In Service of the Truth and the Common Good: The Impact of Media on Global Peace and Conflict

Frank Walton

Introduction

The interrelationship of deadly conflict and the news media is a complex and compelling aspect of our society. With modern roots in 19th-century battlefield reporting and daguerreotypes, from Crimea to Gettsyburg, the interplay of news and conflict has many stages on which to play out: 24-hour-a-day radio and cable television news channels, proliferating Internet news sites and individuals' web logs, and new global media powers such as Al-Jazeera and News Corporation, to name only a few.

Recent events provide evidence of the recognition of the powerful role that the news media can play in advancing the causes of conflict and peace. Sometimes the role is intentional, as in well-documented instances of deliberately false media reports to provoke violence in Bosnia, Rwanda, and elsewhere. More often, however, the news media's impact on peace and conflict comes as a result of covering the words and actions of other powerful institutions and individuals in society. One might consider the increasing sophistication of the U.S. government in controlling information and images about war, as demonstrated in the first Gulf War of 1991 and the embedding of journalists in British and American combat units in the Iraq war of 2003.

In January 2003 the directors of the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishop's Office of Communications had an initial discussion about convening a roundtable to focus on these issues and the questions they raise. Specifically, how do the news media affect and how are they affected by peace and conflict in the world? Participants in the conference would seek to understand better the evolving relationship among media, peace, and conflict. The three months prior to the roundtable witnessed the opening phase of the U.S.-led coalition invasion and occupation of Iraq. As participants signed on to attend the roundtable, Americans focused daily—in real time—on the interplay of global conflict and news media.

The roundtable was held June 1–2, 2003, at the Aspen Wye River Conference Centers in Queenstown, Maryland. Geoffrey Cowan, dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California and former director of Voice of America, moderat-

ed. The conference participants were an interfaith mix of influential journalists, leading members of the Catholic clergy in the United States and abroad, and influential thought leaders from other faith traditions. They included veteran war, foreign affairs, and national security correspondents (both print and broadcast); nationally read columnists and commentators; senior managers of news organizations; an imam who also is an editor of a national circulation Islamic publication; a rabbi who leads a national social advocacy organization; several cardinals and bishops of the Roman Catholic Church in America; two archbishops from Vatican offices; and leaders or senior representatives of major national Catholic organizations such as Catholic Charities USA and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office of International Justice and Peace, Department of Social Development and World Peace, and Office of Communications. (See the Appendix for a complete list of participants.)

The conference participants were an interesting mix. For all their apparent differences and perceived disagreements, the American news media and the Catholic Church share an enduring commitment to social justice and an expectation of a better world. Furthermore, both the church and the news media are vitally concerned about the implications of Arthur Posonby's famous observation that truth is the first casualty of war. The discussions of the Aspen Institute roundtable in June 2003 explored many dimensions of these common concerns.

This report represents a synthesis of the discussion, augmented selectively by references to readings selected by the Aspen Institute and distributed to participants before the roundtable as well as references to timely publications and events that were relevant to the discussion topics.

Plan of This Report

Part I, "The News and the Truth," reflects on what sometimes seems to be the disparity between what the news media cover and what other people perceive as truth and reality. Are the news and the truth parallel phenomena, related but not mirrors of each other? If the news, as is often said, is a window on the world, what is the impact of opening that window on the world that is observed—and on the rest of the world that the window frame excludes from view?

Part II, "Journalism's Creed, Humanity's Values," explores more personally the processes and dilemmas of the individuals who bring the news to us—

reporters, photographers, editors, and media corporation executives. How are conflict and peace in the world affected by their relationships among each other, competitively against each other, with government and other elites, and with their readers and viewers?

Part III, "News Coverage of Conflict," provides anecdotes, reflections, and insights into newsmaking and war and their impact on all society. Are war-making and newsmaking a de facto partnership?

Part IV, "Common Concerns," summarizes the roundtable discussion about how news media and religious organizations might have a more productive and mutually beneficial partnership in serving their common concerns for truth, compassion, and a better world.

When this report uses the terminology "media" and "news media," it is to be understood exclusively as referring to news and public affairs coverage, in all its channels and formats, by American news-reporting organizations. Although the roundtable discussion inevitably included some observations about American entertainment media and the arts, as well as about the news-gathering organizations of other societies, the focus of the roundtable was an examination of the American news media and their impact on peace and conflict in the world.

I: The News and the Truth

In the first days of June 2003, the Aspen Institute roundtable participants were still very much aware of Eason Jordan's April 11, 2003, op-ed column in the *New York Times*. Jordan, the chief news executive at CNN, wrote revealingly about the decisions he and others at CNN had made for several years relating to coverage of events in Iraq. Jordan cited incidents of employees and contacts of CNN who were tortured or murdered by the Iraqi regime because of some real or purported complicity in CNN's news coverage.

> CNN had been in Baghdad long enough to know that telling the world about the torture of one of its employees would almost certainly have gotten him killed and put his family and co-workers at grave risk. Working for a foreign news organization provided Iraqi citizens no protection. The secret police terrorized Iraqis working for international press services who were courageous enough to try to provide accurate reporting. Some vanished, never to be heard from again. Others disappeared and then surfaced later with whispered tales of being hauled off and tortured in unimaginable ways.[1]

To sustain CNN's operations in Iraq and get at least some information out of the country, while ensuring the safety of CNN's employees and contacts, CNN's decisionmakers made many choices over the course of years that some, in hindsight, might say divided the news from the truth.

That is not, by any means, to accuse CNN of intentional misrepresentation. As George Rodrigue, vice president of Belo Capital Bureau and an experienced war correspondent, said, "You go after the truth, but you may never find it. Or you may find 10 or 20 truths."

