CURRENT SITUATION AND CENTRAL QUESTION
What is puzzling, problematic, unsustainable, engaging, meaningful?

Conflicts exist at every level of society, from within our local neighborhoods to the interactions between nations at an international scale. While dealing with national security concerns, the militarily has been the predominant means for resolving and preventing the escalation of conflicts. There has historically existed a strong group of nonviolent supporters; however, the presence of nonviolent advocates for peaceful and diplomatic strategies in resolving conflict is often not represented in national and international media. The messages at the forefront of media headlines are focused on the paradigms of war and intolerance. Peacemaking attempts are continuously overshadowed and pushed to the background of news stories because they do not attract audiences as much as the sensationalism of war and negativity. How can we bring peacemakers and their stories to the foreground of media content without putting the media outlets out of business? How would we achieve a systemic change of media coverage that would allow journalists to focus on more positive news stories without fear of losing their jobs?

BACKGROUND

The news media system is a complex infrastructure nationally and internationally. Trying to pinpoint the responsibilities of a news journalist is a difficult task. The majority of journalists and students of journalism are genuinely interested in the process of investigation and reporting. However, the fact that the news industry is a business is no secret. Attracting and retaining viewers and readers for all media outlets is of the utmost importance. It is not surprising that sensationalist stories make their way to the forefront of media headlines in attempts to draw an audience.

What is the price of prioritizing news coverage in this way? Now more than ever, we see stories that focus on problems we face with hardly any coverage on how people or groups are working to fix these problems. The focus on positive conflict resolution, nonviolent actions, and peacemaking work has been utterly lost. Typically, the only discussions of diplomatic actions occur when outlets are discussing United Nations activities. There are, however, many individuals working at the grass roots level to develop sustainable changes to local economies and communities.

Elissa Tivona, a recent doctoral graduate from the School of Education at Colorado State University, wrote her dissertation on women engaged in peacemaking around the world. As part of her study, she also looked at the most-read news articles from the top news media outlet for each woman’s country. Undertaking a content analysis of the key words within the headlines of these
most-read articles, she discovered that the vast majority of the articles were focused on negative phenomena in society. The work of the peacemaking women was deeply buried in the background of the news stories, if not utterly emmitted.

**Instructional Options**

Case studies are ideal for discussions, debates, role plays, presentations, and guest speakers—i.e., active and interactive formats that promote critical and creative thinking, better communication, improved teamwork, and deeper learning.

**Role Play**

Various roles could be created to draw out a range of reactions, opinions, and values. A large class or group could be sub-divided and organized around each character to talk through the case, what their reactions might be, and how they would interact with the other characters. Participants could be drawn from the following:

- An international correspondent from a country’s main news outlet
- United Nation peacekeepers and experts in diplomacy
- A media scholar from a university’s communication department in the United States
- One or more citizens
- A school board member
- Students enrolled in a media literacy class
- A practitioner of deliberative democracy
- U.S. Government officials from the Departments of Education and Homeland Security
- A local news station reporter
- Other?

**Steps in the Process**

1. Ask each participant to introduce himself or herself to the group in character and explain the role they represent in the narrative.
2. Have each participant make an introductory statement about his case.
3. Establish a timeline and guidelines for a discussion.
4. Use newsprint or a whiteboard to track the points.
5. Summarize agreements, disagreements, and next steps.
6. Debrief the process, focusing on critical thinking.

**Questions for Discussion**

1. How might the media provide more balanced messaging in relation to conflict, including broader coverage of peacemaking efforts?

2. What are the stories that the peacemakers themselves would like told?
3. What messages do everyday citizens take from the media, and what messages do they believe are missing?

Core Readings


Tannen writes, "As Washington Post media critic Howard Kurtz put it in *Hot Air*, 'The middle ground, the sensible center, is dismissed as too squishy, too dull, too likely to send the audience channel surfing.' Getting a rise out of audiences is seen as good, regardless of what the rise consists of" (29). Will covering more peaceful stories of conflict resolution and reconciliation come across as weak and passive? What would be the implications for our global society if the United States news media transformed the sensationalist paradigm into one of more moderate, center-driven stances?


