MEDIA IN PEACE OPERATIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF UNITED NATIONS INITIATIVE IN PUBLIC INFORMATION STRATEGY

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Abstract

Throughout the history of conflict, media has been in wars disseminating information to the public. It plays a vital role in conflict and post-conflict situations in both negative and positive way. At times, the media acted as propaganda tool for vested interest or as a "hate media" to incite violence that creates a negative force in the effort to foster peace. On the other hand, it provided important objective information for conflict resolution and peaceful change in conflict areas. Due to these varying roles some studies have appropriately described media as a double-edged sword. The focal point of this paper is the UN initiative in "public information" strategy in peace operations. In 1990s due to the development in the field of information and communication technology, it changed the way in which conflicts were reported and how the international community accepted the information. Media reporting enabled growing number of awareness in people about the conflict situation but it also provided exaggerated news reports on how well UN peace operations are progressing. This created a rising awareness in UN to address misinformation by using the media objectively to assist in conflict resolution and peace building.

Keywords: *Hate media, International media, Local media, United Nations, Peace Operations, Public Information strategy.*

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Introduction

Media are extremely powerful tools which play both negative and positive role in the conflict-situation. They promote violence and inflame hatreds. Even the Nazi German regime used radio propaganda campaigns (Allan and Stremlau 2). The media in vulnerable societies are most often manipulated and lead the societies towards conflict (Frohardt and Jonathan 2). They can also work in a positive direction in promoting peace (Hunt 7). If media are employed positively they could become an instrument of conflict resolution and bring peaceful change in conflict areas. Due to these varying roles, media have been appropriately described as a double-edged sword (UN 2007:26). When the UN launched its peacekeeping operations in the 1950s, only a few print media and radio were involved in reporting on the conflict areas. Those UN peacekeeping operations were more of military undertaking that supported political and diplomatic activity and as result information dissemination was more cautious (Egleder 53). The information in those peacekeeping operations was more of intelligence and they were often shrouded in secrecy (Lindberg 46). Therefore, public information as a strategy was not included in the mandate of the UN peacekeeping operations during the Cold War period.

The UN Public Information Component became an important part of the UN peacekeeping operations in the post-cold War not only due to the change in the kind of conflicts the United Nations have been called to address but also due to information revolution since 1990s. Due to the information and communication revolution, the parties to the conflicts increased the use of information tools. Earlier governments used to have a monopoly over information in times of conflict. Today, non-state actors are also having access to information tools (Lehmann 3). Media have been systematically used by the parties to the conflict to propagate hatred. For instance, the infamous radio station, Radio Milles Collines, played a crucial role in inciting violence, leading to genocide in Rwanda with casualties of at least

80,000 people. In the early 1990s in the former Yugoslavia, radio and other media played a key role in the ethnic cleansing of the entire region (UN2003: 26). In these conflicts, media were an important tool of the parties to the conflict in gaining popular support for the conflict (Bonde 1). They used media to create a situation of panic, fear, and chaos which subsequently hindered the peace process of the UN peace operations. United Nations peacekeeping operations in the early 1990s underwent significant changes while dealing with internal conflicts such as Somalia, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Cambodia, and Haiti. During this time, there witnessed the change in the way in which conflicts were reported and how the international community accepted the information. In fact, media became a driving force in international relations since 1990s, providing instant and 24/7 news of the conflict areas, which rapidly influenced public perceptions. The conflict in the Balkans, Somalia and Rwanda attracted huge media coverage around the world. Media reporting enabled growing awareness in people about the conflict situations but at the same time they often created negative perceptions of the conflict among the public and policymakers (Lehmann 1).

Awareness has been rising that media, if used objectively, can assist in conflict resolution and peace building (Loewenberg1). The UN also recognized the power of information as a critical support for its peace operations. In 2000, the Panel on UN Peace Operations also known as the "Brahimi Report" addressed the need for Public Information capacity. Information as an operational necessity in peacekeeping operations was soon supported throughout the UN, both in the field as well as at the headquarters levels. The information also used as an empowering tool in assessing the root causes of conflict and also assisting in the transition towards peace of post-conflict societies (Hunt 6-7). Information and communication campaigns became a vital task to build trust in the local population and ensure support for peace operations (UN Doc 2007:27). Thus, UN Public Information became a critical component in peace operations to address the information vacuum as well as the lack of credible information in conflict and post-conflict countries. This research focuses on analyzing the role and functions of the UN Public Information Component.