Unlike other forms of storytelling and narrative, a true journalism story is not a fictional story. Only when a rare few individuals abuse their calling do journalists "make up" a story. Journalists rely on a variety of sources, and another veteran war correspondent, National Public Radio's senior foreign editor Loren Jenkins, lamented, "Sometimes [our sources] do not tell the truth to us." Recognizing the fallibility, if not the occasional deceit, of their sources, individual reporters and various news organizations develop standards for testing the truthfulness of a story. Are two or more independent sources providing the same information? Did the journalist see and hear the evidence himself or herself or get it secondhand? What are the credibility, reputation, and motivation of the source?

All of the journalists at the roundtable were adamant in asserting that once a source has lied to them, they can never trust that source again. Having the burden of conveying the truth to an audience may make the journalist more sensitive than most people to the dangers of being deceived, intentionally or not. Journalists know that in many instances they are called upon to trust people who might not be trustworthy, so a dimension of skepticism and self-protectiveness persists in the journalist that contributes to the stereotype of the cynical news reporter. As a teller of truth, the journalist must be suspicious of all potential deceivers.

The nonjournalists among the roundtable participants expressed their own frustration with news reports—from the opposite point of view. The nonjournalists were nearly universally convinced that the formats and genres of the news story consciously or unconsciously determined what the reported truth would be. Nonjournalists often perceive reporters and/or editors as looking for facts or anecdotes to confirm a predetermined story line, not as investigators seeking the truth.

In an emblematic anecdote, Monsignor Francis J. Maniscalco, director of communications for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), recalled an experience with an editor during Pope John Paul II's visit to the Catholic Church's World Youth Day in 1993 in Denver that ended in frustration for both the reporter and Monsignor Maniscalco. The reporter had been assigned by his editor to do more interviews with the young people. After he had done so, his editor wanted to know what the young people said about the church's teaching on abortion and contraception. As the reporter well knew, these controversies were not on the young people's minds. According to Monsignor Maniscalco, the facts did not fit the story that the editor, hundreds of miles away, expected—to the frustration of the reporter on the scene.

Both the journalists and the nonjournalists suspected that there is an evolving breakdown of one of the fundamental precepts of contemporary journalism, articulated by Robert D. Leigh in 1947: "Of equal importance with reportorial accuracy are the identification of fact as fact and opinion as opinion, and their separation, so far as possible."[2] The most casual discussion about truth has to confront the distinction between objective versus subjective truth. Aslam Abdullah, editor-in-chief of *Minaret,* framed the dilemma this way: "We have to ask, what is news? Everything depends on the subjective understanding of events."

There seems to be no end to the number of instances in which journalism struggles with the dilemma of objectivity and subjectivity, entangled with accuracy. What is the acceptable degree of intervention in a situation for a journalist? Should the journalist just report on what he or she has seen and heard? Is it acceptable to ask questions (which can be leading or suggestive)? Is it acceptable for the photographer to light or compose the scene? Is it acceptable to edit out parts of the video footage?

It has been well documented that Civil War photographer Matthew Brady and his team stage-directed the daguerreotypes of the corpses and debris "found" after the battle of Gettysburg. The iconic photograph of the American flag being raised on Iwo Jima was, in fact, a photograph of a reenactment of an earlier event undertaken at the behest of Joe Rosenthal, an Associated Press photographer. The execution in 1968 of a Viet Cong suspect by South Vietnamese national police chief Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, photographed by Eddie Adams,

also was set up for the cameras—not intentionally by the journalists but by the general, because the cameras were there.

In the face of such perplexing questions, Peter Goldmark, former chairman and chief executive officer (CEO) of the *International Herald Tribune*, said, "There are objective norms and subjective applications in all professions—in medicine and law in the same way as in journalism. What's unique about journalism is its resistance to any outside enforcement of our own standards." Despite a few attempts in the past to create a monitoring and oversight body, media companies have resisted initiatives to institutionalize independent standards and review processes, preferring to rely on their own internal standards and procedures.

Goldmark's observation echoes that of Walter Lippman, who wrote in 1922:

> There is no discipline in applied psychology [which for Lippman encompassed journalism], as there is a discipline in medicine, engineering, or even law, which has authority to direct the journalist's mind when he passes from the news to the vague realm of truth.… His version of the truth is only his version.… He knows that he is seeing the world through subjective lenses.… It was the gradual development of an irrefragable method that gave the physicist his intellectual freedom as against all the powers of the world.… But the journalist has no such support in his own conscience or in fact.[3]

It is not surprising, then, that many media organizations have adopted a commitment (perhaps honored as much in its breach as in its observance) to "balanced coverage." Apprehending that coverage of events inevitably can have a point of view, editors and producers typically create news and commentary formats in which a single event is reported and interpreted by two opposing perspectives. Thus, *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* has had Mark Shields versus Paul Gigot and Mark Shields versus David Brooks; CNN's *Crossfire* has had Paul Begala and James Carville ("on the Left") versus Tucker Carlson and Michael Novak ("on the Right"); and CBS's *60 Minutes* famously had Shana Alexandra versus James J. Kilpatrick and more recently former President Bill Clinton and former Senator Robert Dole. Editors and producers can make a perfunctory nod toward the complexity of discovering the truth by showcasing contrasting—with "balanced"—points of view. What would become of an American media organiza-

tion that went so far in trying to achieve balance, however, as to give equal time to the point of view that Osama bin Laden was a holy warrior following Allah's will as opposed to an international terrorist and mass murderer?

