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Media, Memory, and Forgiveness: Case Studies in South Africa and Argentina's Conflict Resolution Processes

Byron T. Scott,* Carolina Escudero** and Anya Litvak***

Studies of conflict frames¹ customarily include neither mid- to long-term resolution nor the role of the media in that healing process. In theory, the formal reconciliation processes that have followed internal conflicts in many nations provide resolution and a pathway to long-term healing.² But do they? As the chief cultural guardians of national memories, what is the role of the media? Between the spikes of crisis reporting, are there persistent frames of journalistic messages that affect how ever-receding events are viewed by new generations? This paper looks at media behavior in two contrasting nations, Argentina and South Africa, while arguing that longitudinal studies would provide valuable understanding to the key question of whether reconciliation processes are a bandage or a cure to conflicts within nations.

Post-conflict media behavior is a largely uncharted region. In her thorough study of fifteen truth and reconciliation commissions and processes, Hayner³ makes no reference to what the citizens of the involved nations were reading, hearing, and watching during the headline-making hearings, much less afterward. Nevertheless, media organizations and journalists are frequently spotlighted as either victims or perpetrators of the conflict situations themselves.⁴ Yet, while the politicians may be different after truth and reconciliation, the media institutions usually are unchanged.

This remains true in Argentina, where twenty-four years after “the leaden years” military dictatorship (1976 – 1983), the major newspapers and magazines

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1. Framing is a major thread of contemporary media effects research that asserts, among other things, that the media puts thematic emphases around recurrent news themes or events, thus affecting how the public thinks about the related issues. See, e.g., Wayne Wanta, Guy Golan & Cheolhan Lee, *Agenda Setting and International News: Media Influence on Public Perceptions of Foreign Nations*, 81 JOURNALISM & MASS COMM. Q. 364 (2004).

2. CONFLICT RESOLUTION: CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES (Kevin Avruch, Peter W. Black & Joseph A. Scimecca eds., Praeger Publishers 1998) (1991).

3. Priscilla B. Hayner, *Fifteen Truth Commissions – 1974-1994: A Comparative Study*, 16 HUM. RTS. Q. 597 (1994).

4. *Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media, Org. for Sec. & Co-operation*, in EUR., MEDIA IN MULTILINGUAL SOCIETIES: FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY (Ana Karlsreiter ed., 2003).

are essentially the same. In South Africa, where more than thirty years of apartheid ended in 1993, the media landscape is almost unchanged. An important exception in both nations is broadcast, where drastically changed governments control centralized television and radio systems and where active independent stations have sprouted.

Beginning as a private initiative in 1979, the Sábato Commission,⁵ named for the poet who became its president, documented the cases of more than 30,000 missing persons and refugees, including a significant number of journalists (1.6% of all missing individuals). The Missing Persons Commission (CONADEP) hearings in 1984 and later also showed how editors of national media, particularly newspapers, had practiced self-censorship and established informal procedures with government officials and church leaders to “clear” sensitive stories. These same media also failed to cover the investigations and subsequent report of the United Nations Human Rights Commission on the “disappeared.” There was a general rush of media cooperation and contrition⁶ once military rule ended, however, causing one editor to declare: “We hope hell doesn’t have a lot of fire.”

While burdened by more than one hundred laws and regulations, South African media also practiced considerable self-censorship during the apartheid years. The subsequent work of three government-sponsored commissions, lumped under the common title of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), was often derided as “Bishop Tutu’s toy” by the Afrikaans press during its hearings beginning in 1994. Similarly, Cape Town and Johannesburg media declined to have its editors testify before the separate Tutu Commission, named after the Anglican bishop who headed it.⁷ However, over one hundred journalists chose to testify as individuals about the years of misreporting and censorship.⁸

It would be a mistake to indict either Argentine or South African journalism *in toto*, however. Independent publications such as the U.S.-owned, English language daily *Buenos Aires Herald* and the *Mail and Guardian*, and black-owned *Sowetan* and *Drum* magazines in South Africa, were exceptions to the general “go along to get along” media behavior.⁹

In both nations, publishers and editors protested that their first consideration was survival, both commercial and personal. The initial statement submitted to the TRC—in lieu of appearing before the Tutu Commission—by the largest South African newspaper publisher, Independent Newspapers, says it plainly: “The commercial nature of the company limited its political role in exposing apartheid

5. ERNESTO SABATO ET AL., *NUNCA MAS (NEVER AGAIN): A REPORT BY ARGENTINA’S NATIONAL COMMISSION ON DISAPPEARED PEOPLE* (Farrar Straus Giroux trans., Faber and Faber 1986) (1984).