Media in Conflict Areas

The local media in conflict areas are often the first institution in the society to be disrupted by conflict. The media industry that exists in the conflict areas are weak and less

independent and being misused by parties to the conflict. Media are owned by a particular political party or certain ethnic community or region to promote their narrow group interest. The parties to the conflict use media for disinformation and manipulation that create confusion in the mind of people (Rai 1). Moreover, the trained media personnel have left the conflict countries, leaving behind the untrained media personnel who lack the basic standard of journalism. They allow themselves to be used for creating an environment of hostility with misinformation (Coker 78). This increased erosion of public trust in the credibility of media have further fuelled democratic deficit in the conflict society, leading to a climate of instability and impending violence (Hunt 22).

The international media also play an important role in conflict situations. There are various scholars who have argued that there is lack of international media coverage of conflict situation which is needed for global attention. Many of the conflicts, especially those in African countries where millions have died, did not get enough coverage, especially by the international media. Most of the times those reported were ambiguous, unclear and distorted reporting. Commercial interest and profit seeking of international media have sensationalized the conflict situations making it more hostile (Rai 1). The failure of international media to report accurately on these conflicts contributed to the failure to take more effective action on the conflicts.

In 1990s the acute crises in Rwanda, former Yugoslavia, Cambodia, Angola among others were mainly due to the devastating nature with which media incited violence. In Rwanda, media played a very negative role in inciting violence among the ethnic groups by a propaganda campaign through radio which led to genocide (Lehmann 89). In most of these intrastate conflicts there was the problem of hostility among various ethnic communities, where one ethnic community had the control of media with which they used their propaganda to disseminate misinformation and disinformation and create hate and violence. Moreover, in the 1990s the information technology revolution has led to the increased use of information as a powerful tool to incite violence by the parties to the conflict. The government and the parties in conflict try to seize control over media reporting.

While there is a lot of debate whether media perpetuates conflict or not, few scholars suggest that media can still be a powerful tool in the resolution of conflict. The role of media in war transitioning to peace significantly grew in the 1990s (Schoemaker and Streamlau 184-

185). The idea of "freedom of expression" which is an important democratic principle has been encouraged for democratization and development of conflict and post-conflict areas. Moreover, freedom of expression is not only an important aspect for a healthy media but is also an important fundamental human right and significant for a democratic structure as it represents different opinions in a heterogeneous society (Kuusik 1). Media coverage has brought the major conflicts to the world attention without which there would have been little knowledge of the massive destruction and humanitarian crisis in remote places. With the advancement of new information communication technologies, media are playing an important role in encouraging democratization and development in post-conflict countries (Schoemaker and Streamlau 181). Media not only distribute information but also counter hate speech and create an environment of balanced information which is important especially in conflict situations (Kuusik 2010:1). Thus, an effective and democratic media are an essential and indispensable part for societies trying to make a transition towards peace and democracy.

Negative impact of media on UN Peace Operations

The UN Peace Operations play an important role in conflict areas to assist in the transition from conflict to durable peace. In the early 1990s there have been significant changes both in UN peacekeeping operations and in the development of information and communication technology. A dynamic media context facilitated coverage of conflict anywhere in the world. Media reporting impacted both positively and negatively. The international media which provided coverage of the conflict situations created problem in the working of the peacekeeping mission as well as creating misunderstanding among the public at large. International media give less attention to peacekeeping success stories and more on sensationalising events without in-depth peacekeeping coverage. Such negative and sensationalizing reports affect the level of support to the UN peacekeeping operations by the key member states and also the international community at large (Lehmann 3). Moreover, most of the times international media ignore the peacekeepers work in reconstruction or democratization as these are not deserved as big stories to be broadcasted (Holguin 643).

The local media most of the time create negative impact on UN peace operations. They lack objective information dissemination which creates faulty investigative works and biased reporting leading to ethnic violence like those happened in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia

during the UN peacekeeping operations. Local media lack an impartial news-gathering and broadcasting capacity due to its partisan leanings and their bias reporting create difficulty in the peace process (Orme 20). When peacekeepers are deployed to the post-conflict environment, the local media infrastructure often lack capacity as they are one of the first institutions to be destroyed and disrupted by conflict causing insecurity among the journalists. Many of them were forced to practice self-censorship, leading to a lack of effective information in the conflict areas or the peace process (Hunt 21). Moreover, the belligerent parties in conflict areas have used media such as radio to disseminate propaganda against the UN peacekeepers which created a problem for UN mission to work effectively.

Most often the local population in conflict areas lack proper information of the UN mandate which led them to perceive the mission as failure as the media did not inform about the limitations of the peacekeepers. A lack of proper communication has brought a lot of confusion and misinformation among the local population regarding the UN peacekeeping. As a lack of proper communication between the UN peacekeeping and local population, support for a UN mission can turn apathy as the local media due to lack of objective information try to exaggerate information of UN peacekeeping operations (UN Doc 2003:15).

