

# Media in Conflict Resolution and Peace Building



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**H**ow should the media cover conflict? The debate is widespread and ongoing. This has been our most violent decade, and the media must respond appropriately. It's time for new paradigms more suited to our day and age and plurality of cultures. The last one decade in Nepal has been characterized by an armed conflict of an extraordinary scale. In this age of instant digital communication, is there a role for pro-active deployment of newspapers, radio, television and the Internet to help the complex process of conflict management and transformation to peaceful, liberal democracies?

Modern journalism in Nepal is at unrest. The intensity of the debates over issues such as multiculturalism and public, civic and community journalism signal us that the future of the profession is very much up for grabs. Objectivity - and indeed journalism itself - is only one of the media tools available to the local actors and the international community for conflict resolution purposes. There is ample evidence

to show that objective, fair, accurate and timely journalism is an effective way in preventing or managing conflicts. But at the same time, there are many media-based strategies that have nothing whatsoever to do with journalism that may be noticeably effective.

In particular, journalists can play the following roles to prevent and manage conflict:

## Educating

Simply changing the information environment in which the parties operate can have a marked impact on the dynamics of conflict. It is particularly useful to promote the complex factors meddling with the conflict situation, and appreciate the tolerance for the negotiation process itself.

## Confidence Building

Lack of trust between the parties is a major factor contributing to conflict. The media can help to reduce suspicion through their reporting of contested issues and increase the trust through reporting of stories that suggest or illustrate

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that accommodation is possible.

### Counteracting Misperceptions

Similar to the confidence-building role above, journalists can show the misconceptions of the parties in a story, and through this encourage the parties to revise their views, moving closer to the prevention or resolution of a conflict in the process.

### Analyzing Conflict

This differs from conventional conflict reporting in that the media self-consciously applies an analytical framework to systematically enhance the public's understanding of the key aspects of the situation, as well as the dynamics of the efforts to manage it.

### Identifying the Interests Underlying the Issues

This is standard conflict resolution practice, but it is surprising how infrequently journalists address this question in stories. Explanation in Nepalese journalism practice is a kind of long-distance mind reading in which the journalist elucidates the motives, intentions, purposes and hidden agendas which guide individuals in their actions.

### Providing an Emotional Outlet

Conflicts may escalate or explode in part because the parties don't have adequate outlets to express their grievances. Conflict can be fought out in the media rather than in the streets. Journalists, already prone to report conflict, could better serve their readers and viewers, as well as the cause of preventive diplomacy, by

more fully understanding this role and, perhaps, pursuing it self-consciously.

### Encouraging a Balance of Power

This helps get the parties to the negotiating table. A media report can weaken a stronger party or strengthen a weaker party in the eyes of the public, thereby encouraging the parties to negotiate.

### Framing and Defining the Conflict

This is nothing but good journalism practiced on the right occasions. The media can help frame the issues and interests in such a way that they become more susceptible to management. The media can be particularly attentive to the concessions made by the parties, the common ground that exists between them and the solutions they have considered.

### Face Saving and Consensus Building

Similarly, during the course of negotiation, when the parties take steps toward resolving a conflict, they risk being attacked by more intransigent members of their own constituencies. The media can create an environment for compromise by getting the negotiators to address their own public to explain their positions through the media.

### Solution Building

Conflicts are prevented or managed when the parties table or consider possible solutions to the grievances. Journalists can play a role in this process by pressing the

parties for their proffered solutions. Although this seems self-evident, many third-party negotiators have noted that the parties are often so obstinate on their stances that they do not consider options for potential agreement with their adversaries. The simple act of eliciting ideas and reporting them could assist in the formal mediation process.

### Conflict Prevention

There are diverse and contending approaches to conflict prevention. It is likely that proponents of each will come to very different conclusions regarding the potential of media-based preventive action. Realists, focusing as they do on state actors, will likely find little use of the notion that the media can play any role other than that of facilitating the realization of state interests.

In light of the foregoing requisites, when it comes to examining the potential function of journalism in the media mix, it seems that we need to operate analytically on both the operational and the paradigmatic levels. At the operational level, we need to consider what can be done to prevent and resolve conflicts through activities consistent with the existing journalistic practices in different regions of the world. By challenging ourselves to conceive media-based preventive actions that are possible under the current professional paradigms, we increase the likelihood of their adoption by ensuring that they are not fundamentally at odds with the profession as it is currently understood.