job is such that opportunities for critical reflection are rare, and to offer a safe space for them is helpful. It also helped that both Annabel and I were professional reporters ourselves – in the words of one senior editor, it was because we "know what it's like to have to meet a deadline," that he decided to get involved.

Structure

But journalistic agency can only go so far. In our first 'Reporting the World' discussion, we looked at reporting of the Israel-Palestine conflict. In Britain at that time, as in the US today, there were notable omissions in coverage, which corresponded closely with gaps in public understanding. Two researchers, Greg Philo and Mike Berry of the Glasgow University Media Group, set out to measure them, through questionnaires and focus groups, which brought data from over 800 television viewers. At one point they found, people were more likely to believe it was the Palestinians occupying the occupied territories than to realise it was the Israelis. Philo and Berry published a memorable account of the findings, titled, *Bad News from Israel*.

One of the main structural impediments to getting the Palestinian side of the story they write, is that most international media offices are situated in Israeli-controlled West Jerusalem. Internationals equipped with press cards can usually travel around and negotiate the 600-odd army checkpoints which control movements in the occupied West Bank, much more easily than Palestinians, of course. But when something happens, such as a bombing or a military raid, the Israelis can, and often do, slow everything down. Because the journalists are not themselves based in Palestinian communities, Philo and Berry argue, but instead have to travel into them, it's virtually guaranteed that readers and audiences will struggle to find first-hand Palestinian perspectives in the resultant coverage.

In response to such concerns, some changes were set in motion, at least at the BBC. A Gaza

bureau was set up, and later the BBC governors commissioned their own independent report on the corporation's coverage, which recommended that the privations and humiliations of everyday life for Palestinians receive more attention than hitherto. Editors and reporters have since then been a little more likely to break out of what the report called the "strait-jacket" of balance, as applied to the conflict, instead representing the underlying imbalance between an occupying military superpower and an occupied, impoverished people.

Bob Hackett, the Communications Professor from Simon Fraser University, in Canada, who conceived the typology of media activism quoted above, (he is also a media activist of long standing, through the 'Newswatch Canada' project and others), has peered more deeply into the question of which is more influential over the content of news – 'structure' or 'agency.'

In a sense, the very nature of news militates against a fair hearing for the Palestinian case. Ask a Palestinian to give you an account of the conflict, and there's a fair chance it will begin with the words, "In 1948 ...", going on to recall *Al-Nakba*, or 'the Catastrophe', when hundreds of thousands were driven from their homes at Israel's founding. If not, it might open with "In 1967...", explaining how Israel's military occupation of Palestinian territory, which began in that year, lies at the root of many of their problems.

The trouble is, you can't start a story with something that happened 40 or 60 years ago – that would be 'olds', not news. And then, history, especially the history of conflict, is a bitterly contested terrain. News is less controversial – and, therefore saleable to more potential customers – if it sticks to what has just taken place. Hackett echoes many other analysts in critiquing this convention of journalistic objectivity as a major, albeit not insurmountable, structural constraint on the agency that individual reporters or even editors can bring to bear.

What's at a premium then, is structural innovation, capable of reforming the organization of journalistic process and the marketing of news to readers and audiences, creating new frameworks of incentive and reward. Until we can think of them and find ways to apply them, engaging senior professional journalists in reflective discussion is a good way to start.

Details of the Avaaz project can be found here: https://secure.avaaz.org/en/gaza_media_balance/?cl=175527284&v=2748

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