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## News Media as Mediators

By Carol Pauli

Journalism thrives on conflict, a classic “news value,” which can make a story newsworthy. As a result, the normal routines of reporters and editors tend to emphasize extreme voices and combative themes, triggering the criticism that news coverage of an event is “more likely to escalate a conflict than to pacify it.”<sup>1</sup>

Even so, journalism has made some legendary journeys into conflict resolution. In 1977, for example, CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite conducted separate interviews with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, which led directly to Sadat’s historic visit to Jerusalem. In 1985, Ted Koppel, in an ABC *Nightline* series, hosted the first formal conversation between representatives of the African National Congress and supporters of South Africa’s apartheid system. In 1988, a *Nightline* series brought the government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization onto the same stage for the first time.

Such examples have prompted an emerging group of media scholars and practitioners to experiment with importing conflict resolution techniques into news reporting. The result, sometimes called “peace journalism,” has been especially aimed at societies facing conflict, in projects ranging from Burundi to Indonesia.<sup>2</sup>



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“A reliable, diverse and independent news media has an almost innate potential for contributing to conflict resolution,” according to one proponent, Ross Howard, president of Canada’s Media&Democracy Group. “It functions as a channel of communication that counteracts misperceptions. It frames and analyzes the conflict, identifies the interests, defuses mistrust, provides safe emotional outlets, and more.”<sup>3</sup>

What follows is a closer look at news reporting and conflict resolution, comparing the normal practices of the journalist to those of the facilitative mediator. The two have much in common. For example, a facilitative mediator brings parties together, communicates, translates, extracts information, and serves as an agent of reality and a watchdog over the integrity of the process.<sup>4</sup> All of these descriptions would apply as easily to Cronkite, Koppel, and any number of news reporters. However, the journalist’s role also differs from the mediator’s role in important ways. One difference is apparent at the start, as the journalist and the mediator identify just whose conflict is to be heard.

### Initiating the Process

In mediation, disputing parties are identified when a complainant initiates the process and names a respondent. In news coverage, it is the *neutral* who initiates the process; the journalist decides what conflict to cover, what angle to take, and which parties to interview. It is even possible that parties will not know each other until the reporter brings them into the news story. This practice makes the journalist a kind of freelance mediator with the enviable ability to choose the parties, rather than the reverse.

In fact, even if both parties are unwilling to mediate a dispute, the reporter can elicit their narratives, possibly softening their images of each other, and even compelling communication between them. For example, in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, government and rebel leaders refused to be interviewed together on radio. Reporters at Voice of America's headquarters in Washington, D.C., responded by asking both sides the same list of questions and then intercutting the interviews to let Rwandan listeners compare the answers. The result, a dissatisfying kind of parallel talk, persuaded the opponents to agree to future joint interviews.

While the reporter's relative freedom to choose the parties may promote the resolution of some conflicts, it may impede progress in others. Weaker parties, competing for the reporter's attention, sometimes use the strategy of espousing extreme views, which can then skew the dialogue. Even the standard news practice of seeking balance by pairing opposing interviews falls into a trap: it presumes that a dispute has only two opposing camps. News coverage may fail to show the complexities of a polycentric problem and the opportunities for creative solutions. Furthermore, the reporter who is free to engage a party is also free to abandon the party when the conflict becomes tiring. News coverage rarely offers parties the sustained engagement that can be essential to resolving conflicts.

### Arranging a Neutral Setting

The mediator provides a time and place conducive to talking, usually giving each party a specific, equal spot. The journalist, too, creates conditions to promote communication. To persuade Israel and the PLO to share a stage in 1988, *Nightline* agreed to erect a symbolic wall between the two sides. Even when interviews are done separately, journalism has a unique ability to provide safe, equitable, virtual spaces for any number of parties by placing them on the pages of a newspaper or in the airtime of a news broadcast. In the case of Sadat and Begin, for example, Cronkite conducted separate satellite interviews and then created a shared space by broadcasting them on a split screen so that audiences saw the two leaders simultaneously.

### Accumulating Information

Both the mediator and the journalist accumulate information primarily by questioning parties, and here again their approaches are similar. An analysis of the two *Nightline* programs found that Koppel used such mediation techniques as asking challenging questions, seeking explanations, and checking reality.<sup>5</sup> This is not surprising, because these are intuitive techniques of journalism as well.

News gathering, however, differs in some ways from mediation's information gathering. One difference is in the neutral's way of listening. Mediators make use of active listening, sometimes summarizing and reflecting back their understanding of a party's thoughts and asking for confirmation. In contrast, a reporter typically hears and notes a party's reply to a question and then simply asks another question.

