

JOURNALISM, MEDIA  
AND THE CHALLENGE OF  
HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTING

## The International Council on Human Rights Policy

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**Journalism, media and  
the challenge of human rights reporting**

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# **Journalism, media and the challenge of human rights reporting**

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# Background and Acknowledgements

Research and original writing of this report were undertaken by Roger Kaplan between July 2000 and June 2001. Mr. Kaplan is a freelance journalist based in New York.

Additional writing and editing was done by Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, Research Director at the International Council on Human Rights Policy and co-ordinator of the project, and Richard Carver, consultant based in Oxford.

The research and preparation of this report was guided by an Advisory Group composed of:

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Jean-Paul Marthoz      European Communications Director for Human Rights Watch; Former Deputy-Editor of *Le Soir* (Brussels); author of *Et Maintenant, le Monde en Bref - Politique Etrangère, Journalisme Global et Libertés* (1999).

Aidan White      General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists; previously journalist in the United Kingdom for *The Guardian*, *The Sunday Times* and *The Financial Times* and Desk Editor at *The Birmingham Evening Mail*.

Several papers were prepared as contributions to this report. The authors described how human rights aspects of the issues they researched were covered locally and internationally by the media, examined how various actors influenced the local coverage, analysed the process and drew conclusions. The reports, which were researched and written between July and November 2000, covered the impact of the economic sanctions in Iraq since 1990, the issue of international criminal justice in the aftermath of the 1998 Augusto Pinochet indictment precedent, the 1999 international intervention in Kosovo and the 1995 crisis in Burundi. The papers were prepared by:

Nabil Khatib      Bureau Chief of the Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC), Jerusalem office; Director of the Media Institute at Birzeit University, West Bank.

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Adrien Sindyigaya   Producer at Studio Ijambo in Bujumbura.

On November 27–28, 2000, the International Council held an international meeting in Geneva to discuss the preliminary findings of the research, and to debate the research questions. This meeting brought together the research team, the members of the project's Advisory Group and a group of media experts — most of whom are working or former journalists.

Loubna Freih, consultant with Human Rights Watch, prepared a report of the meeting. That document was used in the preparation of the present study, as was a feasibility study prepared by Susan D. Moeller, Fellow at the Joan Shorenstein Centre on Press, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard University.

In addition to the individuals above, the following people took part in the review seminar:

Miguel Bayón      Contributing Editor at *El País* in Madrid.

Frank Ching      Then Contributing Editor at the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in Hong Kong.

Stanley Cohen      Professor of Sociology, London School of Economics and Political Science; Board member of the International Council on Human Rights Policy.

Anna Husarska      Senior Political Analyst at the International Crisis Group in Brussels; Previously Fellow at the Media Studies Centre in New York.

Kakuna Kerina      Then Director of the Africa Programme at the International League for Human Rights in New York.

Claude Moisy      Former President of *Agence France Presse*; Vice-President of *Reporters Sans Frontières* in Paris; President of the Pact of Stability for South-eastern Europe Media Task Force.

Charles Onyongo-Obbo      Editor-in-Chief of *The Monitor* in Kampala; Columnist for *The East African* in Nairobi.

Deborah Potter      Executive Director of *NewsLab* in Washington D.C.; former network Correspondent at CBS and CNN.

Ibn Abdur Rehman      Director of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan in Karachi; former editor and journalist.

Naomi Sakr            Media consultant and Research Associate at the University of Westminster in London.

Andrew Thompson   Commissioning Director at the BBC World Service in London.

Two other consultations contributed to the preparation of this report. On March 13, 2001, in co-operation with the Institute for the Studies on Free Flow of Information, the International Council held a day-long discussion with journalists in Jakarta, Indonesia, to examine the issues. On September 5, 2001, in the context of the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Xenophobia and Related Forms of Intolerance, in Durban, South Africa, the Council co-sponsored a panel discussion on the media and racism with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNESCO and the International Federation of Journalists. The seminar was chaired by Riz Khan, former host of “Q&A with Riz Khan” on CNN International.

Several journalists and human rights experts were consulted individually in the course of this research. They are listed at the end of this report. We thank all of them for their co-operation.

A draft of this report was sent out for comment to a range of journalists in different countries, as well as to media specialists and human rights organisations. Their comments have been perceptive and helpful. We would like to thank the following individuals for their comments: Jon B. Alterman, Morten Boserup, Andy Carl, Richard Carver, Marc D. Charney, Anthony Cheung, Frank Ching, Stanley Cohen, Paddy Coulter, Thomas Crampton, Barbara Crossette, Michael Daka, Kevin d’Arcy, Doug Farah, Loubna Freih, Marguerite Garling, Gbolahan Gbadamosi, Nazila Ghanea-Hercock, Cees J. Hamelink, Thomas Hammarberg, Peggy Hicks, Mike Jempson, Bill Kovach, Drusilla Menaker, Claude Moisy, Johanna Oliver, Jelena Pejic, Alice Petrén, Ibn Abdur Rehman, Naomi Sakr, Nejla Sammakia and Bert Verstappen.



## Foreword

The purpose of this report is to discuss the difficulties of reporting human rights issues and establish what lessons can be drawn from different experiences so as to make sound recommendations to the journalistic profession, policymakers, and human rights advocates. The objective is to improve the quality and consistency of work in this area.

The report is concerned with the media's capacity to provide accurate, reliable, and timely information on issues that involve human rights. A quantitative study would show that the media devote a great deal of attention to this subject. It would also show that, despite all the attention given, the media fail to report much that ought to be known, at least in the estimation of those who are victims. How should the media's performance be judged? How should journalists and editors who work in the media judge themselves, when they try to assess the quality of their reporting in this area? This second question raises vast issues and there is no attempt here to be comprehensive.

The objective of the report is not to make a general judgement on performance but to describe why the media do what they do, in the way they do it, when it comes to human rights. It is concerned not with how much the media do or fail to do, but how they go about bringing information on human rights to their publics. How do journalists and broadcasters see their task? How does it compare with all their other tasks? What pressures are brought to bear on them by parties that, one way or another, may be concerned by their reporting? What would 'good' reporting on human rights issues imply?

The report concentrates on news coverage and does not survey all the ways in which human rights issues are reported by the media. It is biased distinctly in a Northern perspective, because it was prepared in Washington D.C., New York, and to a lesser extent London and Paris. Although it draws on the experiences of individuals in several parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, South Eastern Europe and South Asia who collaborated in its preparation, it bears the marks of its primary locus. It does not cover in detail all forms of human rights violations either. News stories more frequently report certain kinds of violations — such as those that occur in wars and conflicts, and those that are collected and aggregated by governments in statistics on crime or poverty. As a result, the report tends to refer to certain kinds, and often to more extreme or violent kinds, of human rights violations.

The report also looks at the issues from the perspective of those who work in the media, more than those who work in human rights organisations. It discusses the constraints journalists face, the effects of changes in the reporting process and in technology, and how the values of journalists and editors influence their priorities. It is not assumed that 'human rights' information should be treated in a different way from other forms of information, about diplomacy or the environment, science, crime or economic affairs. Information on human rights may have specific characteristics (as does information on these other subjects) but the

report does not assume that human rights are more important to journalists than other forms of information and should be privileged when news priorities are set.

The primary question asked is a simple one. When human rights issues arise, are they reported well, judged in terms of traditional reporting standards? Readers, particularly those who are professional journalists and broadcasters, will not be surprised to learn that there is no obvious consensus on the answer to this question. Some of those interviewed said the media do not report human rights issues enough, others that they report in the wrong way or focus on the wrong subjects, and many (especially in Northern media centres) felt the record was reasonably good.

Small media in poor countries, such as Burundi's Studio Ijambo or Belgrade's Studio B92, and vast news organisations like Cable News Network (CNN) or the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in rich countries, attract into their ranks many individuals whose idea of a life well spent is to show others the way the world is, particularly when the world has gone wrong. Other fields — law enforcement, for example — attract young people for this or similar reasons. Working alongside them are at least as many people to whom it never occurred that they personally can, or perhaps should, make things better for others. Publishers, reporters or editors thus work in an environment that may be sympathetic, indifferent or even hostile to coverage of human rights issues.