Yet even the strategy for providing a balanced view presents dilemmas. William Baker, president and CEO of New York City's public television station, Thirteen/WNET, said, "I got into an argument recently with a luminary journalist when I wanted a show to be more balanced. He disagreed with my view and said that an individual piece of reporting doesn't have to be balanced. Driving one perspective toward a conclusion is a valuable and good role for a journalist in America—as long as the journalist is honest and explicit about where and how he is taking the coverage." The journalist had a fundamental belief that in a free marketplace of reportage, with many unfettered points of view, truth would win out.

Julian Baggini, in *Making Sense: Philosophy Behind the Headlines* (2002), reminds us that there is a big difference between "what is" and "what we know" and suggests that news media often report what the journalist knows at a given time and place—which can be partial, flawed, deceived, or biased, intentionally or not. Baggini argues not that there are many truths but that various individuals in different times and places know things differently.[4]

In practical terms, consumers of news are always simultaneously dealing with apprehending what the journalist knows and listening for the truth (like binocular vision—both processes focused on the same object). Baggini thinks we understand the news differently today: "We are now more skeptical, both of our governments and our media. We no longer trust either to present us with the truth. We chew over what they tell us rather than swallow it whole. In short, the public is much less naïve than it used to be. We want to know what's going on but don't seem to be able to trust any of the sources that might tell us."[5]

Roundtable participants—journalists and nonjournalists alike—acknowledged the journalist's great burden of responsibility to witness and document within the constraints of the technology and perceived market demands. Probably none of the participants simply equated the news with the truth, but only because a serious and concerted reflection on the topic compels one to recognize a temporal divide: that news, by definition, changes, day-to-day and minute-by-minute. The classic ideal of truth is that it does not change.

II: Journalism's Creed, Humanity's Values

Journalists and their audiences are both wary of the shifting ground of the truth of a situation versus what one reporter knows. The roundtable discussion focused on the implicit creed by which American journalism is practiced today—when it is practiced best.

Lee Cullum, columnist for the *Dallas Morning News*, asserted that the first and most fundamental attributes of reporting are that it should be accurate, fair, and balanced.

Accurate: Facts and details can be checked. Dates, times, places, and names should be correct and spelled or pronounced correctly. Without this threshold of accuracy, there can be no credibility or professional respect among journalists or by the audience. When accuracy fails through error, a media outlet should publish a correction and at times an apology. When coverage is inaccurate because of a journalist's intentional misrepresentation, the journalist should be fired. (The roundtable took place after the initial revelations of *New York Times* reporter Jason Blair's incidents of deceit and plagiarism but before the *Times*' editorial resignations.)

Fair: The journalist would do well to abide by the Golden Rule—that is, "do unto others as you would have done unto you." That is the real test of fairness. Having the power of column inches or airtime does not excuse the journalist from this time-honored societal value.

Balanced: Some concept of balance is critical in reporting, if not in editorials, editorial page columns, and electronic media commentary. Two observers of an event see different details and may have different perspectives. Multiple participants in a situation experience it differently. Without somehow capturing these different perspectives and putting them into balance, the journalist loses credibility.

Bob Abernethy, executive editor and host of *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, agreed with Cullum's description of the fundamental journalistic values but also felt that a compelling concern of the journalist is to be interesting.

Interesting: Obviously journalism must be interesting to the audience. Yet being interesting is fraught with dilemmas for the journalist, the news organization, and the audience. Probably no topic, across various sessions of the roundtable, generated more discussion than the debate about how news coverage could be interesting and responsible (observing the aspects of the journalist's creed) at the same time. If the

reporter's work is not interesting, there will be no audience. If there is no audience, the public is not served, there is no way for a media company to be profitable, and there's no job for the journalist. Yet the drive to attract, increase, and sustain the interest and loyalty of an audience is widely recognized to be potentially at odds with the journalist's endeavor. The paradigmatic anecdotes are about the journalist in the field at odds with "management"—the publishers and producers back at headquarters. Reporters say they often are personally conflicted about how to deal with the need to be interesting (to be first, to be colorful, to have exclusive access to facts and people, to include emotional content) as well as to be accurate, fair, balanced, and otherwise adhere to the creed.

Loren Jenkins of National Public Radio added another dimension to the journalist's creed: to educate the public.

Educational: Many journalists abhor the idea that they might be regarded as being *only* interesting—that is, entertainers. There is a deeply and widely held conviction in the profession that journalists perform a public service in bringing information to the public—which, in a democratic society, can then make decisions, personally and collectively, at the ballot box and the checkout counter that can sustain or change the direction of American society. Many journalists hold that their profession—like teaching, social work, and healthcare—exists to guard the rights and welfare of American society and to empower improvement wherever possible. In an era of global media conglomerates and in light of the demand to be interesting, there is an ongoing debate within the profession about the journalist's power and responsibility to educate the public.

Peter Goldmark asserted that two additional factors are part of the journalist's creed: relevance and the need to avoid being unnecessarily inflammatory.

Relevant: The concept of relevance may be a refinement of, and less fraught with danger than—that of interesting. Reporting must make sense of how the information and action affect or might affect the audience in the near future. As a guideline, the concept of relevance sorts out some media coverage, such as celebrity coverage and gossip, from responsible journalism that follows the creed.

Restrained: Goldmark's phrasing—"the journalist has the responsibility not to be unnecessarily inflammatory"—reveals an acknowledgment of the power of media channels to provoke emotional, extreme,

and even violent actions from audiences. There are many recorded instances from recent conflicts, particularly in the Balkan wars in the 1990s, of news reporting about violence and atrocities intentionally and unintentionally provoking further violence. In 1991 the acquittal of Los Angeles police officers involved in the beating of Rodney King set off waves of civic disturbance, violence, and property damage. The fact that the beating was caught on camera impressed the incident vividly on the public's consciousness.

Geoffrey Cowan, dean of the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication, rounded out the discussion of the journalist's creed by saying that it had to include the concept of completeness, or context.

