

Where does one stand, as a journalist, in relation to conflict? Surely we all have different answers. The Media Peace Centre's **Hannes Siebert** and **Melissa Baumann** argue that journalists should locate themselves "on the border where conflict is most intense" ...

on the borderline of conflict

Standing in the thick of it



On the frontline: One of the world's most violent conflicts rages on between Eritrea and Ethiopia – the next site of the Media Peace Centre's training.

- Who might care about the process?
- Who might be affected by either?
- Who might want to be perceived as having been involved?
- To whom are the people involved accountable?
- Whose authorisation might be necessary?
- Whose support is critical?
- Who might be able to sabotage the process?
- Who might prevent the implementation of an agreement?
- Are the parties worried about the short term or the long term?
- Are there concerns about violence, safety, reputation, precedent, services, jobs, intangibles?
- Listen to the solutions they propose and ask, "Why do you favour that?"
- As you probe for interests underlying bargaining positions, make it clear that you are not asking parties to announce concessions.
- Ask actors to describe their 'pie in the sky' ideal outcomes and their worst nightmares. Derive their interests from these scenarios.
- Speculate about things they might be interested in, worried about or afraid of. Ask them to correct your perceptions and add to them.

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Dealing with Perceptions

Many journalists we know have never subscribed to the 'objectivity' doctrine promoted by the Western liberal model of journalism. 'Objectivity' goes out the window when one lives in a society, as most Africans do, where historically the media have offered many different versions of 'the truth'; 'objectivity' becomes just another mask for one of those many 'versions'.

Instead of reporting from 'the sidelines of conflict', as objectivity might suggest, we'd argue that to truly understand a conflict, and to report it fairly and in all its complexity, journalists must place themselves dead centre. We don't mean, necessarily, in the midst of the violence, but at the interface of conflict between the antagonists – where it may become clear what the conflict really means.

In order to do this, journalists have to intervene. We argue that they already do, whether they admit to doing so. We also suggest that journalism, like mediation, is, or should be, an ethical intervention – we are there to help the different parties manage, perhaps resolve, the conflict, and to support peace and justice. Why else are we journalists? To just provide titillating 'entertainment' to people miles away whose lives are not at stake?!

Over the past decade the Media Peace Centre has run workshops for journalists in South Africa and abroad on covering conflict more constructively. The Mediation Project for Journalists (MPJ) and related workshops draw from conflict resolution theory and skills, to equip journalists with better understanding of conflict and better tools to cover it. We are currently running

workshops across the continent for our "Strengthening African Media" project.

Training borrows from the theory and practice of various conflict resolution organisations around the world, including Harvard University's Conflict Management Group (CMG). Here are several of the CMG tools for covering conflict used in our workshops:

A Framework for Analysing Conflict

Interests

- Define the interests of the parties (needs, fears, hopes, goals/objectives)
- How are they dealing with their interests?
- Are they focusing only on demands and positions?
- Do they see interests as opposed/in conflict?
- Do they act as though it's an adversarial, zero-sum game?
- Do they see any common interests?

Options

- What options are under discussion, if any?
- Are the parties likely to develop options on their own?
- Are there options that might satisfy the parties' interests?

Alternatives

- What will the parties do to attain their goals if there is no negotiated or mediated settlement (if there is no agreed settlement)?
- What people or organisations might be able to affect the alternatives of the parties?

Criteria

- Are there applicable standards (locally or further afield) that bear on this case?

- How do the parties measure fairness in this case?
- Do they perceive each other as legitimate?
- Do they feel fairly treated?
- Is it a contest of wills? Threats? How are they using/discussing criteria?

Communication

- Are the parties able to communicate with each other?
- Has there been significant miscommunication?
- How have they communicated? Through what channels?
- How do they perceive each other? Is there significant misperception?
- Are there cultural differences that might account for communication problems?

Relationship

- How are the parties currently dealing with each other? Coercion? Understanding? Acceptance as people?
 - How does the history of the parties affect how they currently deal with each other?
 - What are the perceived power relationships?
- #### Commitment
- Who are the relevant decision makers or opinion leaders?
 - Do they, or anyone else, have the authority to make commitments on behalf of others?
 - To what degree might they be able to commit?
 - How durable might that commitment be?

Interest Analysis

Consider:

- Who might care about the outcome?

Conflicts often start, continue and escalate because of perceptions, or rather, misperceptions that different parties to the conflict hold of each other. It is critical for journalists to identify these perceptions and integrate them into the reporting process. Here is a simple tool to do so, whether in a workshop or adapted for interviews ('A' and 'B' are the antagonistic parties in a conflict; the text in each category is hypothetical, offered as example):

Partisan Perceptions

Important 'facts' that A sees as crucial

- 1) Our land was stolen
- 2) It is our right to get it back
- 3) Our ancestors hold claim to the land
- 4) No other land will substitute

How B sees the important 'facts' of A

- 1) Their land was lawfully appropriated
- 2) They have no rights to it now
- 3) The 'ancestors' are a feeble excuse to reclaim the land
- 4) Other 'better' land is more than adequate compensation

When this process is finished, the 'terms' are then reversed: Important 'facts' that B sees as crucial; How A sees the important 'facts' of B. Ideally one gets to the underlying assumptions, attitudes and belief systems which feed these perceptions, so that one can offer a deeper analysis of the conflict and even help facilitate its transformation.

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