The media appear to give more attention to human rights issues than they did (however insufficient their coverage may seem to some observers), but the reasons may be deceptively complex. Added coverage is due partly to the fact that governments and political leaders refer to human rights more often than they did, even ten years ago, both in their formal statements of policy and in political rhetoric. Public opinion has similarly evolved. For these reasons, the amount of coverage of human rights issues in the media is likely to continue to rise. For similar reasons, there may be higher expectations about the precision of that coverage, and the quality of that transmission. These are the starting points for this report.

The report is organised in seven sections. Section One introduces the relationship between news and human rights, defines the terms and sets out the report's postulates. Section Two provides an overview of the history of human rights, and identifies the points of intersection between the media and human rights. Section Three examines the professional environment of the coverage of human rights in recent years, including analysis of some of the major actors, trends and transformations that have affected or are affecting that coverage. Section Four focuses on the dynamics inside the newsroom, and the direct impact of factors internal and external to media organisations on the selection of human rights stories. Section Five looks at how the presentation of human rights stories is affected by bias and other forms of benign or less benign interference. Section Six highlights the key questions and conclusions when looking at the impact of human rights coverage on change and policymaking. Finally, Section Seven offers some recommendations that journalists and interested parties may wish to consider if they seek to improve the quality of coverage of human rights by the media.



## Preface

Journalism is no easy task at the best of times, but, just occasionally, there are moments when journalists and media are confronted by a story so big that it tests their notion of professionalism to the limit. So it was on September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington when hundreds of millions of viewers around the world tuned into vivid pictures of raw, unedited horror. Within hours global journalism, in all sectors of media, faced its stiffest challenge in half a century.

Most reporters will take heart from the verdict that, apart from the predictable banalities and some bizarre exceptions, coverage of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the aftermath was restrained. Informed reporting of events and untangling of complex military, political and diplomatic background in countless talk-shows full of expert analysis and passionate debate in the days that followed was proof that independent media, strengthened by professional journalism, can be a force for good.

Hard reporting, lashings of human interest and the open-minded search for solutions produce a remarkably sensitive and non-sensational mix of journalism and the telling of the New York story illustrates just how well media contribute to building public confidence by doing the simple things right: promoting open debate, providing reliable information, exposing wrongdoing and corruption, and explaining the impact of events on the world in which we live.

Questions about how journalists work and the media's capacity to provide accurate, reliable and timely information on human rights issues are at the heart of this report. It is not seeking to put journalists on trial, or to make excuses for incompetence, or to define some new communications policy, but it fires the opening shots in a fresh debate between journalists and human rights activists and others about the role of media in modern society.

The report asserts that journalists need to think anew about how media play the human rights story and, for that matter, how media serve a changing world. There could be no better time for such reflection. As the international community launches a fierce and protracted battle without borders, and as political strategists cite 'the war against terrorism' as reason enough to roll back recently won victories for human rights and civil liberties, both journalists and rights activists have good reason to make common cause in defence of accurate information, thoughtful global communication and independent journalism.

The problem facing journalists is how to protect their independence when the world around them calls for their unquestioning allegiance to the cause, whether it is going to war or the struggle against violations of human rights. While journalists can do good, it is not their purpose. Most journalists may well sign up to the notion that democratic pluralism and respect for human rights form the core of a unifying political ideology, but few wish to be told to follow a particular policy or strategy.

The imperatives of journalism — truth-telling, independence and awareness of the impact of words and images on society — bolstered by political freedom and open government provide the backbone of democratic pluralism, but reporters are right to ask what becomes of scrutiny when journalism is the creature of political or social movements, no matter how well meaning they may be.

The manipulation of information to suit national interests, or military and strategic objectives, particularly in time of war, is the banal reality of a journalist's working life. As the political response to coverage of the military strikes on Afghanistan shows, no reporters — even top-drawer correspondents of the BBC, CNN or other international media — are immune from political bullying to serve their government's definition of the national interest. The best of journalists scorn and repudiate this sort of pressure.

In the same way, campaigns against the worst of evil doing — terrorism, modern forms of slavery, child exploitation, torture, extra-judicial killing, incitement to genocide and racism — are not exempt from journalistic questioning and media scrutiny. Nor should they be. Therein lies the reason for so much of the bafflement and dismay that descends upon politicians, the human rights community, and hard working NGOs when they consider media coverage of the human rights story.

A good example of this is the frustration and exasperation felt over media coverage of the beleaguered World Conference against Racism in August-September 2001. Mary Robinson, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, shook her head in dismay because international reporting of the Durban conference — the most inclusive gathering of indigenous groups and anti-racism campaigners ever held — largely ignored the rainbow of solidarity presented by the thousands who attended the event.

The conference was, unquestionably, a landmark for the global anti-racist movement, but for journalists the story was the dramatic walk-out by the United States delegation, furious political arguments in the corridors over the wording of a final statement dealing with slavery and compensation, and the ever-lengthening shadow of the dispute between the Arab world and Israel. These were the headline makers, which rendered invisible many positive images on the conference fringe.

The High Commissioner for Human Rights provides leadership for the United Nations' own body of activists and because her office is starved of financial resources and is denied meaningful support by United Nations member states she relies heavily upon the media to highlight the shameful record of human rights violations of countries. Hard-nosed, forthright and often courageous journalism is important to the High Commission, but, as Durban proved, the news agenda is not based on sentiment and 'do-gooder' journalism. When things fall apart, the story has to be told.

To understand why this happens we need to know how media work, to look at how broadcasters and journalists see their task, to examine what pressures are brought to bear on

them and, perhaps most to the point, to understand better what makes news and what we mean by ‘good’ reporting on human rights issues.

The report brings into focus three elements of the shifting sands of international policy governing media and rights. First, superficially at least, the evolution of government language in relation to human rights and the elaboration of strategies has pushed humanitarian intervention, as in the case of the Kosovo war, and the pursuit of human rights abusers, such as Augusto Pinochet and Slobodan Milosevic, to the top of the international policy agenda. Second, the evolution of human rights law over the past ten years poses new challenges for policymakers, not least in the glacial progress towards establishment of an international system of justice to bring to trial those guilty of serious violations of fundamental rights. Thirdly, the impact of technical and corporate changes in the global media landscape has affected the work of journalists, media content and the news agenda, particularly the way news media deal with human rights.

This report provides useful and perceptive insights into the evolving but uncertain relations between media and the human rights community as it examines the suggestion that the wider political and human rights agendas are merging into a new strategic undertaking that commands a new approach from journalists and media.

Is there such a new agenda? If so, the stunning events of September 11 put the issues into sharp focus — the role of media, the policy objectives of an undefined “war” on terrorism, the absence of a viable system of international justice, the lack of a democratic, credible global high-command working to universally accepted principles of human rights and democracy. If the global policy handbook is being recast, are media up to the job of informing the public on what they need to know and how they can influence events?

Looked at from the perspective of the hard-pressed reporter in the field or the harassed desk editor back at headquarters, these questions may appear somewhat remote. However, they do force us to confront some of the difficulties facing journalism today. In every corner of the journalistic universe there is political and commercial pressure, home-grown bias, prejudice and manipulation by all sides. There is also the ethical squeeze of newsrooms competing to be the first with ‘breaking news’. The rush to publish and to gain competitive advantage in the shark-infested pools of modern media lead to much incompetent and paltry journalism.

We may have many more media outlets, but it is arguable whether plurality is greater or that standards of journalism are higher. Indeed, there is a great deal of anxiety within journalism over the erosion of quality of media content in recent years. Journalists, like other media professionals, have to take their share of responsibility for this decline, but around the reporters’ desk there are corrosive agents at work, both within and outside media, which are weakening independent journalism. This report should be read with these forces in mind.

As the launch of the military campaign against Afghanistan in October 2001 reveals, there is no better example of why independent journalism is vital to democracy than when governments embark upon the mendacious process of making war. The tactics and objectives of great powers going to war are rarely transparent, and making a judgement of their impact

when they intervene requires careful study — particularly when, as in this case, that war is global, fought on a wave of national anguish and launched against an undefined and unseen enemy.