Context: This concept is nearly as difficult to pin down as "interesting." There is a broad consensus that good journalism should provide a sense of the background and history of the reported story, reference to related or analogous situations, and a sense of proportion with regard to how the reported story compares to other events and situations. Journalists readily recognize the great difficulty of providing context within the format of their news channels (e.g., relatively inflexible word and time limits for reporting a story). Writers and editors consciously consider whether a word that provides a shorthand of complex context (such as "genocide" and its World War II associations) should be used to contextualize another current conflict. As this report is being written, there is public discussion among the U.S. Department of Defense and some journalists about whether it is fair and accurate to use the terms "guerrilla war" and "quagmire" in relation to the coalition engagement with presumed Baathist supporters in Iraq in the summer of 2003. To accept the terminology of "guerrilla war" and "quagmire" would be to acknowledge a fair and accurate analogy to the U.S. war with Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. Putting reporting in context is not a simple matter.

Bishop Joseph A. Galante, coadjutor bishop of Dallas, Texas, returned the discussion to the enduring dilemma of the objective versus the subjective, which permeated much of the conversation. "While the journalist's creed seems to be based on the objective principles we've outlined, their applications are very subjective. The journalist and his or her editor alone decide if the coverage is accurate and fair, if the story is balanced, interesting, relevant, and restrained. The journalist and his editor decide if the story is in the right context. The objectivity that one

would want to achieve in a set of principles gets lost in the subjectivity of the personal values of the journalist, the editor, or the management of the media corporation." Aslam Abdullah of *Minaret* concurred: "The journalist's creed is always played out within the two contexts of the journalist's personal values and of the values of the institution for whom the journalist works."

David Ensor, national security correspondent for CNN, assured the nonjournalist discussion participants that "observing this journalist's creed is an everyday battle in the newsroom among the writers, producers, and editors. There's no complacency and more than one battle within the news organizations." Bob Abernethy cited the story of an NBC Nightly News producer in 1984 who insisted, against the reluctance of her executive producer, that footage of famine in Ethiopia be shown. Eventually the executive producer consented. When the footage aired, a new national concern and response were motivated that was attributed to the producer's persistence in the internal debate within the news organization.

In written comments after the meeting, Cardinal William Keeler offered several examples in which, he observed, those reporting on a particular situation of conflict or peacemaking showed a lack of understanding of certain aspects of the complete context or simply "missed the mark" in fully reporting the story. "With respect to Northern Ireland, the conflict there [is] so often described as a 'religious' conflict, when in fact there is a very strong economic side to it," said Cardinal Keeler. Coverage of the major religious shift in Poland following the collapse of Communist rule is another example he cited, wherein the Communist era constraints on religious participation gave way to increased lay participation and leadership in the Catholic Church in Poland. This momentous transition toward greater religious participation and freedom was barely covered by the news media, however. Cardinal Keeler also recounted an experience in the early 1990s, as the Dayton peace talks were convened to end the war in the former Yugoslavia.

> I had a call from Rabbi Arthur Schneier, who leads an organization devoted to the rights of conscience. He had arranged for a day of prayer for peace, with prayers to be offered in Orthodox and Catholic churches, in synagogues, and in mosques throughout the former Yugoslavia and in other places in the world, including the United

States. His specific question was this: Would I contact the Catholic bishops in the United States to ask for a day of prayer for the guidance of God on the participants in the Dayton meeting? Unhesitatingly I replied in the affirmative. Also, I asked him to let CNN know about it, so that there might be coverage of this religious aspect of peacemaking. To my knowledge, there were no reports of this important side of what was going forward at the time.

MSNBC correspondent Ashleigh Banfield probably did not expect to create the controversy she did when she mounted the podium at Kansas State University in the spring of 2003 to give the university's annual Landon Lecture. Her analysis of the experience of the embedded journalists in the 2003 Iraq war incisively described how, she believes, those journalists abandoned their creed. "I think," she said, "we all were very excited about the beginning of this conflict in terms of what we could see for the first time on television. The embedded process…was something that we've never experienced before—neither as reporters nor as viewers. The kinds of pictures that we were able to see from the front lines in real time and on a video phone, and sometimes by a real satellite linkup, was something we'd never seen before.… And there are all sorts of good things that come from that, and there are all sorts of terrible things that come from that."[6]

Although Banfield admitted that the embedded journalists—who included correspondents from Al-Jazeera and other Arab and non-U.S. news organizations—were able to provide unique insights on the coalition troops, their conditions, and what war really looks like to them, she asked, "That said, what didn't you see? You didn't see where those bullets landed. You didn't see what happened when the mortar landed. A puff of smoke is not what a mortar looks like when it explodes, believe me. There are horrors that were completely left out of this war [reporting]. We [the U.S.-led coalition forces] got rid of a dictator, we got rid of a monster, but we didn't see what it took to do that."[7]

Banfield discomfited many in the journalism community—and apparently some of her bosses—by claiming that the product of the embedded journalists in the spring 2003 Iraq war was not accurate, fair, or balanced, that it was only partially educational and provided limited context. The reporting, in her view, was too restrained, though certainly relevant and compelling.

Peter Goldmark formerly of the *International Herald Tribune* articu-

lated a perspective that resonated with many participants in the discussion: "You always hear that the media is dominant in shaping public opinion, yet I don't know if there is much empirical evidence that that's true. The media is more like a spotlight on a dark stage. It catches some things, but there can be a lot more going on on the stage that's not in the spotlight. Consider the news coverage of the SARS [severe acute respiratory syndrome] deaths this spring at the same time we do not get any coverage of the many, many more deaths—the daily drumbeat of death—from malaria in many places around the world every day." This kind of reporting is another example of interest trumping context.