6. MARTIN ZUBIETA & EDUARDO BLAUSTEIN, *DECIAMOS AYER (WE WERE TALKING ABOUT YESTERDAY)* (1998).

7. Edward Bird & Zureida Garda, *Reporting the Truth Commission*, 59 *GAZETTE: INT’L J. FOR COMM. STUD.* 331 (1997); see also Mathatha Tsedu, *Questioning If Guilt Without Punishment Will Lead to Reconciliation: The Black Press Relives Its Own Horrors and Seeks Justice*, 52 *NIEMAN REPORTS* 56 (1998).

8. Tim du Plessis, *Newspaper Management Keeps Quiet About Its Role in Apartheid in the Afrikaans Press*, 52 *NIEMAN REPORTS* 55 (1998).

9. *DEALING WITH THE PAST: TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION IN SOUTH AFRICA* (Alex Boraine, Janet Levy & Ronel Scheffer eds., 2d ed. 1997).

abuses.”¹⁰ The TRC analysis characterized media behavior as “a policy of appeasement [providing] direct support for apartheid.”¹¹

A dozen or so years later in South Africa, and after twice that time period in Argentina, the memories remain fresh, stimulated by occasional news events. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo are now too old to make their Thursday afternoon appearances, but their organization is an active and vocal human rights non-governmental organization (NGO). The blanket amnesties granted by the Argentine Supreme Court have overturned the intended impact of the CONADEP hearings. President Kirchner has removed the portraits of the generals from public buildings and has made righting their wrongs a key theme of his administration. Bishop Tutu remains an oft-reported newsmaker in South Africa and the world in general, but recent reports and outbreaks of violence and corruption have cast doubt on the staying power of forgiveness.

Importantly, the media institutions and some of the editorial gatekeepers are still active. Older editors, producers, and analysts continue to function, even as a new generation of journalists begins to move into the newsrooms and studios. In South Africa, efforts to create “rainbow newsrooms,” including staffers from multi-racial and multicultural backgrounds, have brought considerable attention to such organizations as the South African Newspaper Editors Foundation (SANEF).¹² Still government-controlled, South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) now makes human rights a major focus of its reports.

In Argentina some older generation journalists and editors also continue to work, but sometimes they have to accept criticisms from the new generation of journalists who say, “We are waiting for your self-criticism. Where were you during the ‘70s?”

The Argentinean president Néstor Kirchner declared in his speech of March 23, 2006, marking the anniversary of democracy’s restoration:

I know that I will say something that they are going to dedicate several centimeters of press to criticize me, it does not matter: I would like that in a coming March 24th or before the Argentinean media also makes some auto critic [self criticism]. In any media, up to not so long ago, not even the petitions of the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo were published.¹³

“Once upon the time when I was in Argentina it was the time when the journalist Morales Solá have talked about auto critic, but he was not talking about his

10. Independent Newspapers’ Submission to the TRC, <http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/submit/inc.htm> (last visited Apr. 12, 2007).

11. *Institutional Hearing: The Media*, Proceedings of the Truth & Reconciliation Comm’n, Vol. 4, Ch. 6, at 165 (1998).

12. *Faultlines: Inquiry Into Racism in the Media*, S. Afr. Human Rights Comm’n (August 2000) (loose-leaf binding).

13. In translation, the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who conducted weekly, silent protests in the square facing the Presidential Palace in Buenos Aires for many years, receiving considerable tourist and international media attention. The surviving members of the group no longer protest but are leaders of an active NGO devoted to human rights.

own! No! Everyone want to be auto critic, but not about their selves,” comments Patrick Cox, ex-director of The Buenos Aires Herald.¹⁴

In 1986, after the last dictatorships two national organizations for professional journalists were created—UTPBA (Union of Media Workers of Buenos Aires) and PERIODISTAS (Association for the Defense of the Independent Journalism)—the latter does not exist anymore. Both organizations have been hampered by the presence of journalists who cooperated with the military and church censors in the 1970s. This is not an unusual situation in transitional societies; professional organizations, including those espousing free expression, include members from both old and new generations.

And then there is the legitimate news itself.

Generally unappreciated is that news reports and journalistic narratives require a context that often include recurrent images of violent and tragic events that truth and reconciliation processes sought to put in a healing process. In both Argentina and South Africa, viewers and readers also are reminded of the past by a variety of political and cultural newsmaking events. Commemorations and cultural products are a part of the histories and day-to-day social contexts. In Buenos Aires, protest demonstrations in the Plaza de Mayo and the public squares of other cities occur almost daily. In Cape Town, similar protests often spill over onto the major highways, blocking traffic. One important difference is that, in both Argentina and South Africa, the media now generally cover the same events they ignored or censored in decades past. Both societies exist in a heightened state of social awareness. This is, of course, unavoidable. But the heuristics seem so incompletely examined that it is impossible to characterize them as positive or negative, much less characterize their effect on resolution or healing of past conflicts.

