

## **UNESCO's contemporary response to media and the issues of peace and violent conflict**

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### Abstract

The concept of Peace Journalism has been superseded in recent times at UNESCO by the notion of "conflict-sensitive journalism" on the supply side, and media-and-information literacy (MIL) combined with intercultural dialogue on the demand side (empowering the people 'formerly known as the audience'). These two new approaches are necessary sides of a single coin. Together, they provide for a contemporary peace-oriented approach which today is bound up with the UN-agreed 2030 Development Agenda, and especially Sustainable Development Goal 16 – peace, justice and strong institutions. Examples of UNESCO's work in this area are a new handbook for journalists on coverage of terrorism, and the analysis of research that includes the role of MIL in relation to online radicalisation.

In addition, UNESCO places increasing attention on the freedom, independence and safety of journalists themselves as vital for peace and dialogue, with a range of activities in this regard. Amongst these are leadership of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, as well as developing new curricula for training on safety (including digital safety), and an academic research agenda on the subject of safety and impunity. A gender-sensitive lense is seen as vital in all this, not just for the principle of advancing gender equality in and through media as an end in itself, but also because of its significance for peace.

Also today, it is recognised at UNESCO that the idea of a peace-oriented approach to media needs to go beyond mainstream media and to encompass social media institutions where conflict-mongering is often present. Against this background, UNESCO's 195 Member States have agreed the concept of Internet Universality, which serves as a frame for – inter alia – the conceptualisation of online communications challenges. In this context, UNESCO has published studies dealing with online hate speech, and with the rights to (online) expression, access to information, and privacy (along with the issue of encryption). These caution against securitisation and militarisation of the Internet, which is too often at unnecessary expense to freedom of expression.

This paper highlights the evolution and range of all these activities, and how they constitute a comprehensive contribution to the role of communications in advancing peace and intercultural understanding, within the contemporary context of the Sustainable Development Goals.

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## UNESCO's approach to free expression

The evolution of UNESCO's approach to peace and conflict has come in the context of UNESCO over the past two decades increasingly focusing on a human rights-based approach to communications. What is clear is that violent conflict without justification in international law, and which targets civilians (and journalists) is anathema to all human rights and constitutes the biggest obstacle to sustainable development. But on the positive side, respect for human rights – including for the right to freedom of expression – is a starting point for preventing and resolving tensions that become violent.

Freedom of expression for all actors means the right to choose what to impart and what to seek and receive, via communications. This includes the right of every individual to press freedom as meaning the freedom to disseminate information and ideas to a public through the use of media.<sup>1</sup> Such freedom can cover many stances of greater or lesser relevance to peace, including the extent to which media actors wish to voluntarily take up particular positions. That said, it is evident that freedom of choice is not applicable in terms of opting for communications that advocate incitement to violence, aggression and war – as is clear in the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights.

Overall, for UNESCO, the default setting is the right to freedom of expression and press freedom, and media's role in regard peace has to be primarily understood within this normative setting – and not in terms of restrictions or compulsions. The notion of censoring or controlling media in order to ensure peace should therefore never become the primary approach to understanding or regulating the role that media plays vis-à-vis peace and conflict resolution.

According to international human rights law, rights may be legitimately limited only in exceptional circumstances, such as if the content constitutes advocacy for incitement to violence and discrimination, and if such limitation is done in terms of law and respect for necessity and proportionality. Under the Rabat Plan of Action<sup>2</sup>, it should be very rare that expression is penalised or restriction under these conditions, because contextual considerations need to be taken into account as well – such as the actual likelihood of causing violence and discrimination. The norm, therefore, is a free flow information and ideas.

All this is the foundation for press freedom, and its major users – the media. The norm of freedom is a precondition for journalistic expression to voluntarily perform its public service with credibility and conscience. It is this very independence that underpins the possibility of professional journalism and its contribution to the conditions of peace by means of trustworthy information and informed comment. Peace, as is well-established, is not merely the absence of violent conflict – it is a condition whose sustainability is based on social factors like: inclusion; the existence of peaceful channels for resolving differences; respect for pluralism; justice; rule of law and strong institutions – all conditions underlined by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Significantly, the SDG package includes target 16.10 “public access to information and fundamental freedoms” – indicating

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO (2014). *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development*. Paris: UNESCO. Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/world-media-trends> [Accessed 4 Aug. 2016]

<sup>2</sup> Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights. (2012). *Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence*. Accessed at: [www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/pdf/Rabat\\_draft\\_outcome.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/pdf/Rabat_draft_outcome.pdf)

thereby the importance of freedom of expression as both a utility and a principle from the point of view of peace and development.