Bishop Galante returned the discussion to enduring issues, with some personal frustration and with sympathy from many of the journalists: "Much of our analysis of the journalist's creed deals with the pervasive moral relativism of western culture. 'My truth is mine, yours is yours.' But what of transcendental truths? Can we not decide that there are basic common values that everyone will stand for? Until all of us get serious about some objective truth, we are condemned to a morass of subjectivism."

Walter Lippmann, writing in 1922, was stringent in holding journalists to the creed, but he did not attribute a privileged or transcendent importance in society to what journalists actually do. Lippmann wrote, "At its best the press is a servant and guardian of institutions; at its worst it is a means by which a few exploit social disorganization to their own ends. In the degree to which institutions fail to function, the unscrupulous journalist can fish in troubled waters, and the conscientious one must gamble with uncertainties."[8]

III: News Coverage of Conflict

"If it bleeds, it leads" is the newsroom cliché that is sometimes used to explain why journalism focuses on death, disaster, conflict, and mayhem. Yet the cliché in itself is neither a guide to good journalism nor a criterion of relevance or interest for the audience because there is much more bleeding in the world than ever gets coverage in the media.

Archbishop John Foley of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications at the Vatican (the Vatican office responsible for relations and issues, worldwide, with the news and entertainment media), noted that there is "a vicious cycle. The American military goes where the media coverage is, and the media goes to where the troops are." U.S.

national priorities in foreign relations seem to be the primary criterion for the coverage of crises or disasters. Bishop Galante noted, "It seems to me that the media will cover those hot spots where the government has some vested interest. The United States government isn't interested in the Sudan because the Sudan doesn't have anything the American government wants. So the war and deprivation in the Sudan will not get news coverage."

"Domestically, the press doesn't need the government to act," said Margaret Carlson, columnist at *TIME Magazine*. "Domestically, the press often focuses on what the government isn't doing: corporate greed, nursing homes, social change. For international news stories, though, an editor isn't going to spend the resources unless the government does act. It's the exact reverse to the paradigm of domestic news coverage."

The actions of the U.S. government certainly are a relevant concern to U.S. citizens, so it is understandable why the U.S. media should follow government action. Yet the result is far from being a global view or a balanced view of events in the world. The international news section of the *Washington Post* and *ABC's World News Tonight,* just to name two examples, each have a uniquely American-interest lens on all that happens in the world. Archbishop Foley noted, "The Sudan has been very much ignored, and I think also Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone." Aslam Abdullah, editor-in-chief of *Minaret* concurred: "Nearly 60,000 people have been killed in Kashmir over the past 10 years. CNN has covered that story twice, whereas the coverage of the Israel-Palestinian conflict is continuous."

The American government's strategic perspective on the world viewed through the U.S. news media is exacerbated by the small number of correspondents covering world affairs. Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said, "With a few notable exceptions, almost every major media institution has cut back on coverage abroad and must rely on other entities for getting information." Writing in 1999, Susan Moeller estimated that there were only about 400 American foreign correspondents at the time, and they were not evenly distributed throughout the globe or even across every hot spot. Typically, Moeller argued, these correspondents become specialists not in a part of the world or a particular society but in crisis reporting, fostering the tendency of all crises to sound and look alike.[9]

NPR's Loren Jenkins said, "We don't have the resources to cover every conflict. So we pick and choose. Or we visit a crisis periodically once a year. For example, today [in June 2003] I have half of my staff in the Middle East. How can I cover the rest of the world in the same depth?" Carlson said, "The further an event is from Times Square or Capitol Hill, the harder it is to cover. We don't have the resources."

So the implicit criterion for news coverage of conflict is how the events may affect the American reader either directly or through the actions of government. Once the story passes that threshold, however, the coverage and accompanying commentary may be balanced or objective, supportive or critical. Archbishop Foley observed, "When elites in a society are in agreement, you find that media coverage will support the government. Where elites are divided you find the media stirring the pot much more."

In her controversial Kansas State University speech, Ashleigh Banfield spoke about the "Fox News effect"—the way in which the Fox cable news network in the United States covered the 2003 Iraq war: with little concern for balance, highly supportive and congratulatory of the actions of the U.S.-led coalition.[10] Several roundtable participants had read and viewed both U.S. and European coverage of the Iraq war, and several found Fox's—and some other U.S. coverage—"strident and alarming." It was particularly apparent in the images and video shown to audiences; U.S. media exerted much more constraint about showing the results of violence and battle than European and Arabic media. CNN's national security correspondent, David Ensor, noted that there were two independent sets of correspondents and producers for coverage of the Iraq war at CNN and CNN International—because of the corporation's explicit assumption that the audiences are different and want to see and hear different things.

Again the theme emerges of media companies and journalists navigating between the often-opposing pulls of giving the audience what it wants and providing the service of public education. One of the journalists stated, "We are so driven by the question: Is it entertainment or not?" Besides following U.S. foreign policy interests, news coverage of conflict also focuses prominently on routinely sanitized stories of heroism.

In his book *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning,* veteran *New York Times* war correspondent Chris Hedges explores two factors that shape news coverage of conflict. First, most people in our culture are still

inspired by the noncombatant's perspective on warfare, glorified throughout our literature and popular culture: the bravery, perseverance, and overcoming of overwhelming odds (a perspective that does not generally encompass the fear, panic, stench, noise, and other horrors of combat). Consciously or not, journalists want to tell these stories to their audiences (e.g., the story of Private Jessica Lynch).

Second, once American soldiers are dying in combat, the news media find it difficult to be straightforward, analytical, or critical of the military action—that is, to fulfill the journalists' creed. There is a compelling impulse to honor the dead and to respect the feelings of their families. Restraint takes the upper hand, and military failure, incompetence, or accident can be masked by euphemistic jargon ("friendly fire," for example).[11] One journalist described a hot dispute in the media organization about how many and how to present images of bodies during the recent Iraq war.