The coverage of previous wars from the Gulf to Kosovo, via the Falklands and Grenada, is a story of restrictions on news reporting to bolster public support for predetermined agendas. A 1991 report on governmental restrictions in the United States after the Second Gulf War concluded that “information was restricted or manipulated not for national security purposes, but for political purposes — to protect the image and priorities of the Department of Defence and its civilian leaders, including the President.”<sup>1</sup> United States information strategists learned the lessons of Vietnam well and adopted the model of press control used by the British during the Falklands War. A similar template was used by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) during the Kosovo war in 1999, when spoon-fed journalists were served generous helpings of a doubtful new political order — one committed to humanitarian intervention and defence of human rights.

The Afghanistan phase of the so-called ‘war on terrorism’ was also preceded by attempts to exercise political control over the news agenda. A familiar pattern of strong-arm political pressure emerged in the United States and Europe as media and journalists were cajoled into service in defence of governmental definitions of ‘patriotism’ or ‘national interests’. Journalists who expressed views counter to the prevailing popular consensus were victimised. Programmes were pulled, even music was censored.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, an honourable section of the media struggled to give people a broader picture of complex events following the worthy, if minority opinion, that the truth, not propaganda, is what people need if they are to make sense out of the chaos of events. The editorial team at the Voice of America, for instance, in September 2001 flatly opposed a United States Department of State attempt to ban a news item including an interview with Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, arguing successfully that the Voice of America, although funded by the US taxpayer, like the BBC World Service in the United Kingdom and Germany’s Deutsche Welle, should be professionally independent. The government backed down.

Coverage of wars and conflict are only part of the journalists’ story. Despite all the exotic froth about foreign assignments, world-changing events, and front-line coverage most journalists do not spend their days writing rough drafts of history. Most are too worried about the mundane demands of daily life to fret about the grand mission of their profession.

Journalists are not past caring, far from it. The instincts of reporters and editors who strive for thoughtfulness and decency in their work are strong, even if most of them cannot recite the details of the ethical codes of their professional associations and unions. These instincts apply,

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Public Integrity. *Under Fire: US Military Restrictions on Media from Grenada to the Persian Gulf*. Washington D.C.: Center for Public Integrity, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> An initial report by the International Federation of Journalists, *Journalism, Civil Liberties and the War on Terrorism*, October 2001, provides some detail. It can be accessed here: [www.ifj.org](http://www.ifj.org)

surprisingly, irrespective of the political reality and economic restraints within which they work.

There is always an element of bias in journalism and the scope for reliable and accurate reporting is often defined by the identity, objective and character of the media themselves. Journalists tend to take their cue, both political and professional, not from the moral values of parent, teacher or journalism school, but from the media culture within which they work.<sup>3</sup> A surprisingly coherent and shared common professional tradition operates within journalism, whether represented by *Bild Zeitung* tabloid or *The Washington Post* quality, and this tends to apply irrespective of the mode of transmission.

However, this latent ethical signpost is weakening in the wake of changes now overtaking media. With the advent of digital editing, text messages and dot-com journalism, the world of journalism is today very different from what it was, even ten or fifteen years ago — though the process of gathering, sifting facts and trying to produce a coherent, honest and comprehensive account on deadline remains essentially the same.

Most journalists in the developed world — and many of those elsewhere — have come to work in a converged media environment. They file stories, often simultaneously, for newspapers, audiovisual and online media; they are multiskilled, presentable, technocrats of a new media landscape that leaves little time or space for ethical reflection. The cynical, vaguely disreputable, hard-drinking stereotype of journalistic myth has been fully eclipsed.

At the same time, working conditions have become perceptibly worse. Often as not, journalists are increasingly distant from the point of editing, production and dissemination of their work. Almost a third of journalists worldwide are freelance, many of them working in poor, insecure and unprotected social conditions. Young people graduating from journalism school join a growing pool of exploited labour working in a twilight world with no secure employment. As a result, journalism is often more open to corruption and susceptible to undue corporate and political influence.

Technological poverty and the isolation of independent media in many parts of the world exacerbate the crisis of journalism. For many of them — whether in Colombia, Zimbabwe, China or Russia — violations of human rights take place ‘at home’ rather than ‘abroad’. For journalists working within repressive régimes, human rights abuse goes hand in hand with the routine of daily life.

In these circumstances, many journalists see the value of journalistic activism and advocacy. Of course, advocacy journalism is not some professional crime. It has its place among the traditions of free media. Where the mix fails is when the choices of story, direction, opinion and conclusion are made not by media professionals, but by interested parties.

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<sup>3</sup> A survey on this phenomenon is found in Edmund B. Lambeth, *Committed Journalism: An Ethic for the Profession*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

It is not just the way that journalists work and the tools they use that define the modern editorial culture and which influence so much of the content of newspapers and electronic media. Corporate lobbyists and a political class increasingly obsessed with public relations have spawned a multimillion-dollar industry that feeds media messages to suit the vested interests of rich and powerful players in society. It has always been thus, but today the tidal wave of pre-packaged information threatens to overwhelm journalism, not least because media corporations themselves are significant actors on the global stage.

Media corporations invest heavily in lobbying politicians and even human rights groups. They tweak the noses of feeble-minded legislators so that they ignore the dangers of media monopolisation and embark upon spineless and complacent political strategies that will not compromise their friends in media. For almost ten years the European Union in Brussels, for instance, has stalled on a promise to bring forward regulation covering media ownership in Europe after a successful lobbying campaign by powerful media groups.

Similarly, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, lobbied heavily by media employers, has issued a press freedom policy on behalf of the Organisation of American States (OAS) attacking legal restrictions on media ownership. One of the principles set out in the declaration cautions against special anti-trust laws for media — despite the fact that in the US and Canada, for instance, media-specific rules on ownership and competition policy are well-established.

In the United States, the lobbying power of media organisations is well known. Both of the major political parties receive donations directly from media who also generously sponsor and support Congressmen who support their objectives. The legislative and political agenda of major media in the United States — removing the ownership and competition rules of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), challenging unfavourable tax laws, resisting any attempt to limit political advertising or violence on television — are evidence of a private sector agenda heavily committed to the bottom line rather than good journalism or public interests.<sup>4</sup>

While media companies invest heavily in reshaping the political and legal landscape in their own image, they spend less money on jobs, less money on training their staff and less money on research and investigative journalism. Driven by new technologies and the lure of lucrative mass markets, media owners are themselves guilty of upsetting the balance of interest between journalism as an instrument of democracy and its exploitation as a tradable commodity. As a result, important stories — such as the consequence of globalisation — are missed or not fully reported.

Media corporations are some of the prime beneficiaries of current world trade policy and they are not beyond sidelining principles of press freedom and human rights when it suits them. In September 2001, China announced that AOL Time Warner, the world's biggest media conglomerate, and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation were close to an agreement giving them the right to broadcast television entertainment programmes in mainland China on

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<sup>4</sup> A detailed exposé of the unreported agenda of media corporations is set out in *Off The Record*, published in 2000 by the Center for Public Integrity, Washington D.C.

condition that they will beam Chinese government-sponsored material into the United States. Under the arrangement, Chinese state news propaganda will be beamed into American homes, but Chinese viewers will get no access to an alternative news and information service.

Yet despite poor working conditions, cynical dealing at the expense of rights, and constant pressure from advertisers, sponsors, and the gang of political and corporate lobbyists, good journalism survives and prospers, even in the unlikeliest of corners and circumstances. The scale of rights-based reporting on core human rights issues — torture, extra-judicial killings, child rights, people trafficking and asylum seekers, racism and intolerance — and editorial voices counselling peace in the face of war-mongering politicians testify to the fact that the patient is alive, if not kicking as vigorously as many of us would like.

Thoughtful journalists will, therefore, welcome this report because it raises many questions about how we work and how media perform. It does not have all the answers, nor could it, but it starts a long-overdue debate within media and with the world outside the newsroom. It also identifies much work yet to be done both within media and in co-operation with the wider human rights community: to improve the professional and social conditions in which media staff work; to eliminate editorial intolerance and to marginalise incompetence; to combat violations of media freedom; to assert public service values above corporate and political interests; and to demand, again and again, that quality and pluralism go back to the top of the news agenda. The list is painfully long, but these are tasks journalists wholeheartedly support.