### Culture and conflict

In the interface of the norm of free expression with the issues of culture and peace, UNESCO stands for the diversity of cultural expression which respects freedom of expression.<sup>3</sup> In other words, suppression of freedom of expression on the basis of cultural expression is not permissible. Instead, it is freedom of expression that can enable differences in cultural expression to be mutually understood and respected, within an overarching framework of human rights. Freedom of expression is essential if there is to be intercultural dialogue, rather than a polarisation and conflict based on impermeable cultural silos.

Dialogue in this context has the potential to make a difference to advancing peace. At the same time, cultural misunderstanding should not be exaggerated as if it were always and inevitably a driver of conflict and polarisation - let alone assumed to be the cause of violent conflict. Where it plays a role, it is typically in combination with many other vectors of tension, often structural.

Notwithstanding the concatenation of factors in many cases of violent conflict, there are distinctions to be made. Thus, inter-cultural dialogue as a strategy to pre-empt or otherwise address such conflict, is not per se to be conflated with inter-religious dialogue or inter-linguistic dialogue. These are distinct considerations, and even where in some empirical cases there are connotations, the fact remains that cultural conflict can exist within a given religious community, and religious conflict can exist within a given cultural community. Different issues are at stake even when they are fused and blurred, and hence responses need to be nuanced accordingly. Addressing conflict as if it were fully subsumed under factors that are cultural, when there may well be religious or linguistic or economic elements at play and which need particular attention, or vice versa, would evidently be an erroneous approach.

Dialogue in general, and inter-cultural dialogue in particular, is not a panacea for resolving all conflict, violent or non-violent. But it can help in some cases to open up channels to greater mutual understanding and towards resolving many structural tensions such as discrimination and inequality. For such dialogue to happen, freedom of expression, and its application to the media, is fundamental.

### Tackling the sending sides of communication

Against this broad background, it is now possible to proceed to discussing more specifics. A good place to begin is to note how UNESCO moved beyond the deadlocked debate about media controls associated with the 1980s New World Communications and Information Order. Since the end of the Cold War, and the endorsement of the Windhoek Declaration at UNESCO, the Organisation has

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<sup>3</sup> "Cultural diversity can be protected and promoted only if human rights and fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression, information and communication, as well as the ability of individuals to choose cultural expressions, are guaranteed. No one may invoke the provisions of this Convention in order to infringe human rights and fundamental freedoms as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or guaranteed by international law, or to limit the scope thereof". UNESCO. (2005). *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*. [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=31038&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=31038&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

consistently embraced the concept of free, pluralistic and independent media. This approach implicitly acknowledges a free communications environment in which there may well even be expressions that are shocking and disturbing to many, but which do not constitute a threat to public order or advocacy for incitement to violence, hatred or discrimination (which would be legitimate grounds for restriction if they did).

In the plurality – indeed cacophony - of communications in the contemporary world, UNESCO advocates that those people engaged in journalistic practice live up to the standards voluntarily agreed in their profession concerning verifiable information (and informed comment) in the public interest, and with conscious ethical considerations as well. It is basic, however, that it is a matter of choice (within legitimate laws of freedom of expression) as to whether the highest standards are lived up to. What this means therefore is avoiding an instrumentalist and prescriptive approach. Instead, by respecting the principle of editorial independence (within the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression), UNESCO encourages that those claiming to do journalism, whether professionals or others, to live up to their goals of producing verifiable information in the public interest, along with the ethics that go with this. Such a role provides for well-informed populations, and in and of itself works in the interests of human rights, peace, justice and sustainable development. The lesson of the Second World War, when censorship enabled aggressors to indoctrinate populations for war and genocide, is precisely the reason why UNESCO champions a free flow of information. At the same time, it is also evident that journalism may also prove unpopular with certain actors – for instance, who may sincerely believe they are, or who simply masquerade as, champions of peace and justice, but who prefer to suppress information that is inconvenient to their interests and interpretations.