William Baker, president and CEO of Thirteen/WNET, suggested the news media can end up being a tool of the administration; without meaning to, they can distort and demonize the enemy. Bishop Galante asked, "Is the success of America the media's business? Is part of patriotism playing up to power? Particularly in coverage of war and disaster, media has not reconciled business and service. I want media to be a service to truth."

Many people would like to see the news media be advocates for great causes. "Columnists and editorial writers can do this," observed Bob Abernethy of *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, "but reporters, while hoping their work will somehow improve society, know they must be content to tell good stories—no easy task in itself. They lose credibility for a general audience if they are seen to be propagandists."

Peter Goldmark, former chairman and CEO at the *International Herald Tribune*, said, "I view an independent press as the oxygen of a free society. It can be corrosive, but there are no life processes without it. I think on many major issues journalists are falling short on the principles we've discussed. Journalists are falling far short on the coverage of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, the deterioration of the environment, the gap between the rich and poor, and understanding the Islamic world and gap between Islam and the West."

The foreign correspondents in the discussion, however, expressed a modest assessment of the power of news media. The news can certain-

ly provoke violence and add to conflict. George Rodrigue of Belo Capital Bureau reminded the group of the story of William Randolph Hearst's boast that he'd provide the war; the government only needed to provide the army. Rodrigue had experienced similar incidents in his reporting on the conflict in Bosnia. A much-repeated story about Muslims being hung from a Catholic cathedral spire had been a total fabrication disseminated for the purpose of provoking violent revenge.

David Ensor said, "I would posit that the media doesn't have much impact on war and peace. In Bosnia there was a fair amount of coverage of the horrors that were happening over some years. Christiane Amanpour was dogged in her coverage, but it didn't make much difference to public opinion in the United States. It didn't make much difference to the president. Finally President Clinton did the right thing, but I'm not sure that the crusading journalists changed the timetable all that much."

Loren Jenkins observed, "Everyone says that the media changed the U.S. government's policy and ended the Vietnam War. But I don't think so. I think that what changed Americans' minds was not the media but the personal impact of bodies coming home, when America's sons and neighbors started coming home dead."

The immediacy of contemporary news coverage, however limited in perspective, is having an impact on society and government policy. Geoffrey Cowan, dean of the Annenberg School at USC recounted President George W. Bush's interview with NBC's Tom Brokaw in which the president described the hesitancy of the U.S.-led coalition to bomb certain potential targets in Baghdad even though Saddam Hussein might have been there. The president said the government did not want to bomb a site and run the risk of having Saddam Hussein escape but have stories and images of Saddam Hussein's dead grandchildren on the evening news.

Father Bryan Hehir, president of Catholic Charities USA, noted that there has been "a major shift in foreign policy and military action since World War II that has to be very linked to press coverage of war. In World War II indiscriminate bombing and killing of civilians—by the United States and its allies—went without objection: Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima. Even during the Vietnam War, the daily 'body counts' did not distinguish between civilian and combatant casualties. But by the time of the first Gulf War, the military and government had become

acutely sensitive to the likelihood of killing civilians. There was great concern about 'dual-use targets' and targets on the edge of civilian populations. Instantaneous images from that war of where civilians were killed in a bomb shelter mistakenly hit had a searing effect on the U.S. military."

Yet although the spotlight of news coverage may create restrain on a major national military power, violence and terrorism can be the gateway to media attention for groups who have causes they believe are ignored. In an article examining Israeli news media, "The News Media and Peace Processes," Gadi Wolfsfeld argues that coverage of violence intensifies the levels of rhetoric and retributive violence. He writes:

> There are two major doors for entering the news media. The front door is reserved for a select group of VIPs. These are people with such political and social status that almost everything they say and do is considered newsworthy. The back door is reserved for the rest of society. The only way to gain access is through novelty or deviance. This makes it extremely difficult for members of the opposition to promote their ideological frames to the public. They are forced to choose between obscurity and extremism. A leading member of the opposition described the rules of entry: "What do the journalists see as newsworthy? Violence and riots, that's what they're waiting for. So when you bring them reasonable opinions, it doesn't interest them. They want blood.… They want something drastic, some type of scoop that will get them a medal from their editor."[12]

At an extreme form, as Alan M. Dershowitz argues in *Why Terrorism Works*, terrorism *does* work, in the sense that the more acute the atrocity the more media attention it attracts. Dershowitz asserts that terrorism is "propaganda…by violent and deadly deeds, often against the most vulnerable and innocent of victims, and often only as an initial step in a multifaceted program of violence." Dershowitz quotes Zehdi Labib Terzi, a Palestine Liberation Organization chief observer to the United Nations: "The first of several hijackings [in the late 1960s] aroused the consciousness of the world and awakened the media and the world opinion much more—and more effectively—than 20 years of pleading at the United Nations."[13]

The question, however, must arise in everyone's minds: Why don't we just turn away? Why does the audience accept—or even demand and

relish—images and stories of conflict, violence, and suffering? Even disregarding the pathological and pornographic interest in violence that admittedly is an element of American culture, images and narratives of suffering are a persistent and compelling aspect of our culture. Consider, for example, the popularity of the widely read and Man Booker Prize-winning work of fiction, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (Random House, 2001) and the continuing series of Holocaust narratives such as the recent movie *The Pianist* (Focus Features, 2002).