Tip #10: Introduce new ways of thinking.

Tip #13: Emphasize critical thinking.

If elementary, junior, and high school students were enrolled in media literacy classes, they could then think about media more critically as consumers. If students begin to learn the dynamics of the media system, the necessity to draw in audiences, and the tactics used such as introducing sensationalism in stories, perhaps they would demand more balanced and positive news coverage. Students could consider how we can make peacemaking and nonviolence more appealing to a broader audience range. Students could identify how to present stories of war from a more positive angle than just identifying the atrocities without offering positive solutions.


Ury speaks of a story that would not get covered in most mainstream news sources but is illustrative of the alternative methods of conflict resolution and interventions to violence that have been very successful: a community mobilization effort in the Boston city area surrounding an outbreak of teenage violence. The community, including teachers, parents, social workers, police, pastors, and counselors, came together collaboratively to resolve the problem, and they had great success (10).

Other Sources


Many of the pieces of literature are composed in a case-study format. Each analyzes a particular event or set of events in a country and then analyzes the media discourses that followed the event, paying attention to the framing of the issue and the overall tone struck by the media outlet. As the authors note: "Hence, 'War Journalism.' A mode of reporting seen by many journalists as 'objective' actually contains a hidden bias in favour of violence. It renders conflict opaque, obscuring the structural factors driving the cycle of violence and occluding the political steps necessary to interrupt and divert it" (12).

This article looks at both the positive and negative elements of the media presentations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa and focuses on three features in particular: sensationalism, bias, and simplification. The author states: "Over the last couple of decades, linguists have paid quite a lot of attention to media discourse. There are a number of reasons for this interest: an overwhelming amount of media discourse data is available since this kind of discourse is produced and reproduced every single moment of the day; media discourse also represents people's attitudes and opinions, and at the same time it influences the way people see the world; finally, media discourse provides information about politics, culture, and society, and it gives insight into social processes and changes" (183).


The authors describe their article as follows: "This study deals with a question that has received far less attention: Can leaders also mobilize the news media for peace? In other words, does the process also work in reverse? It is clear that the news media have the potential of playing a vital role in a peace process. They can provide legitimacy for leaders engaging in the process, they can emphasize the benefits that come from peace, and they can humanize the enemy. If the news media can help create a climate for war, they should also be able to create an atmosphere conducive for peace" (189-190).

**Sustainability**

*What will be enduring and healthy for everyone affected, addressing differences as well as areas of shared interest, context, and place?*

It is important to find ways for media institutions to operate as businesses and at the same time cover issues that highlight the world's nonviolent workers, incorporating peacemaking into mass communication in an engaging format so that audiences "stay tuned." The sustainability of peacemaking efforts may depend on awareness of them and a subsequent demand by peoples of the world for examples of conflict resolution in media reports. Media-literate students could potentially help change the system from within.

**Evaluation**

Bloom’s Hierarchy (Figure 1) offers a useful reference point when thinking about goals, objectives, and outcomes, i.e., where to focus the discussion, questions, and evaluation. Instructors build on lower level skills, helping students deepen their learning through application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of their knowledge and understanding.

**Creativity**

How can individuals search for more diverse news coverage? How can they demand better coverage from their existing sources?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>What knowledge of core concepts, such as tolerance, respect, understanding, acceptance, and appreciation, is required in this case study analysis?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>How can educators help students understand the importance of fostering meaningful relationships with others?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>What opportunities exist for students to exercise respect, grow in understanding, and learn acceptance and appreciation for the diversity of the human experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>How can educators help students look at their current values and beliefs about others in the world?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesis</td>
<td>What approaches and best practices aid educators in fostering student learning and engagement with others?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>What is common to the best practices that foster engaged learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Pursuing creative approaches in education to support student development of respect, understanding, acceptance, and appreciation is at the heart of this case.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Evaluation**

Journalists who want to cover stories without sensationalism or destructive conflict seem to be in constant threat of being replaced by those willing to write in such a manner. How can audience members accurately assess what is happening to the news that they receive? How can they demand more diverse news coverage?