Aidan White  
General Secretary of the  
International Federation of Journalists

On behalf of the Advisory Group

# I. INTRODUCTION

This report examines three main questions:

- *to what extent are new information trends affecting the quality of media presentation of human rights issues?*
- *what is the process of reporting human rights news, and to what degree do the media report those issues in a way that is accurate and consistent?*
- *how do other actors — governments, public relations firms, non-governmental organisations and other media — influence the presentation of human rights by the media?*

Because the production and framing of news media reports on human rights influences their political impact, it is important to understand these processes. Similarly, since human rights information is subject to constant struggle in the public sphere, and the media themselves stand at the centre of a highly political process, many actors interact in the production of news about human rights, including governments, non-governmental and inter-governmental organisations, public relations firms and other interest groups, and other media. How do stories on human rights emerge from that interaction?

The report analyses the nature of media processes that are internal, the exchange on human rights between the media and organisations that seek to influence them and the difficulty of communicating complicated information. How can the media communicate effectively (separating systematically editorialising and news-reporting and dealing with the velocity of coverage)? How can the media remain independent and avoid bias?

Certain places have more influence on these processes than others. Influence tends to be concentrated in Northern capitals where powerful governments and influential media organisations are located. Governments are concerned with, on the one hand, handling stories where they are themselves violators, and, on the other, managing human rights information about other governments (allies, sponsors, client states, enemy and ‘rogue’ states). The process is complex and the juxtaposition of government presentation and media reaction to it has important consequences. Among other effects, this interaction tends to draw international attention to human rights abuses, and shape public opinion in relation to human rights (which, in turn, influences policy).

The process affects some journalists and media organisations more than others. However, in this new environment, it is no longer sufficient for individual journalists to be alert. Reporting human rights requires a more considered response. How should editors and journalists respond institutionally?

## Human rights as a news topic

In recent years, it has become apparent to observers as well as practitioners of mass communications that human rights is more newsworthy than it was.<sup>5</sup> The media have become interested not only in violations of human rights, but in the institutional apparatus that has been designed to promote and protect human rights.

Partly this is due to the fact that many governments and international institutions have integrated human rights principles into their policy frameworks. Formally, therefore, the human rights discourse and human rights law influence directly public policy and diplomatic relations in ways that was not the case until the end of the Cold War. Since 1945, but more especially in the last twenty five years, numerous international standards and conventions have been approved and ratified by governments and international organisations. They set out detailed guidelines on unacceptable and acceptable conduct in numerous areas of life.

In parallel, a large number of human rights organisations have emerged from within civil society in many countries around the world. These organisations monitor violations of human rights, lobby for reform and feed the press with information on the subject.

The many humanitarian crises in the last decade have also caused media organisations to increase their coverage of human rights. Some of the most serious human rights violations have either taken place in the context of armed conflict, or have been the immediate cause of conflict erupting. One effect of this has been to muddy a distinction between human rights and humanitarian issues that was already none too clear in the minds of many journalists. Yet the impact of these crises in pushing human rights into the foreground has been indisputable, above all those crises in the former Yugoslavia and Central Africa.

Though journalists have expanded coverage of human rights issues into new areas, many human rights issues are under-reported. Issues that are less visible, or slow processes, are covered rarely. Human rights are still taken largely to mean political and civil rights, and the importance of economic, social and cultural rights is ignored widely by the media in their coverage of economic issues, including the international economy, poverty, inequity and social and economic discrimination.

How well do the media use, explain and analyse human rights standards? While data on human rights violations and issues are not lacking, the impact of this information on the public is not as great as might be expected. As a result, many human rights NGOs have refined their approach to public information and advocacy. As was noted at a workshop organised in 1995 by Index on Censorship, based on research undertaken by Stanley Cohen,<sup>6</sup> it is no longer the

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<sup>5</sup> Though it is difficult to verify that the number of human rights stories has augmented in national and international media, the proportion of stories that contain human rights issues has definitely increased. Hence, in some instances, a human rights angle can be found in mainstream stories, such as diplomatic or financial stories, which was not the case a decade ago. The perception of the importance and relevance of human rights has also increased.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Cohen, *Denial and Acknowledgement: The Impact of Information about Human Rights Violations*, Jerusalem: Centre for Human Rights, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1995.

priority of human rights organisations today to generate new information or establish its credibility. There is usually more than enough information and it is all too believable. Their real priority is to understand and improve what is *done* with this information.<sup>7</sup>

This is not the role of news organisations, whose function is to obtain, verify and make news known. News editors and reporters certainly think about the impact of information. They are morally concerned with the abuses they uncover but it is not up to them to determine what to do, let alone do it.<sup>8</sup>

The question that occurs repeatedly, *from the media's point of view*, is whether human rights issues are news in their own right, or whether they are news only when they are associated with other news. It should be stated at the outset that news organisations and the media collectively can say a great deal about human rights, but they have no inherent obligation to say everything. They have to select; and have no duty to privilege human rights stories over others. This is the argument that emerges from a number of journalists interviewed for this report when asked about the quantity and quality of their human rights coverage.

With regard to human rights issues, the decision of whether or not to go with a story may define an editor's (or a news organisation's) attitude toward human rights.<sup>9</sup> Human rights advocates ought not to assume the media are not interested in human rights stories because they do not cover *all* such stories. For even if news organisations do not cover all the human rights news, journalists argue, they cover a significant amount, and they are interested in human rights as a continuing issue. Overriding everything is whether or not a story is news: new, unexpected, affecting current affairs both large and small.

The basic difference in the cultures of news organisations and human rights advocacy organisations is that the latter are concerned with all human rights issues, everywhere, while the former are interested merely in issues that are newsworthy. The news media are interested in human rights only inasmuch as it bears on news — on a war in progress, for example — although it must be said that the interest of the media in human rights varies across the media spectrum and from country to country.

Although the ordinary news professional, in practically any part of the world, is unlikely to ask such a question as 'are human rights news?', differences appear as soon as the question is put in more specific terms: *which* human rights, *whose* human rights, *from whose perspective*, and on the basis of *what criteria*, are human rights newsworthy? Human rights involve questions of law,

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<sup>7</sup> *Human Rights Violations: Communicating the Information*, London: Index on Censorship, 1995, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> This applies slightly differently to editors as they have to express opinion and exercise judgement in reporting facts. Rajat Neogy, in "Do Magazines Culture?", *Transition* 24, 1966, pp. 16–22, notes that "an editor should be neutral but not a neuter. His acceptance of repugnant views must be determined by his ability to reply to them, and not because someone said 'always look at both sides of the story'. [Both] writers and readers [have to] sense this atmosphere of 'aggressive non-prejudice'".

<sup>9</sup> News organisations are less selective than the media generally, in the sense that the latter include the public affairs departments of both public and private agencies (e.g., governments or business firms), which aim deliberately to influence the consumers of information. In this respect, as noted above, the press office of a human rights organisation is part of the media.

morality and political philosophy as well as practical problems and how to deal with them. Journalism is concerned with facts-on-the-ground, what-happened-when. Journalism also includes opinion-making (editorials and op-eds), and in that sense is broader than mere investigative reporting. This means that, though they are essentially mostly observers, journalists can sometimes also be (powerful and opinionated) players.

## **Covering Human Rights<sup>10</sup>**

Any discussion about how the media communicate human rights, or how different players use the media as a vehicle, requires an examination of what information the media pick up and how it is treated.

In the Northern and international arena, the mass media are the most important sources of information about human rights violations. Neither personal experience nor human rights organisations directly are anywhere near as significant. For most people, television, radio and newspapers are their only source of information. They select which events and places in the world we get to know about; they decide what constitutes ‘news’; they filter and frame the issues; they contextualise the problem; they set the political agenda; and they create both a consciousness and a conscience about human rights issues. If ever the classic formula applies, it applies to human rights news: the media might not tell us what to think, but they tell us what to think about. They perform this role in two obvious ways.

First, *the media are generators and sources of information*. Under such rubrics as ‘foreign’ or ‘international’ news, reporters gather, process and present most of the information we receive about human rights violations over the world. In addition to just processing information, the media are political and moral agents: deciding to highlight a particular story, taking clear editorial positions, calling for ‘something to be done’.

Second, besides their independent role as producers of information and moral concern, *the media are the carriers of information generated by human rights organisations*. They are the most powerful gatekeepers between these organisations and the wider public. Whether mounting a campaign on a particular issue or publishing a report about a particular country or appealing for funds, organisations channel their information through the selective filter of the media.