The uses and effects of images and stories about suffering from war and violence are examined in several important and provocative recent books. Peter Howe's S*hooting Under Fire: The World of the War Photographer* (Artisan, 2003) collects images from 10 contemporary photojournalists who have brought the horrors of war to the attention of the American public. Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003) traces the long historical tradition in Western society of creating images of the suffering of innocents rooted in the Bible and Christian iconography—Job in the Old Testament, the victim of robbery rescued by the Good Samaritan, the martyrdoms of the Christian saints, Herod's slaughter of the firstborn, Christ's crucifixion, and images of the Pieta with Mary and the crucified Jesus. Sontag implicitly refutes the earlier argument of Moeller's *Compassion Fatigue* that contemporary imaging of suffering dulls and inures the viewer. For Sontag—and for participants of the roundtable discussion—the contemporary, immediate, and always-shocking journalistic images and reporting of suffering awaken the compassionate and activist response.

Bishop Galante remarked that regarding the effects of violence, looking at images and hearing stories about the suffering of the innocent, fundamentally fosters the solidarity of the human family.

Journalists on the front lines of conflict are similar to the combatants: alone; self-reliant; with limited frame of reference; sometimes disoriented by the stimulation, chaos, and terror of conflict; committed to doing what they believe is right. The warrior firing his weapon may do so believing he is making the world safer, potentially more peaceful; the journalist reporting on that same warrior can have identical motives.

IV: Common Concerns

The common concerns that brought together the religious leaders and journalists at the Aspen roundtable also motivated discussion about how they might work together more productively—not to change media coverage but complementarily to work toward the goals of social justice, compassion, improvement of the human condition, and acknowledgment of truth.

The journalists and the religious leaders in the discussion felt that there is a reemerging interest in serious and broad public debate and examination of public, as well as private, morality. Within the few months surrounding the roundtable discussion, public attention and media coverage concentrated America's attention across a wide spectrum of issues and stories based on questions of truth-telling: the U.S. and British arguments for the attack on Iraq; the legal charges against Martha Stewart and other high-profile corporate leaders; the public revelation of stories of American Catholic bishops' handling of priests who were criminal sex abusers; public examination of incidents of individual journalists' roles in reporting—and occasionally distorting—events; and contention over the impact on the public welfare of corporate concentration of media organizations.

The roundtable participants concurred that there should be more, formally structured moral debate in society today that includes the voices of media and religious leaders. Father Hehir contended that there are at least two urgent public policy issues yet to be resolved in America that by their nature should demand the active participation of religious leaders and the media. "There is a totally unfinished debate about humanitarian military intervention, especially in this era after the attack on Iraq. Will the United States react to another Bosnia or Rwanda differently than we did in the past? The case may be made that such situations are not materially relevant to us. Will Americans concur that being materially relevant to us is the only criteria of our public policy?" Father Hehir continued, "At the other end of the spectrum, there is an erosion of the generation-old commitment to a ban on the use of limited nuclear weapons. There is increasing discussion in some policy circles of what would be the acceptable scenarios for first use. The evolution of these issues and the actions our government takes should not be without a structured moral debate that includes both religious leaders and the media."

Gerald Powers, director of the Office of International Justice and Peace at the USCCB, contended that there is an increasingly dominant view in the U.S. government that religion "is a dysfunctional force in the world. The 'realist' paradigm says that religion and morality don't matter." Powers also noted the difficulties in "talking to the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Religious Freedom about the challenges in getting the postwar reconstruction effort to consider religion."

A few roundtable participants provided anecdotes about the effective impact that religious leaders and media can have on the creation of public policy. Rabbi Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism said,

> In the late 1970s a group, originally mostly of fundamentalist Christians, supported the creation of legislation to guide U.S. policies toward countries in which there were systematic patterns of religious persecution. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Cardinal McCarrick here in Washington, D.C., particularly; the Reformed Jewish Conference; and a few other organizations joined the effort and somewhat changed the proposed bill. It was finally passed in 1998—the International Religious Freedom Act—with significant media attention. Among other things, the bill requires an annual report from the State Department on the state of religious freedom and persecution in the world. Extensive training on religious issues was also integrated into the Foreign Service school. In one year there was a huge transformation in the ways that the U.S. Foreign Service interacts with religious leaders, even in diverse and challenging places such as Pakistan, Nigeria, and Indonesia.

John Carr, secretary of the Department of Social Development and World Peace at the USCCB, also cited examples of the positive impact of religious leaders on policy that did not receive much media attention. Carr noted that religious organizations throughout the world lobbied diligently for the global campaign against landmines, along with other nonreligious, influential organizations and celebrities (most famously, Princess Diana) who were most successful in attracting the media attention that assisted the growing public demand for the international treaty.

Carr also noted that sometimes the Catholic Church and other religious organizations are more effective out of the spotlight of media reporting. He said,

> At the request of the Pope, and along with Bono from the rock band U2, David Saperstein of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, and others concerned about the social and moral impact of international debt on the developing world, we convened a conference at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey. U.S. administration officials, senior representatives from the World Bank, key staff from the International Monetary Fund, congressmen, and bishops from around the world attended. The discussion focused on the moral dimensions of the debt question. What came out of it was a promise for the U.S. to push for debt relief. Third World countries had to commit to curbing corruption, and the idea came out of it for "conditioning debt relief," which got U.S. government appropriations and some matching funds from other countries. The consensus we achieved at the meeting, however, was done through confidential discussion. We did not want coverage, although two journalists—one from Catholic News Service and another from the *New York Times*—did participate in the conference under an agreement of confidentiality.

Monsignor Maniscalco, director of communications of the USCCB, observed that on issues such as those cited by Father Hehir and John Carr, "Religious leaders from the three great monotheistic religions must not let their faiths be defined by nationalistic leaders. Religions are not confined in space. Islam is an important force in Europe and North America as it is in the Middle East and South Asia. The Catholic Church—just one of the Christian faiths—is strongest in numbers in South America, North America, the Philippines, and Europe."