In this approach, it would be of concern if journalists were to lose their professional independence – for instance, by being pressed into service - for example - as publicists or strategic communicators for particular conceptions of peace or development. Their best contribution to such causes is to help societies evolve their definitions and desires in regard to these objectives, by working as independent professionals, who uphold high professional and ethical standards as they act to inform and educate, as well as hold the powerful accountable. This is the opposite of being co-opted into acting as a means towards an externally defined end. Of course, in their independent role, journalists often fall short of their highest ideals – frequently due to the policies of media owners, pressures from politics and business, or as a result of individual corruption. All this indeed is why UNESCO also promotes self-regulation, as opposed to state-regulation of journalistic ethics.

What is further apparent is that the dynamic character of doing journalism can always improve. This is one reason why, in regard to the impact of reportage on conflict, the concept of “conflict sensitive reporting” has come to the fore.<sup>4</sup> This concept has superseded that of peace journalism, which can risk compromising the independence and even freedom of the media. Conflict-sensitive journalism is simply an appeal to those doing independent journalism to think carefully about potential impact, and to use particular techniques to avoid exacerbating violence. To borrow from *New York Times*

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<sup>4</sup> Howard, R. (2009). *Conflict-sensitive reporting: state of the art; a course for journalists and journalism educators*. Paris: UNESCO. [http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/conflict-sensitive-reporting-state-of-the-art-a-course-for-journalists-and-journalism-educators//](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/conflict-sensitive-reporting-state-of-the-art-a-course-for-journalists-and-journalism-educators/)

journalist Thomas Friedman, it is about helping journalists to realise that they can inadvertently be in the “heating business”, but that professionalism and ethics should rather keep them in “the lighting business”.<sup>5</sup> Thus UNESCO urges journalists to help throw light on violent conflict, its causes and its solutions. In this vein, the Organisation published a new handbook in 2017 alerting journalists about how they can avoid the pitfalls of inflaming opinion or of reinforcing fearmongering, in the coverage of terrorism.<sup>6</sup>

#### Tackling the receiving sides of communication

At the same time, it is evident that some of what claims to be journalism, and indeed much else in the communications sphere such as on social media, is far from conflict-sensitive reporting. Therefore a complementary approach has developed at UNESCO, focussing not only on the supply side of messaging, but also the demand side. This is the empowerment of those formerly known as “the audience”<sup>7</sup>, and who now have the benefit of the ubiquity of social media to not only access information, but also to share and to create it. UNESCO’s contribution here is the overarching concept of Media and Information Literacy (MIL)<sup>8</sup> which covers a wide range of competencies that are relevant to current times. These include the ability to find and evaluate information online, and to recognise and resist narratives and attempts to manipulate identities for purposes ranging from consumer preferences through to sexual attitudes, as well as online bullying, intimidation and radicalisation towards violent extremism. They also include competencies of global citizenship, in terms of which users know their rights and respect those of others, when it comes to asserting their claims in cyberspace and in terms of what content they disclose, produce or share.

In other words, MIL goes far beyond the technical skills of digital security, online research and how to produce compelling content. It engages identity formation, belonging, privacy and civility. It is also about how to promote human rights against violations – whether these are by authorities, internet companies, trolls, spambots, and the like. MIL further articulates strongly with inter-cultural dialogue, seeking to help users recognise assumptions and biases, and the danger of remaining in information filter bubbles and silos, as well as the risks of perpetuating stereotypes, including “us” and “them” conceptions. To help give impetus to MIL, UNESCO has initiated the Global Alliance for Partnerships in MIL (GAPMIL), linking together hundreds of actors worldwide around this agenda.<sup>9</sup>

#### Call for more research on sending and receiving messages

In regard to all the above, it can be easily discerned that a focus on independent, professional and conflict-sensitive journalism constitutes one side of the coin; the empowerment of non-professionals is the other. Patently, progress in one area will have limited effect without progress in the other.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://nps.edu/About/News/Celebrated-Author-Journalist-Thomas-Friedman-Guest-Lectures-at-NPS.html>

<sup>6</sup> Marthoz, J.P. (2017). *Terrorism and the Media: A Handbook for Journalists*. Paris: UNESCO  
<http://en.unesco.org/news/terrorism-and-media-handbook-journalists>

<sup>7</sup> Rosen, J. (2006). *The People Formerly Known as the Audience*.  
[http://www.archive.pressthink.org/2006/06/27/ppl\\_frmr.html](http://www.archive.pressthink.org/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html)

<sup>8</sup> <http://en.unesco.org/themes/media-and-information-literacy>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/media-development/media-literacy/global-alliance-for-partnerships-on-media-and-information-literacy/about-gapmil/>

Attention is therefore needed to both the sending and the receiving side of communications in terms of the vantage point of peace and conflict-resolution.