UN Peace Operations Public Information Strategy

The Panel on United Nations Peace Operations also known as the "Brahimi Report" after Lakhdar Brahimi, the Chair of the panel, recognised Public Information as a fundamental component and an operational necessity of UN peacekeeping operations. Public Information within peace operations is important to respond to the information gap and address the scarcity of credible information in conflict areas (Hunt 9).Thus, there came a need for Public Information strategy to address the fragile media environment in post conflict societies and Public Information Component which are civilian peacekeepers have played an important role in peace building, democratizing and conflict resolution. In post-Cold War UN missions, information operations are incorporated to encourage voter participation and raise awareness about democracy (Korson 256). By independent broadcasting for the public through training of local journalist, UN Public Information Component is assisting in democratic reforms and peace building in conflict-affected areas (Orme 60).

In UN multidimensional peacekeeping the formulation of public information strategy has become a significant aspect to address the fragile media environment in conflict affected societies. Public information assessment is the most effective way of reaching the population in the early stage prior to the launch of a field mission. It lays the foundation for the formulation of public information strategy and accesses the distinct factors unique to the mission area. A well designed and skilfully implemented public information strategy increases confidence in the peace process and thus counter the negative effects of hostile and controlled media (UN 2008:83).

Formulating public information strategy have three main characteristics: indentifying the target audience; identifying and developing key messages that support mission priorities, and identifying the most appropriate medium to reach the target audience. The target audience for the public information strategy can be the international media, the international community, parties to the conflict, donor countries and also the local community. The Public Information Component assess the parties to the conflict and their use of media in the early stage to take into account the views of the parties to the conflict without compromising credible and accurate information. Moreover, Hunt highlighted that although international audience remains important for the mission but public information strategies main target is to reach out to the local population (27). The public information strategy have included identifying key messages which reflect mission priorities in the peace process like voter education, disarmament and national reconciliation of gender mainstreaming. For instance, disseminating key message against Gender-based violence propagates discussion involving the local people in the debate and the peace process (Hunt 46). Again, the key messages of the public information strategy are adjusted with time and as circumstances changes (Lehmann 30). Another important aspect of public information strategy is identifying the medium to communicate the target audience like if the target audience is the local population and if the majority of the population is illiterate, or the area is remote, then radio or community outreach as medium is adopted in the strategy (Lehmann 31-34).

Since 1990s with the first Public Information Component being deployed in UN Mission in Namibia (UNTAG) there has been formulation of public information strategy providing information to a wide range of audience. Gradually, through lesson learned reports there has been increasing importance given to local population as a target audience along with

collaborating partners and actors operating in the mission. Local population are the most affected people with lack of credible information about the peace process and there is also initiative to bring confidence about the UN peace operations playing an important role in bringing durable peace. UN Radio as a medium to disseminate information to the local population has become very popular in conflict areas transitioning to peace. In the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), the UN radio station is the critical medium to the success of Public Information strategy which is essential for reaching out to the population living in the regions (Office of the Internal Oversight Services 3). In both Sierra Leone and Liberia due to low literacy rate and lack of access to other mainstream media, mission radio stations are deployed for the success of Public Information strategy. Moreover, the Community Outreach unit in the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) and Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) assisted in informing the local population through music, dance, theatre and other traditional media which are easily accessible to the target group. The Radio Unit and Community Outreach unit is a very important medium sensitizing the local population including local media on key messages which include disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and repatriation (DDRR); HIV/AIDS awareness; human rights and the electoral process.

Conclusion

In the 1990s, the advent of Post-Cold War UN peacekeeping operations operated in the complex conflict environment and media in the age of the information revolution of the 1990s further complicated their tasks. This revolution has led to the increased use of information as a powerful tool to incite violence by the parties to the conflict. The government or the parties try to seize control over media reporting. The government may seek to discredit the peace process if it suits them to do so. Moreover, the local media are often the first institution in society to be disrupted by conflict and many media practitioners with credibility have left the country. The media industry that exists in the conflict areas are weak and less independent and being misused by the parties to the conflict. In such scenario, there was a need for Public Information Strategy to address the fragile media environment and disseminate accurate and reliable information on the conflict situation and the UN mission and also assist in the reconstruction of the media infrastructure through capacity building of the local media. Thereafter, information programs became an important part in most of the UN peacekeeping operations mandate. The

role and functions of UN Public Information Component as civilian UN peacekeepers expanded gradually over the years. Public Information Component through the public information strategy has been playing a crucial role in providing credible and reliable information and assists UN peace operations to stabilizing the conflict areas and building local media capacity to contribute to stable and sustainable peace.

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