Despite this, neither NGOs nor academics have given this subject much attention. There are no reliable or sensible answers to simple, empirical questions such as: how much media coverage is given to human rights stories? Basic questions about the selection, impact and effect of human rights in the media remain unexamined, thereby making it difficult for staff of organisations or outside researchers to explain what happens at any of the three stages of the communication flow:

- *selection* (how some events, issues or parts of the world receive attention),
- *presentation* (how particular issues or items of information are framed) and

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<sup>10</sup> This section is based on Chapter Six, “Publicity: Getting into the Media”, in Cohen, 1995, pp. 89–116.

- *effects* (the impact on the public of particular stories or media events).

In examining these questions, in sorting out who is interested in what — not only which journalist, but which journalistic culture — a contradictory picture of the state of human rights coverage in the media emerges. Interviews with editors, reporters, human rights professionals and other interested parties show there is little agreement on whether the media are doing a good job of covering this beat.

In the course of this research, three broad concerns were identified:

First, the media are said to confuse issues because of *inadequate understanding* of the material they are covering. They have a superficial grasp of the institutional apparatus of human rights. This is no doubt because of the relative novelty of human rights as a news topic. Nevertheless, as evidenced by what they write, many journalists would be hard pressed to explain the difference between the different mechanisms that exist to monitor adherence to human rights treaties or even distinguish between humanitarian and human rights law. Whereas most general reporters dealing with international affairs could explain the difference between the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, human rights mechanisms are taken to be rather arcane and specialist territory.

Second, *by not paying attention to human rights*, including economic and social rights in the media of countries where such rights are not well established, *the media miss stories*, or dimensions of stories, which diminish the professional value of their reporting. This criticism applies particularly to media coverage of rights issues that relate to their own governments or other powerful interests in their own societies. For the Western media, human rights are almost always seen as a dimension of foreign policy. Issues that have a strong human rights element may be addressed extensively in a domestic context but are seldom categorised in terms of rights. Child abuse, refugees and immigration, unemployment, sexual and racial discrimination and a host of other issues that are the daily staple of the media are generally covered in a manner that suggests that there are no external or commonly agreed standards to which governments must adhere. The effect of this is to weaken the media's own efforts to hold their institutions and other powerful interests in society to account.

Third, the media are accused of *missing the context of human rights stories* (historical, political, social and local contexts). This occurs even in the cases where the media are covering a story or stories that are not of immediate public concern, but are, in effect, reporting on a historical event about which more information has been uncovered and which, for that reason, is considered newsworthy.<sup>11</sup>

Some observers believe that such failures demonstrate that there is little point in the journalistic profession's search for reportorial and editorial standards that would enhance

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<sup>11</sup> Examples from wartime are abundant. They include reports on treatment by the Japanese army of women, during World War II, who (depending on accounts) were either willing camp-followers or sex-slaves; the circumstances in which torture was used by the French army in Algeria (aberrant, generalised or systematic?); the killing of non-combatant Vietnamese (accidental or deliberate?) by American forces in South Vietnam, and so forth.

accuracy. Yet it could be seen as an invitation to try harder. Accuracy is a definable quality. It means: getting the facts right about a case and presenting them clearly so that audiences can understand what happened and form a sensible judgement about what it means.

## **Definitions**

The media often tend to be demonised. As a profession, journalism is sometimes held in even lower esteem than politics. The media are partly to blame, not only because there is much bad journalism but also because it often feeds on itself and in so doing inflates its own image and influence in the world. It may therefore be helpful to begin by stating how we understand the role that the media play.

*Media* is an all-encompassing term referring to the presentation and transmission of information by a multiplicity of outlets (radio, television, print and the Internet). In this report, we use the term to refer to the individuals and organisations that communicate with the public via print, radio, television and Internet broadcast, and video and film production. When human rights organisations put out reports, they are in effect participating in such media activity, as are government public affairs departments. News organisations are part of the media, but their mission, in principle at least, is to evaluate all information that is released, and to seek information that is relevant but not available immediately. The term media, however, is widely understood to refer primarily to news, and unless otherwise stated it will be so used here.

*The role of a journalist is to report news and issues.* Most journalists do not believe — correctly — that they have a duty to privilege reporting of human rights issues.

*Journalists are observers.* Much has been said about the media's influence on events, its ability to create and manipulate issues. There is evidently truth in such claims. Fundamentally, nevertheless, important issues have important and substantial causes and media involvement rarely 'creates' an event of significance.

*The media are acted upon.* They are the target of lobbying by governments, private companies and NGOs, which lobby and spin news with great skill. They reflect rather than create biases of political presentation and influence. This does not of course absolve journalists from responsibility.

*Most consumers do not think that information about human rights should be privileged.* Consumers read, watch or listen to news for many reasons, including entertainment. It is their right to do so. To this extent, consumers get the news they want. Since we do not think it is right or sensible to argue that journalists or consumers of news should be *compelled* to attach importance to human rights, we have a more limited objective. How can human rights issues be communicated accurately (rather than in an inadequate or distorted way)? And how can they be communicated in a way that is relevant and interesting to consumers of news — and eventually, as a result, to the media that supply the news that is consumed?

Finally, an important distinction needs to be made between media organisations that are *regional* (Al Jazeera in the Middle East and North Africa, the Star network in Southeast Asia), *national* (SABC in South Africa) and *international* (in television, CNN; in radio, the World Service of the BBC or Voice of America). The latter have an altogether wider appeal and influence. In this report, we use examples from all three types without always distinguishing between them.

## II. HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE MEDIA IN HISTORY

### The International Bill of Rights

The modern body of internationally guaranteed human rights has its source in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR or the Universal Declaration) promulgated by the United Nations in 1948. This document, comprehensive in the rights that it addressed and still radical in its substance, was subsequently enacted into a series of treaties — notably the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1966. These have binding power on states that are party to them.

This body of rights has three defining characteristics:

- it is universal,
- it is indivisible, and
- it is enforceable.

These characteristics distinguish the modern human rights system from anything that came before. Universality means that the rights within the UDHR are the entitlement of every human person, by virtue of their being human. Discrimination, or selective application of rights, for example on grounds of gender, skin colour or nationality, is prohibited under this system.

The rights within the UDHR are also seen to be entirely interrelated and interdependent. No one category of rights (for example, civil and political or economic and social) is more important than another. This is in some respects the most radical challenge presented by the UDHR. Although most governments claim to subscribe to the principles of the Universal Declaration, in practice almost all tend to prioritise one set of rights over the other. This is not to say that every right is of equal importance. The right to life, for example, is held to be a core right that cannot be derogated from (i.e., no exception can be made). Many other rights — for example the rights of freedom of expression and privacy — may in practice be in conflictual.

The third defining characteristic of rights is that they are enforceable. What distinguishes rights from values is that they are claims that individuals make against the state. By signing up to human rights treaties, states undertake to protect and promote the rights of their citizens.

These particular characteristics of the modern human rights system distinguish it from what preceded it. However, this system did not emerge *ex nihilo*. The fundamental values underpinning human rights are to be found in a variety of cultures and religions, from Islam to Christianity to Buddhism to a variety of traditional and animist beliefs.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to deny that such belief systems also contain many elements that stand in contradiction to the modern notions of human rights.

The language of human rights can be traced back to the Western Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Political philosophers elaborated the notion that citizens enjoyed certain rights — mainly of a civil or political nature — in relation to the state. Such theories found their expression in two important documents that emerged from the revolutionary turmoil of the late eighteenth century: the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789) and the American Bill of Rights (1791). The terminology of both documents can still be found in human rights law of the early twenty-first century. Yet the rights they guaranteed were far from universal, since they were limited on grounds of gender, skin colour or wealth, and they were hardly comprehensive, addressing only civil and political issues.

The gap between the early use of the language of rights and the human rights system of the mid-twentieth century was bridged by a series of important developments: the emergence of democracy as an influential (if not widely practised) political system; the rise of the labour and socialist movement; the emergence of anti-colonial nationalism; and, crucially in the end, the horror of large-scale war and genocide in Europe.

