UNU Workshop on
“The Contribution of Media and Communication to the Dialogue of Civilizations”
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OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promoting dialogue among civilizations

*Dialogue to prevent conflict and to promote sustainable development*

Cultural diversity is a positive force and an enrichment of humanity, not a cause for division and confrontation. The dialogue among civilizations therefore affirms both the rights to be “different” and to be “equal.” It aims at bringing about a deeper mutual understanding among people from different civilizations by increasing their knowledge about each other’s value and norm systems, motivations and ways of thinking and ways of life. An ongoing and peaceful process, such a dialogue is based on tolerance and mutual respect, and requires from all participants to engage in it on an equal footing and to listen carefully to each other’s viewpoints.

The dialogue of civilizations will help (1) to avoid misunderstandings and distrust among different groups of people, and (2) to solve today’s economic, social and political problems by sharing experiences on both the national and international level.

*The media have a high level of potential to promote inter-civilizational dialogue*

Since the media play an important role in shaping public opinion, they have great potential to facilitate the dialogue among civilizations by expanding the public’s knowledge base about different cultural, religious, ethnic, and social groups.
This potential, however, is not automatically realized, as the media operate under various constraints, such as financial limitations and strong competition, ideological bias on the part of individual media, a public demand for sensational and “exotic” news, or a growing demand for visual material: “no news without a relevant photo.” These constraints, more often than not, lead to a shortsighted, one-dimensional, stereotypical, and biased coverage of events in other cultures.

Media professionals should become more aware of the vital role that the media plays in informing the public and its potential to foster peace and mutual respect among different cultural, religious, ethnic and social groups, nationally and internationally. Individual newsmakers should constantly reflect upon their own level of objectivity and tolerance in choosing a subject to report and the style and words in which to do so.

*New media formats enhance information flows*

As with conventional media, the potential of new media and new information and communication technologies to facilitate dialogue among civilizations is vast. The internet, in particular, offers individuals the opportunity to easily communicate with members of other cultural and social groups irrespective of national or other borders. These new forms of media contribute greatly to increased, diversified, and decentralized information flows.

New technological developments have made it possible to establish connections between mobile telephones, televisions, personal computers, and other electronic devices. This wireless and satellite technology can be used to substitute for conventional communication infrastructure, allowing developing countries to “leapfrog” technological developments.

*Efforts will have to be made to ensure that all the world population has access to these tools*

Access to new information and communication technology is not evenly spread around the world. Most internet users, and hosts, are located in industrialized
countries. To realize the potential of new technologies for a dialogue of civilizations, more efforts will have to be made to remedy this imbalance.

Language also constitutes an obstacle to the full realization of the potential of new technologies for a better dialogue of civilizations. The dominant language on the internet is English, which represents the native language of only a small proportion of the world population. More linguistic variety in terms of internet content, better, cheaper and possibly automated translation services, along with a greater emphasis on foreign language education, will help lower the language barrier to a successful dialogue among civilizations.

*Media and new information and communication technology cannot replace face-to-face communication*

In inter-civilizational dialogue, face-to-face communication can serve as a means to correct distorted, stereotypical views about certain groups of people or events in other cultures formed on the basis of information received indirectly, e.g. through the media. Face-to-face communication will therefore remain significant in fostering greater mutual understanding among different cultures and civilizations in the modern world. Although new information technology cannot replace face-to-face communication, it can be used as a tool to promote more direct forms of interchange, as it offers opportunities for direct communication between individuals in widely dispersed locations in the form of chat rooms, etc.

2. **History of inter-civilizational dialogues**

*Dual role of the media*

Historical observation shows that, in the past, the media have contributed to a better intercultural understanding, as can be seen, for example, in the role of the media played in the creation of international humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross. However, they have also contributed to ethnic, religious or other conflicts among as well as within nations (e.g. Kosovo crisis) by serving as instruments of propaganda for parties to the conflict.
Media cycles

History also reveals that media coverage of a particular country, culture or social group tends to develop in recurring cycles, changing from stereotypical and sensational coverage to a style of reporting that pays more attention to the “normal” and “ordinary” than the “exceptional” and “extraordinary.”

Understanding one’s own culture

History underscores the importance for newsmakers to report and analyze the similarities between different cultures and civilizations along with the differences in order to promote a better mutual understanding, and with it, the basis for fruitful dialogue. To do so, they should have a profound understanding of their own country and cultural background in order to draw proper comparisons and justly evaluate features of and events taking place in different countries and cultural settings.

3. Multicultural society and cultural transformation

Challenges to the media in multicultural societies

Examples from various parts of the world show that the media can both facilitate and obstruct intercultural dialogue in multicultural societies. In Toronto, for example, the media have played an important role in creating a better understanding among different local groups by giving them room to report on specific ethnic, cultural and religious matters while at the same time also showing what they have in common. In India, to cite a different example, media catering to specific ethnic or religious groups have created or reinforced a “magic of categorization,” by which individuals develop a strong identification with their own ethnicity or religion and an antagonism towards other ethnic or religious groups. This process can lead, as it has done in the recent past, to violent clashes between members of different ethnic or religious groups.