**Synthesis**

Have individuals identify their values along with what they typically receive from the media and then construct a plan to get more of what they need. Do they want the truth, and if so, what truths do they want told? Do they want news to be fair and unbiased? Are they okay with media outlets having clear biases in their reporting?

**Analysis**

Have individuals outline the implications of a media system that features more stories, for example, on peacemaking and positive community actions. Have them research whether this kind of news could foster more peaceful societies.
**Application**

Having learned how to identify sensationalist stories, individuals could watch the news from different sources and record the number of stories that were focused on negative or alarming events, as well as the number that had positive or peaceful content.

**Understanding**

Ask individuals to report on their understanding of media preference for sensationalist stories.

**Knowledge**

Individuals could examine the structures of media corporations and report on the conglomeration of media outlets in the United States.

**Models of Communication**

There is a rich body of research on a range of communication theories, practices, and skills that can help guide case study analysis.

1. **TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS TRAINING**: The current consensus in the news is to focus on conflicts and wars at the expense of presenting other news, including peacemaking efforts around the globe. If media audiences were given more diverse news stories, would they develop more empathy and listening skills to prevent conflict nonviolently?

2. **TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS**: Media audiences often take on the role of the child in the Transactional Analysis (TA) model. They want their news as they have always had it, full of intensity and juicy information. Media outlets which present alternative stories about peacemaking could be like parents, trying to get their children, or their audiences in this case, to hear something new. This would not be as effective as if all of the media outlets came together like "adults" and decided that a certain percentage of their news coverage had to incorporate stories on peace as opposed to violent conflict.

3. **CLASSROOM MEETINGS**: Media literacy classes and current students are the ones who will dictate the future of media outlets based on the demands they place on new sources. If media students can come together with a sense of shared responsibility for incorporating more peaceful news, then the media outlets would have to respond.

4. **NATURAL/LOGICAL CONSEQUENCES**: The latest findings in science around quantum mechanics and quantum physics point to the fact that our thoughts have more power than we once assumed. If one subscribes to the notion that we are constantly in the process of creating our realities based on where we focus our thoughts, then the logical consequence of watching story after story on the news regarding violence and war would be that we will never get out of the cycle of war. We have to shift our awareness and focus on things that we want to see in the world. What you focus on, you create.

5. **BEHAVIORAL APPROACHES**: Perhaps the media outlets could create their own version of the Nobel Peace Prize by recognizing journalists for outstanding coverage of peacemaking efforts around the world, inspiring a whole new generation of journalists to find those stories and present them to the public.

6. **AWARENESS**: Would the individual journalists get more out of their work if they were to focus on more diverse stories? Would they be changed by the efforts of peacemak-
ers, bringing them more into the present moment with their own methods for covering news? Many journalists have lost their lives covering war; for those who have survived, what have been the emotional impacts on them as individuals? At what cost are we sending our journalistic talent into dangerous situations?

7. ASSERTIVENESS: The news coverage will be dictated by what the audience demands. Those of us who desire hearing more positive news in the world must be vocal in our demands.

8. PERFORMANCE

Local media outlets, such as public radio stations and university television stations, can experiment with other stories to get audiences more accustomed to positive news.

DEBRIEF

1. What lessons were learned?

2. What was successful in this case study analysis?

3. What could be improved?

AUTHOR

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A graduate of the Communication Studies Department at Colorado State University with both Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees, Mallorie also served as an assistant for CSU’s Center for Public Deliberation. Her interests include conflict management, restorative practices, and utilizing dialogue for building relationships and community. She also completed an interdisciplinary certificate in Peace and Reconciliation Studies through the Office of International Programs. Mallorie is currently employed as a Mediator and Program Associate for the Meridian Institute in Dillon, Colorado.