It is debatable whether the emergence of the human rights system in the post-Second World War world was the culmination of a long historical ascent or the product of a fortuitous set of circumstances. Either way, the standards enunciated in the UDHR and subsequent treaty documents are a synthesis of ethical thought. They protect rights to life, conscience, opinion, expression, political participation, liberty, non-discrimination, self-determination, asylum, work, health, education and social security — to name only some of the key rights. They give specific protection to groups such as women, racial or ethnic groups, children, indigenous peoples and refugees. The historical reality, not surprisingly, has limped some way behind.

The mechanisms created to protect human rights at an international level were rather less impressive than the rights themselves. A United Nations Human Rights Commission, an intergovernmental body, was charged with protecting rights. It established a growing number of sub-commissions and ‘thematic mechanisms’ to address violations of particular rights. However, the resources at the disposal of these bodies were minimal. The United Nations Centre for Human Rights, conjuring visions of a grand monitoring centre in Geneva, was in reality a handful of part-time and largely inexperienced international civil servants. The various bodies put in place to monitor adherence to the human rights treaties were composed of experts, but also lacked the capacity to research human rights issues or to compel the compliance of governments.

Perhaps the largest UN body with a rights mandate is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Curiously, it is not usually regarded as a human rights agency, although the 1951 Refugee Convention is unambiguously a part of the system of international human rights law. While the UNHCR has on occasions performed valiantly in difficult circumstances, in general there has been a devaluation of its ‘protection’ activities — the core of the role assigned the agency under the 1951 Convention — in favour of relief work and management of refugee populations.

The gap in the United Nations’ capacity to monitor human rights was filled by a burgeoning number of non-governmental organisations. International NGOs such as Amnesty

International and the International Commission of Jurists (joined later by Human Rights Watch and an increasing number of others) developed a fact-finding capacity that far outstripped that of governments or the UN itself. For many years, a few international NGOs acted in effect as a secretariat for the UN human rights mechanisms. Over time, there was a corresponding development in the number and capacities of human rights NGOs at a national and regional level, addressing the whole range of rights contained within the UDHR. Most aspired to emulate the impartiality and assiduous fact-finding pioneered by Amnesty International in particular. The enormous volume of generally reliable information about human rights issues generated by these NGOs clearly marked them out as a vital source for the media and played an important part in stimulating greater media interest in human rights. Although governments were fond of deriding NGO human rights activists as idealists with no grasp of *realpolitik*, in fact human rights organisations developed a very down-to-earth understanding of the impact of grand policy at a human level.

It would clearly be an oversimplification to say that governments took no interest in human rights issues in the early years following the UDHR. They sat on the intergovernmental human rights bodies and routinely issued praise and condemnation of each other. However, with limited exceptions, governments tended to refer sparingly to human rights when they examined important political issues. The major exception to this was the position of Western governments in relation to the Soviet Union and other Communist countries. Even in that case, the emphasis was more on the threat deemed to be posed by the Communist economic and political system than on violation of the rights of, for instance, Soviet citizens.

The first major attempt to incorporate the language of human rights into foreign policy was initiated by US President Jimmy Carter in the late 1970s.<sup>13</sup> The target was still primarily the Soviet Union and its allies, while US support for anti-communist regimes that violated human rights did not noticeably decrease. However, President Carter's administration (1977-1981) introduced an attempt at global human rights monitoring through annual reports published by the Department of State. In many countries, publication of the 'Country Report on Human Rights Practices' released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour of the Department of State remains an annual media event. Particularly in the early years, the quality of the country reports was uneven and criticism of US allies muted; however, this improved over time. The Department of State reports cover all sets of rights, although in practice greater emphasis has always been given to civil and political rights. However, for many non-governmental human rights activists (and many others besides), the most objectionable aspect of the State Department reports was that they claimed to be global but did not report on the United States itself. This picture of the world's most powerful government, itself far from blameless in the human rights field, bestowing laurels and rapping the knuckles of the rest of the world was far removed from the impartial style of NGO human rights monitors. The State Department reports, nevertheless, had a great influence on media coverage, and not only in the United States. They fixed clearly human rights as an element of foreign policy — something that happens abroad — rather than something that informs all aspects of government.

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<sup>13</sup> The idea of an annual human rights report was born in the United States Congress. The Carter administration took it up.

In parallel with the UN human rights system, three regional human rights systems have emerged, in Europe, the Americas and Africa. In content, the regional human rights treaties do not differ significantly from the main UN treaties, although the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights places greater emphasis on collective rights. In Europe, and to some extent the Americas (less in Africa), the regional commissions and courts that police these treaties have proved usually a more effective route to justice for individuals who claim that their rights have been violated. An individual claim against the government in a regional human rights court is, of course, a newsworthy event. It also has the effect of bringing human rights home, by showing the responsibility of one's own government to protect and respect human rights.

Long before the emergence of the international human rights system after the Second World War, a body of law existed to regulate the behaviour of combatants in wartime. International humanitarian law, or the 'laws of war', was contained in The Hague and now the Geneva Conventions. International humanitarian law began in the mid-nineteenth century as a private initiative by a Swiss citizen, Henry Dunant. Dunant was appalled by the suffering he saw on the battlefield of Solferino (1859) and set out to campaign for some regulation of the conduct of war. It is as a result of these rather quixotic origins that the Geneva Conventions still today fall under the administration not of the United Nations, but of a *private* Swiss organisation, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The values of the Geneva Conventions clearly overlap with human rights standards. For example, torture is prohibited in all circumstances, as is the killing of those who are *hors de combat* (out of battle). Yet, as its name suggests, international humanitarian law is based upon an appeal to standards of respect and compassion rather than to rights. The ICRC monitors the behaviour of belligerent parties and provides material assistance to the victims of conflict, including civilian populations and prisoners of war. It does the same for those under administrative detention, outside conflict situations, but is concerned with their welfare rather than with the merits of their imprisonment. The sharp contrast with the work of an NGO such as Amnesty International in the area of administrative detention is a good illustration of the distinction between the humanitarian and human rights systems.

### **From codification to institutionalisation**

The greater use of human rights language during the era of Jimmy Carter made little difference to the practical approach to human rights issues by the world's most powerful governments. For example, the genocidal Cambodian régime retained that country's seat at the UN throughout the 1980s — because the *de facto* government that had supplanted it was regarded as pro-Soviet.

However, Western governments and global financial institutions did become more interested in human rights in the 1980s. The main reason was that the catastrophic failure of development aid to the impoverished majority of countries could be ascribed easily to failures of governance. 'Good governance' was a term coined by the World Bank. It was not synonymous with democracy, still less with human rights. Yet donor impatience with misuse of funds combined with growing agitation from nascent human rights organisations to link

questions of governance with those of broader accountability and respect for rights. The sudden collapse of the Communist system after 1989 gave impetus to this development. On the one hand, popular uprisings in Central and Eastern Europe inspired similar developments elsewhere in the world, especially Africa. On the other hand, Western governments were free to abandon the Cold War polarities that had determined largely their attitudes to human rights issues.<sup>14</sup>

In the 1990s, the language of human rights became central to the way international relations were conducted. Whether rights themselves were any more respected is highly debatable. For every triumph for human rights — in South Africa, for example — there were any number of setbacks: Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, the Congo, Sierra Leone and others. Moreover, the language of rights still concerned itself largely with civil and political issues. In the post-Communist era of globalisation, poverty and inequality between nations, peoples and classes were on the increase. This was not, by and large, perceived as having to do with rights.

Nevertheless, the last decade of the millennium saw significant human rights achievements. The tone was set by the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. This, the most important global gathering on human rights since 1948, produced grand sentiments aplenty but also some concrete results. The United Nations Centre for Human Rights was replaced by a High Commissioner for Human Rights with more authority and resources. Human rights have since become integrated into UN field operations in countries such as Bosnia, Haiti, Cambodia and East Timor — with varying degrees of success. The Vienna Declaration gave impetus to the development of national human rights institutions — human rights commissions, ombudspersons and similar bodies — again with differing impact.<sup>15</sup>

Almost certainly, the most important development of recent years has been the foundation of an international criminal justice system. The idea that perpetrators of human rights violations should be brought to justice was at the heart of the modern human rights system. The Genocide Convention of 1948 was the very first of the human rights treaties. It established universal jurisdiction to deal with crimes against humanity. Already, those responsible for German and Japanese war crimes and crimes against humanity had been tried before specially constituted tribunals in Nuremberg and Tokyo. These trials were an attempt to establish the principle of the rule of law in relation to the very worst of crimes. Their principal weakness was the perception that this was victors' justice. The UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984) also established universal jurisdiction for the crime of torture. However, it was not until crimes comparable to those of the 1940s were perpetrated in the 1990s that an international criminal justice system became more than a worthy intention.