Another important difference is the lack of privacy granted to a news interview. The mediator closes the doors and promises a confidential conversation, but the journalist inherently invites a large unseen public to listen in and to hold the speaker publicly responsible for what he or she says.<sup>6</sup> In many cases, therefore, the reporter likely gets less information than a mediator would. However, where parties are seeking public support, the unseen audience can also strengthen the reporter's hand. For Cronkite and Koppel, it was the size and power of their audiences that provided the leverage to bring high-level disputing parties together to answer difficult questions.

**News coverage rarely offers parties the sustained engagement that can be essential to resolving conflicts.**

### Framing Issues

The facilitative mediator is charged with managing a conversation between disputing parties "in a way that does not simply reinforce their differences."<sup>7</sup> To do this, the mediator typically reframes points of disagreement in nonjudgmental terms and suggests an agenda for discussion that is designed to optimize the chances of resolving the dispute. Such an exercise would be alien to journalism. To the extent that the reporter has an agenda for conducting an interview, it is calculated not to assist the parties, but rather to extract information to share with the public. Furthermore, the reporter rarely rephrases a party's statements, because the newsroom places a high value on capturing the party's exact words, especially if they are vivid or particularly apt.

The reporter generally frames issues later, in the process of writing or telling the story. Here the contrast to the neutral framing of mediation is stark. An analysis of seven newspapers over a two-month period found that 30 percent of front-page stories used combative narrative frames. That is, they told stories in terms of conflicts, winners and losers, or revelations of wrongdoing.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, unlike the mediator, the reporter is usually not deliberate in framing the story. The journalist's choices tend to be unintentional and even unconscious.

### Generating Movement

Resolving a conflict requires movement by one or more parties. The mediator consciously tries to generate this movement. The journalist tries not to. A cardinal principle

of journalism is to report news, but not make news. But journalists may generate movement simply as a by-product of the interviewing process. When researchers classified Koppel's *Nightline* conversational moves according to a list of 100 mediation techniques, they found that he "stroked" opposing parties, oriented them toward the future, used humor, pointed out shared positions, performed "reality checks," and warned of the consequences of their negative behavior. Cronkite's satellite exchanges, although much briefer, also followed lines familiar to mediators, as in the following excerpt regarding the prospect of Sadat's visiting Jerusalem (see above).

Sadat's historic trip to Jerusalem did take place within a week, and Cronkite eventually acknowledged that his broadcast probably played a role because it "speeded up the process, brought it into the open, removed a lot of possibly obstructionist middlemen, and made it difficult for principals to renege on their very public agreement."<sup>9</sup>

### Using a Caucus

A facilitative mediator sometimes meets in a confidential session, or caucus, with individual parties in order to get sensitive information or to provide a safe space for exploring ideas or difficulties in a party's arguments. For the journalist, separate interviews are normally not private in the same sense, unless the interview is off the record.

In some respects, this confidentiality offered by the reporter and the mediator are mirror images of each other. In mediation, the parties are already known, but their information is kept secret by the mediator. In journalism, the information is usually published, but the party's identity is kept secret. In mediation, an individual conversation is presumed to be confidential unless a party authorizes sharing specific information. In journalism, an individual conversation is presumed on the record unless otherwise agreed. In both settings, confidentiality is seen to serve a purpose worthy of some degree of legal protection. The mediator is under a duty not to tell a trial court the statements heard in the mediation. Most states, although not the federal government, provide some evidentiary privilege allowing a reporter to protect the identity of a source in order to keep a promise of anonymity.

### Resolving the Dispute

The mediator's ultimate hope—resolving the dispute—is not shared by the journalist. The reporter's primary aim is to inform, leaving any next steps to the parties and the public. Yet the contrast between mediator and reporter is not as clear-cut as it might seem initially. A mediation that does not resolve all of the issues is not considered to have failed. Nor is a news story that *does* resolve issues seen as failing. Newspapers that have actively sought resolution to community conflicts have been among those to win the Pulitzer Prize for exactly those efforts.<sup>11</sup>

## Walter Cronkite's Interview/ Mediation Technique

News interview	Mediation technique
<i>Sadat:</i> I'm just waiting for the proper invitation.	Issue
<i>Cronkite:</i> You must get something directly from Mr. Begin, not through the press?	Rephrasing to clarify
<i>Sadat:</i> Right. Right.	
<i>Cronkite:</i> And how would that be transmitted . . . since you do not have diplomatic relations with Israel?	Reality test/ option development
<i>Sadat:</i> Why not through our mutual friend, the Americans . . . ?	Proposal
<i>Cronkite:</i> If you get that formal invitation, how soon are you prepared to go?	Clarification
<i>Sadat:</i> . . . in the earliest time possible.	
<i>Cronkite:</i> . . . say within a week?	Clarification
<i>Sadat:</i> You can say that, yes . . . <sup>10</sup>	

### Journalism as Transformative Mediation

On several points, where journalism differs markedly from facilitative mediation, it has a striking resemblance to another ADR method: transformative mediation. This approach to mediation focuses on the communication between parties. It tries to help each achieve a greater degree of clarity about the self and a greater degree of responsiveness toward the other.