What is important, however, is to assess such progress, which means mapping the activities and evaluating their impact. While this takes a lot of intellectual work, as well as financial resource, it is important to do this. For example, a new study commissioned by UNESCO shows that a common assumption that exposure to the Internet is a cause of radicalisation for extremist violence, is not borne out within the scientific literature.<sup>10</sup> There is much evidence that groups bent on violent radicalisation use social media to distribute messages that constitute advocacy to incite violence. But there is a gap in research about how such messages are received. By the same token, the effect of counter-messaging strategies and MIL also need to be evaluated. We also need to research the extent to which free and credible journalism (where it is allowed), can play a role in balancing the impact of misinformation and emotional appeals to young people to become engaged in violence. Also worth researching is the extent to which a controlled media suffers a lack of credibility, and the resulting vacuum is filled by conspiracy theories and violent extremist messaging.

#### Advancing safety for journalism

There cannot be much hope for journalism to play its role if the practitioners are subjected to attack. The world has seen a rapid increase in the numbers of killed journalists in the past decade, most of whom are local actors in contexts not characterised by war, and there has also been the spread of online intimidation (particularly against women and minority journalists).<sup>11</sup> Promoting peace can well start with the protection of journalists – not least because, as is widely observed, such attacks are often a forerunner of wider societal conflict. In particular, the high impunity – whereby 9 of 10 cases of killings are never brought to justice – is an indicator of the weakness of the rule of law. When journalists are visible victims of attack due to their exercise of freedom of expression, there is a signal that goes out to the rest of society to keep quiet or face a similar risk. The effect is to intensify self-censorship across the board, which in turn creates informational darkness that provides further cover for human rights violations. When journalism cannot alert a society, or the international community, to intensifying conflict, it becomes more difficult to develop preventative interventions as distinct from belated reaction when the conflict intensifies into war. The protection of journalists – whether covering low-level conflict or fullscale war – can help the UN Security Council to make informed decisions about peacekeeping.

Against this background, UNESCO in 2011 initiated the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, a multi-stakeholder movement that works at global, regional and national levels.<sup>12</sup> The result has been an unprecedented 10 resolutions on safety in UN bodies over the past five years, as well as wide awareness-raising activities, and capacity-building for both journalists, law enforcement and the judiciary. Good practices in developing institutional mechanisms for monitoring, protecting and prosecution have been shared. UNESCO has contributed regularly to

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/news-and-in-focus-articles/all-news/news/unesco\\_addresses\\_youth\\_radicalization\\_and\\_online\\_hate\\_speech/](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/news-and-in-focus-articles/all-news/news/unesco_addresses_youth_radicalization_and_online_hate_speech/)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/freedom-of-expression/safety-of-journalists/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/freedom-of-expression/safety-of-journalists/un-plan-of-action/newsletter/>

reports on safety for the UN General Assembly on the Sustainable Development Goal 16.10, and for the Universal Periodic Review process at the Human Rights Council.<sup>13</sup>

UNESCO in 2014 also launched an academic research agenda on the subject of safety and impunity, which has catalysed action by scores of scholars.<sup>14</sup> In 2017, the Organisation published a new university-level curricula for training on safety (including digital safety)<sup>15</sup>, as well as a handbook for journalists in war zones like Yemen.<sup>16</sup>

These measures are intended to help secure conditions for journalistic work to be done without encountering physical, psychological or digital attacks – precisely so that journalism can do its job in reporting on conditions where there is a breakdown of peace.

### Connecting gender, conflict and peace

In recent years, UNESCO has worked to initiate the Global Alliance for Media and Gender, a network of over 600 groups, that enables concerted action around campaigns, including “Women make the News” and the implementation of the Gender Sensitive Indicators for Media.<sup>17</sup> The Organisation’s work on safety is with a gender-sensitive lense.