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<sup>14</sup> In many countries, the Cold War was not the life and death matter that it represented for Americans and Russians. Though for people in such countries, the year 1989 was surely spectacular, the more important question was when – or if – they would be freed from massive state control over the media, state-run human rights organisations, and other forms of state control over their basic freedoms.

<sup>15</sup> See International Council on Human Rights Policy, *Performance and Legitimacy – National Human Rights Institutions*, Geneva: ICHRP, 2000.

The UN Security Council established special criminal tribunals to hear cases against those responsible for crimes against humanity in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. The former in particular had more than a hint of Nuremberg-style victors' justice — especially when an indictment was served on Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic just as NATO went to war with him over Kosovo. The principle of accountability for human rights violations at the very highest levels was gaining ground. Rapid moves were made towards the establishment of an International Criminal Court that would perform permanently the functions temporarily assumed by the two special tribunals.

Another important step in ending impunity and establishing universal jurisdiction was the arrest in London in 1998 of General Augusto Pinochet, the former Chilean dictator. General Pinochet was arrested in response to a request for extradition from Spain, where an investigating judge had built a case against him. Although the extradition attempt ultimately failed because Pinochet was deemed to be too ill to face trial, the episode had two important consequences. First, in relation to Pinochet himself, Chile opened legal proceedings against the general on his return. Second, and of more universal significance, the principle of accountability and universal jurisdiction was established at the expense of the traditional defence that former heads of state enjoyed 'sovereign immunity'.

There are two real and continuing obstacles to the establishment of an effective international criminal justice system. One, quite naturally, is the enormously complicated logistics of such a system and the resources that would be required for it to have more than symbolic importance. The other is the opposition of successive governments of the United States who have consistently opposed the formation of an International Criminal Court.

## **The media and human rights**

There are two main points of intersection between the worlds of the media and human rights. One is the considerable degree of overlap of subject matter between the two areas. Much of reporting concerns matters that directly or indirectly have a human rights content. The other is the fact that freedom of the media is itself a human right. The media are regarded conventionally as one of the mechanisms by which citizens hold their governments to account.

To take the second point of intersection first: the emergence of the first widely circulated newspapers coincided almost exactly with the development of Enlightenment ideas of human rights in eighteenth century Europe and North America. Indeed, some of the early advocates of the 'rights of man', such as Tom Paine, were themselves journalists. The First Amendment (1791) to the Constitution of the United States (1787) forbade any laws 'abridging' the freedom of the press. The press was regarded in the United States as a fourth branch of government or 'estate', holding to account the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. Indeed, in the United States the press was considered to be vital to the functioning of a free society, no less

important than other state institutions.<sup>16</sup> This US doctrine on press freedom has found its way almost unchanged into modern human rights thinking.

At stake are two sets of rights: that of the media to report and express opinions as they see fit and that of the people to accurate and critical information regarding the actions of those in power. Other rights may be involved too — for example, those of opposition politicians who need the media to disseminate their opinions. In theory — and to a large extent in practice — the freedom of the media to go about their business without interference is held to guarantee all these interlocking rights.

The most problematic areas of this classic ‘first amendment’ doctrine lie around the fringes. For example, in countries with a consistent commitment to media freedom there are still enormous differences of approach to the issue of ‘hate speech’. The classic response to those who advocate directly racist and other extreme views is that these should be permitted unless they incite directly violence. This school of thought points out that the country with the strongest legal battery against racial hate speech was apartheid South Africa — and without exception it was the opponents of apartheid who were prosecuted. Yet the shortcomings of this classical doctrine are most starkly shown in the role of the media in inciting war and atrocious violations of human rights in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. It is arguably true that in a country with a truly free and plural media such atrocities could never occur (just as the economist Amartya Sen argues that there has never been a famine in a country with a free press<sup>17</sup>). That scarcely solves the problem of how to address hate speech in a context where genuine pluralism in the media does not exist. Meanwhile, it seems warranted to prosecute (and convict) Rwandan journalists guilty of racial incitement before the special tribunal in Arusha.<sup>18</sup>

However, US press freedom doctrine has failed to find widespread acceptance in its insistence on the primacy of the market as a guarantee of pluralism. In most European countries, broadcasting developed as a government monopoly. Indeed, in some countries with a long tradition of pluralist democracy, such as France, this was the situation as late as the 1980s. Others, notably in Scandinavia, had a system of subsidies to the press out of public funds. In all cases, the rationale was precisely the opposite of the US argument: that the market could *not* guarantee pluralism since it excluded those without economic power. From the early days of public broadcasting in Western Europe there was a strong sentiment that it was also a guarantee of quality in programming, against the commercial temptation to go for the lowest common denominator — ‘dumbing down’ in contemporary parlance.

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<sup>16</sup> Whereas state institutions required regulation to protect freedom, the press had to be left alone to achieve the same goal. Confidence in the self-correcting functions of a free, private, and competitive press was such that it was not believed that the media, taken as a whole, could have anti-democratic consequences, so long as they were not censored or regulated.

<sup>17</sup> Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famine*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

<sup>18</sup> The central questions in that trial are these: Can journalism kill? And at what point does political propaganda become criminal? See Marlise Simons, “Trial Examines War Crimes, Free Speech and Journalism,” *The International Herald Tribune*, March 5, 2002, p. 2.

European colonial powers exported their publicly funded broadcasting model throughout the world, where it became hideously distorted into a government propaganda machine — in defence first of the colonial order and later of authoritarian post-colonial governments. The dictatorships of the Eastern bloc and the colonial and post-colonial world were marked generally by state monopolies or near monopolies of broadcasting and often print media. There were some curious exceptions. Apartheid South Africa, for example, retained a tight control over broadcasting for many years, but allowed a greater degree of latitude to the print media. Yet this fell far short of the freedom the press needed to do its job effectively: publications were banned, and journalists imprisoned or exiled. As in much of the rest of the world, the struggle of journalists to break the constraints on their own activities clearly aligned them with those who sought political freedom and respect for human rights.

The Western media, in a sense, had similar origins. The first ‘mass media’ — newspapers — developed along with political democracy. Yet the Western media, with their largely corporate ownership, cannot be said to be aligned with the struggle for human rights in the same way as small, campaigning newspapers or broadcasting stations in Central and Eastern Europe and in much of the Southern hemisphere. Indeed, the rise of gigantic media corporations poses one of the most difficult contemporary questions about the relationship between the media and human rights. Whereas the classical US freedom of expression doctrine always perceived a conflict of interest between the duty of the publicly employed journalist to her employer and to her audience (or her professional obligations), the same dilemma is now posed every bit as starkly for journalists who work for AOL Time Warner, News International or any of the conglomerates that trade in information as a commodity. This emerges in its sharpest form if the journalist’s employer — Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi to name a celebrated example — has direct political ambitions.

A crossover between journalism and politics is hardly new. What has changed is the sheer scale and power of media corporations. In some instances, the commercial interests of the company will influence directly the media’s coverage of human rights issues — as the Murdoch Group has soft-pedalled on human rights violations in China. Although the ethical obligations of journalists are the same whether they work for CNN<sup>19</sup> or a small weekly newspaper in Latin America, it is doubtful whether the label ‘private’ or ‘independent’ media can be applied usefully to embrace both categories.

The other overlap between the concerns of human rights campaigners and journalists is in the subject matter. The violations of rights that are of concern to the former may often be the scoops or hidden scandals that preoccupy the latter. In other cases, the great political crises that journalists cover are caused often by, or cause serious violations of rights.

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<sup>19</sup> In addition to an international radio service and Internet sites in Arabic, Danish, English, German, Italian, Korean, Portuguese and Spanish, the Atlanta-based Cable News Network (CNN) airs in seven editions: CNN (in the continental United States), CNNI (international, based in London, broken down in regional segments in Africa, Asia and Europe), CNN Headlines News, CNN Airport Network, CNN Plus (in Spanish), CNNfn (financial news), and CNNSI (in association with Sports Illustrated).