Roundtable participants representing both the news media and religious organizations equally acknowledged untapped resources and missed opportunities for using religious leaders and organizations as sources for covering important public issues. David Ensor of CNN said, "I look for experts and insights from people who have a global perspective. For example, I frequently go to Human Rights Watch, and I could go to religious organizations more often."

Loren Jenkins of National Public Radio said, "A lot of my colleagues don't know this, but I have found as a reporter, when I was covering a

war on the ground—for example in El Salvador—that the two Irish priests and three nuns living in a village were invaluable sources to us. They were going around in areas of the country where journalists could not go. How many thousands of people does the church have on the ground all around the world? And there are only a few hundred American news organizations' foreign correspondents."

Bishop Galante asserted, "Religious leaders, especially those from the major established religions, are not so ethereal and otherworldly. We know we can have an impact on the society in which we live. Issues that don't initially seem religious, such as ecology and global warming, are a concern to us because we believe we are entrusted with the stewardship of the earth. We spend much time and resources thinking, researching, and teaching about the wide range of topics of concern to the media—environment, health, economic development, and human suffering."

Journalists and the religious leaders concluded that religious organizations need a reinvigorated outreach to the media and that reporters, editors, and producers should be more aware of and attentive to religious organizations as potential sources of fact as well as opinion. Participants shared a variety of tactical suggestions for improved information sharing and better mutual access—particularly, as Monsignor Maniscalco noted, in helping the media be more consistently accurate in reporting about issues facing religious organizations, as well as in offering the benefit of religious leaders' experience in analyzing the moral content of nonreligious issues.

Yet the roundtable participants expressed continuing concern about the lack of designated individuals in news organizations focused on religion. Margaret Carlson of *TIME* noted that there is no one at her magazine assigned to religion and religious topics. "I, by default, become the unofficial religion department." Lee Cullum of the *Dallas Morning News* reminded the group, "In the not so distant past, religious thinkers and philosophers would be profiled on the covers of the news magazines. We were concerned about what Tillich or Niebuhr was saying. I think Americans would welcome that again."

Finally, many of the discussion participants expressed a strong appeal for the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and/or the Congress to rethink and act on the concept of fairness in media, particularly the public interest requirement for broadcasters—currently mandated for review every eight years but widely felt not to be seriously

enforced. (The policy of the FCC known colloquially as the "Fairness Doctrine" attempted to ensure that all coverage of controversial issues by broadcast organizations would be fair and balanced. This doctrine was first formally expressed in 1949. In 1985 the courts determined that because Congress had not mandated the Fairness Doctrine the FCC did not have the authority to enforce it. Although Congress, in response, passed legislation mandating the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, President Reagan vetoed the legislation; when the House of Representatives passed another version of the legislation in 1989, a threatened veto by President George H. W. Bush prevented further action by the Senate. Nothing has replaced the Fairness Doctrine in statute or policy.)

Archbishop Foley of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications at the Vatican said he felt that "a sense of conscience in the media has in many ways been lost in the generation since Ed Murrow's 'See It Now.' There has been a diminishing sense of responsibility to the audience. It seems to me essential to have a response through the FCC or Congress to have a restoration of moral responsibility, the recognition of the importance of religion in American society, and the importance of promoting interreligious understanding, which promotes peace." Because of a pending ruling about corporate ownership of multiple media properties in a geographical area by the FCC at the time of the Aspen roundtable, there was considerable conversation and agreement in the group that the FCC did not consistently act today to support news making at its best.

Peter Goldmark, formerly of the *International Herald Tribune,* ruefully responded to Archbishop Foley that "in Murrow's period, TV news was not expected to be profit making. It was a thorn in the side and an obligation that these companies had to have. It was also a nursery for a moral conscience. But the world has changed."

Indeed, taking a hard look at how the media world is changing—and with it, the context within which most American journalism is practiced—will be central to a continuing discussion of the issues raised at the Aspen Institute roundtable. So will exploring how the ownership and regulation of news organizations might be changed to create an atmosphere in which reporters and editors can do the kind of reporting that motivated most of them to join the profession in the first place.

Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, Archbishop of Washington, D.C., said, "Sometimes in our discussions I hear anecdotes of business con-

siderations overcoming journalism's mission. At other times I've heard about heroic actions of reporters. What I think the media has to have is a basic philosophy of service. The media is here because of a need in society. The business side provides the resources, but we all have to always return to seeking an understanding of what are the compelling needs of our society."

[1] Eason Jordan, "The News We Kept to Ourselves," *New York Times*, April 11, 2003.

[2] Commission on Freedom of the Press, *A Free and Responsible Press*, Robert D. Leigh, ed., (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1947 and Midway Press, 1974), 20-29. Citations are to the Midway edition.

[3] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (1922; repr., New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 226–30.

[4] Julian Baggini, *Making Sense: Philosophy Behind the Headlines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 17–27.

[5] Ibid., 17–27.

[6] Ashleigh Banfield, Landon Lecture, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, April 24, 2003. Available at http://www.alternet.org/story.html?StoryID=15778 (accessed August 1, 2003).

[7] Ibid.

[8] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997 [1922]), 226–30.

[9] Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 26.

[10] Ashleigh Banfield, Landon Lecture, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, April 24, 2003. http://www.alternet.org/story.html?StoryID=15778 (accessed August 1, 2003).

[11] Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003).

[12] Gadi Wolfsfeld, "The News Media and Peace Processes: The Middle East and Northern Ireland," *USIP Peaceworks* no. 37 (January 2001), 10–27, 21–24, 25, 26–27, 30–31, 37–38, 39–40, 44–45.

[13] Alan M. Dershowitz, *Why Terrorism Works* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), 5, 24.