Multiple information sources for multicultural societies

Reporting on the cultural diversity within a country is best done by a plurality of media, giving room to the expression of the diversity of viewpoints that co-exist within this society. Countries currently without a sufficiently diversified and transparent media network should receive assistance from the international
community to increase the number of news sources, including (but not limited to) public service broadcasting. Apart from national television stations, newspapers and other media catering to whole countries, independent local news providers can play a crucial role in creating tolerance among different ethnic, cultural and social groups in one region. Local multi-media centers, where citizens can access information and work together on an equal basis in the creation of news programs, are another important component of pluralistic media networks.

Self-regulation
Non-governmental self-regulatory bodies, which set and monitor minimum standards of fair and just broadcasting, should exist in every country. Where this is not yet the case, the international community should lend its support in establishing such bodies.

4. Perspectives from Asia

“Orientalism” obstructs dialogue
The history of media coverage on Asia in western countries - and vice versa – illustrates how paying excessive attention to the differences between civilizations, rather than showing what they have in common, results in over-simplified distinctions between “the East” and “the West.” Such a view not only ignores cultural and other commonalities between these regions, but also completely disregards the differences between cultures within the regions. This runs counter to the goals of the dialogue of civilizations, which strives to recognize diversity within unity. Unfortunately, such an overly simplified categorization of civilizations continues – not only in, or with regard to, Asia. Media still on occasion apply the hierarchical and dichotomous rhetoric of orientalism and colonialism in their coverage.

Providing multiple perspectives
A number of examples can be found in Asia where audiences are provided with a chance to see for themselves how members of other cultures perceive world events: in Japan, television viewers can watch news programmes from a variety of countries on a daily basis. Also in Japan, a national newspaper recently started a joint venture with an international paper, producing a daily newspaper which combines both papers
reporting. Frequently, the joint paper carries articles on the same news item in both the international and the section produced in Japan, thereby presenting its readers with different perspectives on the same “reality” and encouraging them to think critically every day.

**Pooling resources for “indigenous” reporting**

Asia is a diverse region not only in terms of ethnicity, culture, religion, or political systems, but also in languages. However, the majority of news about Asia in the language most widely spoken as a second language in the region - English - is produced by foreign correspondents, who, quite naturally, make their judgments from their own cultural backgrounds. In order to better reflect the diversity of “native” viewpoints on events taking place in the region, more reporting in English should be done by journalists from Asian countries. This will not only serve to better communicate the diversity of the region to the international community, but will at the same time promote mutual understanding among different population groups within “Asia.”

This effort will be greatly facilitated by increased cooperation among media in Asia. Examples such as the Asian News Network, through which a number of English-language newspapers in Asia exchange information about different parts of the region from their “native” perspectives on a regular basis, should encourage other types of media to establish similar cooperative arrangements.

**5. Universality versus Particularity?**

*The globalization of media does not translate into a global value system*

Over the past decades, a worldwide process of consolidation among the media has taken place. One of the results of this process has been the creation of news services operating on a global scale, with their news programmes available in a similar format in almost every corner of the world. On the other hand, however, the consolidation of media enterprises has not led to a streamlined, unified coverage of news events in the individual international, national, local components – newspapers, television channels, internet services etc. – of these enterprises.
Searching for common ground within diversity

The globalization of media does not therefore necessarily have to be interpreted as a vehicle for the globalization of value systems, i.e. an increasingly common perception of reality among members of all cultures. Some media certainly try to do just that. Others, on the contrary, perceive their role as promoters of particular cultural values, which are more often than not identified with specific territorial boundaries. Among the latter, there are those that give no room to viewpoints other than those of the culture they want to promote, while some may be open at least to a search for solutions to similar problems on a global level.

More conducive to the dialogue of civilizations are media which through their coverage of news events involving members of other cultural groups try to emphasize the existence of some common ground, of basic ideas shared by members of all civilizations within the cultural diversity and plurality characteristic of a world society. This type of news coverage and feature articles or programmes would encourage readers and audiences to comprehend, respect and appreciate the particularities of different cultures in their region, country and the world, by presenting such cultures with close reference to the respective “indigenous” value systems and cultural parameters. At the same time, they would give room to showing the commonalities, shared values, customs, ways of life that exist across cultural boundaries, thereby eventually creating common frames of reference – as opposed to universal values – among the members different civilizations.

To play this role of a facilitator of inter-civilizational dialogue effective, the media will have to cooperate more closely among themselves, at the regional, national, and international levels. Such cooperation should include exchange programmes for journalists. These would not only give them a chance to broaden their personal perspectives by experiencing different styles of journalism while reporting back to their home institutions, but will involve them actively in the work of their hosts. Such exchange programmes should also be made available for editors;
- an exchange of content (television programmes, newspaper and magazine articles, website content etc) to encourage direct exposure of readers and audiences to other cultural perspectives;
- the joint production of content, which will foster the identification of common denominators.

Regional and international organizations should be called upon to assist in the development and implementation of such cooperation.

*Importance of education*

The final interpretation of any kind of information is made by the individual recipient. Sufficient attention should therefore be paid to the education of each individual citizen of the world, so that she or he can appropriately filter and evaluate information. New information and communication technologies in particular lend themselves easily to the polarization of ideas by providing channels to disseminate biased versions of reality. The inclusion of media literacy programs at all levels of education is vital to develop the ability to examine the authenticity of information disseminated by the media. Education should be aimed at equipping individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to think critically for themselves.

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