All this is not just for the noble principle of advancing gender equality in and through media as an end in itself. It is also because of the significance of the scourge of violence against women, and because of the importance of social participation of women in relation to resolving issues of conflict and building peace.

### Responding to challenges on the Internet

While mainstream media continues to be the site where most news is generated, and where agenda-setting and forming public opinion are highly operational, increasingly attention has to be given to social media. This is particularly because of the role of actors on these platforms in facilitating conflict-mongering via hate speech and misinformation that fuels polarisation.

A relevant response by UNESCO has been the agreement in 2015 by the Organisation’s 195 Member States to the concept of Internet Universality.<sup>18</sup> This concept enables a comprehensive approach to many online communications challenges to peace. In particular, it highlights four interdependent principles for Internet governance – human rights, openness, accessibility, and multi-stakeholder

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<sup>13</sup> <http://en.unesco.org/strengthening-un-plan-action/background-materials>;  
<http://en.unesco.org/strengthening-un-plan-action>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/freedom-of-expression/safety-of-journalists/unescos-research-agenda-on-safety-of-journalists/>

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<https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Funesdoc.unesco.org%2Fimages%2F0024%2F002482%2F248297e.pdf&h=ATMtmtCB8p5sqKKii0iHbimES40Pn9VLI6zM0A1eZ92MxylsSYGdS7bAl-TKihQusC0m7KwGoGxKyQF0I63ISiBhpruqP0wH10t5s1hpmm98oNCBs-kcxR-EzmDJg2E0EdeDirjV>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/freedom-of-expression/safety-of-journalists/safety-training/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/gamag>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/crosscutting-priorities/unesco-internet-study/internet-universality/>

participation. It is on this foundation that UNESCO has commissioned several studies dealing with online hate speech<sup>19</sup>, rights to online expression<sup>20</sup>, access to information and privacy<sup>21</sup> (along with the issue of encryption<sup>22</sup>). It is also against the background of this concept that caution is needed against securitisation and militarisation of the Internet in the name of peace, as this is often at unnecessary and disproportionate damage to the right of freedom of expression, and even counter-productive to knowledge and efforts at developing a sustainable peace.

## Conclusion

This paper has set out in a brief overview the evolution and range of numerous activities by UNESCO. Taken together, they constitute a comprehensive contribution to the role of communications in advancing peace and intercultural understanding. Covered here are initiatives on the supply and the demand sides of communications, as well as initiatives related to gender and to Internet issues. This work is highly relevant within the contemporary context of the Sustainable Development Goals and the further development of the World Summit on the Information Society.

For peace and conflict-resolution, the UNESCO interventions outlined here are not sufficient to prevent or reverse trends in violence, or deal with contributing factors like displacement, populism, polarisation and disinformation. At the same time, it can be reasonably posited that situations of concern from a peace vantage point might well be worse without UNESCO's work in communications - knowledge dissemination, capacity-building and networking.

With more resources, UNESCO could vastly increase the scale of these actions, and also put more attention into evaluating what works best and why. With researchers as gathered in Orbicom, an expansion of scale and assessment of impact can be possible. Orbicom therefore has a very valuable part to play in linking to the issues highlighted in this paper. In the interests of promoting peace in troubled times, the present is an ideal moment to enhance co-operation between UNESCO and the Orbicom network of UNESCO chairs in communication.

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<sup>19</sup> Gagliardone, I ; Gal, D ; Alves, T and Martinez, G. (2015). *Countering Online Hate Speech*. Paris: UNESCO. [unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002332/233231e.pdf](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002332/233231e.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> MacKinnon, R; Hickok, E and Bar, Allon. (2015). *Fostering freedom online: the role of internet intermediaries*. Paris UNESCO. [unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002311/231162e.pdf](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002311/231162e.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Cannataci, J; Zhao, B; Torres Vives, G; Monteleone, S; Mifsud Bonnici, J and Moyakine, E. *Privacy, free expression and transparency: redefining their new boundaries in the digital age*. Paris: UNESCO. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002466/246610E.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Schulz, W and Hoboken, J. (2016). *Human rights and encryption*. [unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002465/246527E.pdf](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002465/246527E.pdf)