# MEDIA AND PEACE PROCESSES: INTERNATIONAL CASES

INTRODUCTION

As one of the principal ways in which citizens access information, the communications media can have a central role in reporting on peace processes, conflict, peacebuilding, and relevant subjects. They are also key in shaping public opinion on these topics as they develop, with the ability to both facilitate support for and generate opposition to government-implemented and other initiatives. The media's role in polarizing society at crucial moments during conflict resolution processes has been widely studied, from the radio programs that incited violence in Rwanda to Hitler's use of media to promote and gain support for his hatred of Jews. 'Peace journalism' has also been widely encouraged as a way for the media to contribute to and strengthen peacebuilding efforts.[i]

Public opinion of the current GOC-FARC peace process in Colombia has swayed in both directions at various points throughout the talks' almost three-year trajectory. The national and international media have played a central role in this volatility, and continue to influence public support for a possible final agreement, which will most likely be demonstrated in a referendum after such an accord is signed. It is therefore essential that the Colombian government and media examine cases such as those presented here, which provide important lessons on the positive part the media can take in peacebuilding efforts.

NORTHERN IRELAND

In Northern Ireland, the media generally took a non-sensationalist approach to reporting developments in the peace process. Barring Britain-based sources such as the BBC, mainstream media for the most part was not strongly associated with one side of the conflict or the other, refraining from reporting opinion and focusing instead on fact. This was especially true towards the end of the peace process when the Good Friday Agreement was signed, and the media – including the BBC and other national channels - became an instrumental and constructive tool for representatives from all sides of the political spectrum to drum up support in the run-up to the public referendum that would eventually approve the Agreement and allow its implementation. The media therefore played a central role in the referendum by contributing to and facilitating the public support necessary to bring the peace process' results to fruition. Since then, the media has been credited with highlighting examples of peaceful coexistence around the country, and celebrating Irish diversity in the face of various types of social conflict.[ii]
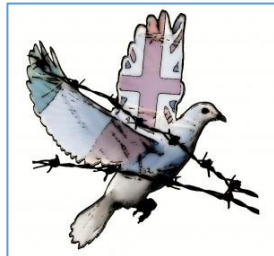
Northern Ireland also presents some examples of the negative role that media can play in the context of a peace process. As mentioned, the BBC and other British sources, as well as some Unionist media outlets in Ireland and Northern Ireland, expressed doubts even after the Good Friday Agreement had been signed, possibly missing opportunities to take a constructive role. Analysts also highlight that the lack of opinion by other media sources could actually have prevented public debate, or at the least obscured the chance to shape such discussions. Finally, the Sinn Fein illegal armed group complained that the national media was biased against them after the talks, curtailing their political support base. However, overall the media's role in Northern Ireland's peace process was constructive.[iii]

BOSNIA

Bosnia's Open Broadcast Network (OBN) is an example of how media channels have been constructed to contribute to peace in the conflict and post-conflict phases. The 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement established the channel with the specific goal of providing trustworthy programming and promoting the accord's content and resolutions, which concentrated on peace and reconciliation. OBN news stories generally highlighted local-level examples of community groups and leaders who championed peaceful coexistence even in the face of grave social tensions, and the reports avoided biased interpretations of the implementation of the Dayton Agreement, in great contrast to other Bosnian networks at the time.[iv]

Despite these great efforts to make OBN an instrumental tool in the implementation and appropriation of the Dayton Agreement, there were various issues with its structure and mandate. The first was that OBN had an English name, indicating its international origins. Many Bosnians were wary of international interventions and control during the post-conflict phase, so this marker did not jive well with them and therefore lost possible public support before it had even begun. In addition, OBN journalists quickly became confused with their goals and responsibilities, as they did not feel that reporting unbiased facts could always contribute directly to reconciliation, rather preferring to highlight examples of reconciliation executed by others. OBN's low budget and consequent lack of news material (rather broadcasting a lot of donated foreign programming) worsened the lack of credibility it experienced due to its English name. It closed in 2003, four years after its creation, and became a private commercial channel.[v]

LIBYA

Libya's often confusing security landscape includes a range of legal and illegal armed actors who represent varying degrees of Islamist and anti-Islamist sentiment. Mainstream media experiences relatively low levels of trust, but has been used widely by these groups to promote their positions, with channels thereby becoming associated with one or another side of the conflict. Broadcasting and viewing data shows that the national mainstream media is becoming increasingly accessed and influential.[vi]

One of the most significant ways in which these media outlets have influenced public perception of the conflict in Libya is by positioning certain armed groups as legal or illegal. For example, while some channels presented the Islamist revolutionary brigades as illegal entities and a danger to national security and politics, others projected an image of them as legal bodies whose conduct benefits Libya. Ultimately, as the accessibility of the news improved and trust in certain channels increased, public opinion swayed in the political direction they represented, thereby influencing public perception of important security actors and their legitimacy in the new post-Gaddafi Libyan government. These tendencies show how mainstream media can shape public perception of important issues in the conflict and post-conflict phases.[vii]

COLOMBIA

As Colombia moves through a peace process between the national government and the FARC guerrilla group, communications media are an important source of information about the talks. Until now, the media have, for the most part, played a polarizing role in shaping public opinion about the peace process, focusing on the sensationalism of the news and not on the facts of the process. This lack of real facts has been exacerbated by the GoC's strategy of not releasing large quantities of concrete information about developments in the dialogues, facilitating speculation and false representations by the media. Furthermore, some journalists have overtly expressed their own political bias and opposition to the peace talks and the Santos administration, thereby calling into question the validity of their reporting.[viii] Although many calls have been made for the Colombian media to leave aside its partiality, this bias seems entrenched in peace process-related journalism, and continues to affect public opinion in ways that benefit neither the progress of the peace talks nor the population whose situation would be changed for the better in the case of a final agreement.[ix]

CONCLUSION

Peace journalism is an essential reporting practice that recognizes the influence and impact that communications media can have on the development and implementation of peace processes and agreements. Northern Ireland's example provides a crucial lesson to Colombia, especially in terms of the role the media could play in a popular referendum of a final agreement, when news reporting could significantly shape public opinion and thereby the outcome of the vote. Bosnia demonstrates the mistrust that can stem from international intervention in peace media efforts, as well as the importance of training journalists in practices that support peace, reconciliation, and other crucial components of post-conflict journalism. Finally, Libya shows how public opinion on peace-related issues is directly linked to public trust in communications media, therefore highlighting the importance of fomenting such trust in order to facilitate the achievement of peace goals through the media. Colombia has a long way to go in order to maximize the potential of the media to drum up support for the peace process and interest in implementation of a final agreement. These international and national lessons should serve to highlight opportunities to use the communications media in a positive way during and after the peace process, rather than continuing their use as a public space in which journalists and politicians contribute to further polarization, speculation, and sensationalism regarding the peace talks.

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