Common patterns do seem to exist in South Africa and Argentina, as well as in other nations. Investigators would need to begin with an improved understanding of media behavior during the intra-national conflicts, and during the coverage of the commissions themselves and the immediate aftermath. These data and observations are largely unsystematic and include both the commission reports and the *mea culpas* of indigenous journalists. The data also exist in reports by such press freedom organizations as Freedom House, Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters without Borders, and a half-dozen others. Based on the authors' observations, these before/during/soon after reconciliation patterns would include:

- *Before:* Major mass media do little to help, regardless of control or ownership. In such conflicts the press is neither watchdog nor critical societal force, but a complicit and largely silent partner of government.
- *Before:* Independent media, such as are permitted to exist, are severely hampered by government and unsupported by peers within the same system. Their support, if it comes at all, is from press freedom NGOs and other journalists working outside the country.
- *During:* The early work of human rights activists, and the later work of commissions, tends to be underreported and even derided.

14. Undated, personal conversation with Carolina Escudero, co-author.

- *During:* Under the weight of political and perhaps economic reality, the media admit their role. Admissions may be accompanied by explanations and even reforms, but apologies are usually not forthcoming.
- *After:* As a consequence, in the period immediately after reconciliation, print media tend to have diminished public credibility outside of elites. Comparatively, broadcast media, particularly independent radio have larger audiences and often greater trust.
- *After:* Coverage of continuing stories tends to emphasize past conflicts and images. Often such stories are themselves conflict-based.

A basic argument remains for those considering the media's role, whether before, during, or after the conflict resolution process (e.g., Does the media have a legitimate role?). Many professional journalists would answer in the negative. This perspective is summarized by Stuart Loory, former newspaper and television reporter/editor and executive, now Lee Hills Professor of Free Press Studies at the Missouri School of Journalism, who contends that the brief of journalism extends to finding facts—even uncomfortable ones—exposing, and explaining:

The conventional wisdom among the researchers is that news organizations desire a role in resolving conflicts.

Is that really so?...The news business has grown so visible and controversial in recent years that it is hard not to over emphasize its importance...But when it comes to mediating a dispute, conducting a negotiation or arbitrating disagreement, the news business is not fit for the job. It is doing the job well when it lays out all the facts, giving the public something to judge by and giving those involved in the dispute something on which to base a conclusion.¹⁵

The professional sin of South African and Argentine journalists was accepting or practicing censorship and reporting what they knew to be lies, Loory would insist. We would agree, but add that the variables by which the media deal with memories of past events while reporting the present still require study.

Studies of media behavior during conflicts or commission hearings are not enough, but even these have not been done in a systematic fashion. Patterns of post-conflict coverage similarly need longitudinal analysis. Persistent frames exist.

The heuristics are complex, but here is a short list of questions whose answers might describe and inform the media's role in intra-national conflicts and their aftermaths in recovering nations:

- What is the role of broadcast in semi-literate and illiterate populations? Does the similarity to interpersonal communication, particularly radio, make it more credible and powerful as observations in such diverse areas as Eastern Europe and Afghanistan seem to suggest?

15. Stuart H. Loory, News Organizations are not Conflict Resolvers, http://www.globaljournalist.org/web-content/columns/final_word/fw2006_10.html (last visited Apr. 11, 2007).

- Are there credible images of forgiveness? What visual meaning does a photo or video clip of Bishop Tutu or the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo evoke?
- How does the rhetoric of post-conflict reporting differ from crisis reporting, and how does it perhaps affect public attitudes? Materials available at the United Nations Center for Conflict Resolution in Derry, Northern Ireland, suggest that when Irish journalists secretly decided to bring down the heat of their words and images, movement toward reconciliation seemed more practical.
- Can we truly develop a reliable measure for the 30-year/10-year levels of healing and how does media express them? Longitudinal data can be extracted from materials available through the International Crisis Group in Brussels and other organizations.

Or do both the media and the public have higher demands? In the Argentinian case, thirty years after the CONADEP report, a national poll conducted for the newspaper, *Clarín*, indicated that fifty-seven percent of the society saw the highest need as “more justice.” Another thirty-five percent believed that the results and conclusions of CONADEP should be published in more places. Just eight percent told pollsters that it is time to forget. And forgive?