One similarity is in the framing of issues. The transformative mediator, like the journalist, avoids neutrally reframing issues, preferring to reflect back to both parties the words and emotions that they have conveyed themselves. For the transformative mediator, to frame an issue is not to rephrase it, but to highlight it, inviting parties to "consider the implications or questions that follow from a statement one of them has made."<sup>12</sup> This unflinching adherence to the parties' own words is strikingly similar to journalists' attempts to accurately quote sources in stories.

A second similarity is that, even more than the facilitative mediator, the transformative mediator places all responsibility for the outcome of a conflict on the parties. Transformative mediators "consciously reject feelings of responsibility for generating agreements, solving the parties' problem, healing the parties, or bringing about recon-

ciliation between them.”<sup>13</sup> This determined detachment from the outcome also is true to the norms of journalism.

In some other characteristics, journalism and transformative mediation are at opposite extremes. For example, the journalist typically keeps control of an interview, while a transformative mediator purposely turns the process over to the parties.

### Journalism and Adjudication

In several other areas, journalism is strikingly unlike transformative mediation but similar to adjudication. Like adjudication, journalism aims at pursuing truth above resolving disputes. Also, journalism is necessarily public. Both journalists and judges take their authority from the public. Like the court, the journalist even has some ability to force parties to the table. The reporter’s version of a subpoena is a phone call to a party saying that an opponent will be quoted in the next day’s newspaper or broadcast. In that context, the reluctant party often consents to be interviewed too.

Another similarity between journalism and adjudication is the way both fit widely varied human stories into a limited set of predetermined frames. In law, the process is conscious, and the frame is the formal cause of action. In journalism, the framing process is more intuitive, but it still tends to impose a win-lose relationship on the parties and to limit the way parties can hear each other and the way the public perceives them.

### Future Directions

Proponents of peace journalism advocate spreading their approach and encourage an array of changes in news reporting and writing practices. Some aim at the goals of news reporting and suggest that journalists should abandon their claim of disengagement from the consequences of their work. Others aim at the methods of news reporting and suggest that journalists should take care to include moderate voices in their stories, ask questions designed to find areas of agreement, become more conscious of their framing, and expand the range of interpretive frames that they use in order to include more than combat.

In deciding how—and whether—conflict resolution techniques may be put to use in the news media, it may be wise to follow Lon Fuller’s example and first examine the moralities of the process in question. The morality of journalism would seem to lie in public truth telling, holding a mirror up to society. If this is the case, then journalism fails its own morality when it distorts the mirror by focusing on the most extreme voices, constricting people’s stories into a limited set of frames, or making unconscious prejudgments. To the extent that the techniques of facilitative mediation can heighten the awareness and expand the tools of reporters, those techniques can promote both peace making and journalistic integrity.

However, to aim consciously at a result—even the noble result of a resolved dispute—may compromise the truth-telling aim of journalism and, in the process, undermine its prospects for helping parties reach settlements. Unlike facilitative mediation, journalism is a public process that, at points, has a level of

power approaching that of adjudication, capable even of proactively seeking out conflicts to bring into its process. Given this freewheeling power, journalism may be exercising an important balancing restraint, even if unintentionally, when it leaves outcomes up to the parties and the public.

This suggests that peace journalism advocates may find helpful insights by further investigating the applicability of transformative mediation techniques. Disengagement from the outcomes of mediation fits the stance of the journalist. Emphasis on clarity and responsiveness may provide a good orientation for an accurate and useful journalistic mirror. ♦♦

### Endnotes

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8. PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM & PRINCETON SURVEY RESEARCH ASSOCIATES, *FRAMING THE NEWS: THE TRIGGERS, FRAMES AND MESSAGES IN NEWSPAPER COVERAGE* (August 5, 1999).
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11. ROBERT KARL MANOFF, *THE MEDIA’S ROLE IN PREVENTING AND MODERATING CONFLICT* (United States Institute of Peace 1997), [www.usip.org/virtualdiplomacy/publications/papers/manoff.html](http://www.usip.org/virtualdiplomacy/publications/papers/manoff.html).
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13. *Id.* at 267.

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(continued from page 2)

will be used more frequently and more intelligently. The effort will not be limited to mediation. Companies and their firms need to discuss collaborative law skills in negotiating early resolutions, arbitration, and other creative ways to resolve disputes.

If this effort is successful with Fortune 100 companies, then the message will spread. When corporate America and its law firms embrace ADR, the rest of the legal system will, too.

The dispute resolution field has always held great promise. To realize this promise we need to strive to be better neutrals and promote the advantages of our work in concrete, attainable ways. ♦♦