Many of these same issues have been a focus for the media long before they would ever have been cast in the language of rights. Wartime atrocities, for example, have been a concern of journalists since the first ‘media wars’, the Crimea and the American Civil War, in the mid-nineteenth century. In the years before the creation of the human rights system, many other human rights issues have preoccupied the media, journalists and other writers: child labour in nineteenth century Europe, or the plight of workers and the poor in the depression of the 1930s (in the writings of George Orwell and James Agee). These issues were seldom presented in the language of rights — though this was not true of Emile Zola’s celebrated press campaign over the wrongful imprisonment of the French Jewish army officer, Captain Alfred Dreyfus.<sup>20</sup>

Coverage of wartime atrocities was also rarely presented in terms of human rights or explicit humanitarian standards. An exception to this was the campaign of *The Manchester Guardian* over the British internment of Boer women and children in concentration camps during the South African war (1899-1902). More characteristic was the string of anti-‘Hun’ atrocity stories that appeared in the Allied press during the First World War. Indeed the exaggerated and inaccurate nature of these stories probably discouraged the early reporting of genuine German atrocities of a far more serious nature, a mere twenty years later. A problem with the reporting of war is that it has almost always been from the perspective of one’s ‘own’ side. The atrocities reported were always committed by the enemy. This patriotic alignment still exists, and the logistics of war reporting demand usually that journalists are accredited to accompany a particular army. In this respect, the Vietnam war in the 1960s marked a turning point because in that case American media portrayed the human impact of the war on both Americans and Vietnamese — thereby influencing public sentiment in the United States in a dramatic fashion.

From around the same period, journalists began to understand the potential of human rights organisations as a source of well-researched information. It was perhaps not until the 1990s, when the language of human rights permeated international relations, that the media too began to talk extensively of human rights. Whether this signifies that human rights issues are more covered fully in the media now than before is, of course, another matter.

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<sup>20</sup> Not entirely by coincidence, Zola and Orwell were novelists as well as journalists at one time or another. This reinforced rather than trivialised their sense of the absolute primacy of facts and fair reporting. Zola and Orwell were also clear about the distinction between fact and fiction. A lack of clarity about such matters damages journalists’ work, sometimes irreparably.

## **'RETROACTIVE' COVERAGE**

Much human rights coverage continues necessarily after the events at issue. This is no doubt particularly true of reporting conduct during wars; because it is always technically difficult, and often impossible, to establish facts at the time and therefore report whether crimes were committed, whose human rights were violated or what could have been done differently. If the media often fail to get the story in 'real time', they should be given credit for making retrospective 'specials' or 'dossiers' in which considerable amounts of information, relevant background and other features are brought together. Coverage is not necessarily faulty because it is tardy.

As human rights language has been adopted more widely, retrospective interest in abuses of human rights has increased. This can be positive beyond its usefulness to understand the past or to secure justice (justice delayed is better than no justice). It can also be valuable in clarifying contemporary situations. The interest of journalists in 'refighting' old wars and other events is eminently practical, and human rights organisations ought to take an interest in these exercises too, and help journalists understand the terms they are using (and sometimes misusing) retroactively.

Uncovering new information or new perspectives on old events can also have legal consequences. Confessing openly to running a death squad during the Algerian war in 1957 exposed a retired French general, Paul Aussaresses, to legal proceedings in 2001. The role of the media here is that while the *broad facts* were not unknown, legal action required that *specific facts* be stated. News organisations were in a position to investigate, prove or disprove, the specific facts offered by General Aussaresses.

Some war crimes can be tried indefinitely; others cannot. Did the United States' army commit a war crime at No Gun Ri, in South Korea, in July 1950? Even long after the events, the question is relevant both for journalists and historians. Could the events have been reported much differently than they were at the time? Answering this question helps journalists to decide what they ought to be on the lookout for, even though no two situations are alike exactly.

Examination of past cases can also help journalists to train themselves to identify human rights issues. In many cases, perhaps especially in conditions of war, violations may not be self-evident immediately.

The fact that the formula ‘human rights violations’ was more likely to appear in news coverage of wars during the 1990s than during the 1890s does not necessarily mean that coverage of the later wars was more accurate and consistent. There now exists a consensus among news professionals and human rights activists that the media are more receptive to human rights issues today than at any time in the modern history of the media — though the consensus does not extend to saying that the media cover the subject well. To some degree, this merely means, as many individuals interviewed for this report remarked, that the language of human rights is more widely used than in the past — in part because it is more widely used in the language of foreign policy-makers.

This has nonetheless created a degree of confusion in practice because at one level the language of human rights is a technical and legal code, while at another it is used loosely and emotionally as a moral language. Its emotional resonance means that it can be used — and is used — to great effect, not least by political leaders and parties. In practice, policy-makers and political leaders oscillate freely between one and the other when they speak of human rights, now marking a technical and legal point, now marking an emotional one, in ways that can be highly manipulative politically and impossible to disentangle without an understanding of the human rights standards concerned. This underscores the editorial imperative to be very clear on what is referred to.

This is significant also because it means that human rights issues are likely to appear, more regularly than in the past, on the agendas of editorial conferences. It is not controversial for an editor or reporter to use a human rights ‘hook’ to angle his or her story, whereas in the past he or she might have used a more traditional one — diplomatic or security affairs, for example or, in the case of domestic human rights, politics or law. Generally, many incidences of human rights violations have been brought to light and documented in recent years by the news media. In many cases, news reports have served to set in motion mechanisms or procedures for putting an end to human rights violations. At the same time, the crucial challenge remains how to provide accurate media representation and unbiased objective reporting.<sup>21</sup>

Because most political societies now tend toward acceptance, in theory and practice, of the values (and specific political obligations) defined in the Universal Declaration, every failure to respect these becomes more newsworthy. It is newsworthy in the way that South African apartheid, or segregation as practised in the United States, were newsworthy. It was not ‘fresh news’ every day that in South Africa or in the United States there was legal and racially-based discrimination or political and judicial inequality. Both were chronic situations. It is characteristic of such situations, however, that minor as well as major events call attention to the basic discrimination in question, generating a stream of news coverage that steadily draws public attention to it. It is important to keep this in mind when considering the different conditions under which the media in countries of liberal traditions and countries not of liberal traditions labour. Where these include the traditions and values of free reporting and free criticism, the media either feel obliged to follow those values or, contrarily, deliberately spurn them.

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<sup>21</sup> Kayoko Mizuta, “Human Rights and the Media”, in Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, *Media and Human Rights in Asia*, Singapore: AMIC, 2000, pp. 3–4.

This report considers examples of how the media have covered some recent human rights issues. There are, unfortunately, many cases to choose from. Massacres and civil wars in Rwanda and Burundi fuelled the crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo (previously Zaire). Civil wars ravaged the states that emerged from the former Yugoslav federation. The arrest of Augusto Pinochet to stand trial for human rights abuses threw up several new and complex issues in relation to national sovereignty, political immunity and the application of international human rights law. The imposition of economic and political sanctions against Iraq, following that country's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the war that ensued in 1991, caused enormous suffering among Iraq's civilian population.

These issues, and others, have certainly challenged journalists, human rights activists and policy-makers alike. The changing international environment and the emerging position of human rights within it similarly challenge these actors.

### **III. THE PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT: CONTEXT, TRENDS AND CONSTRAINTS**

How well, accurately, fairly and consistently do the media cover human rights issues? How well do the media integrate human rights issues into their coverage of international affairs? To what extent are they influenced in their coverage by factors such as their own economic interests or their sense of what their audience's interests are? Do human rights gain or lose (compared to other themes) in the internal editorial decision-making process? How are stories chosen and prioritised? What is newsworthy?

Before turning to these questions, we review the transformations that are going on in the media at the present time, particularly the economic and political constraints that may limit their ability to cover human rights in a consistent and accurate manner. Particular attention is given to the proliferation of news outlets and the concentration of news ownership, and to the decline in international coverage.

#### **The communication revolution**

Recent political changes — the end of the Cold War, emerging ethnic and nationalist conflicts, changes in the organisation of state and non-state actors, intensification of North-South divisions — have made human rights issues more complex to frame in media terms. Previously, information on human rights was news in the sense that systemic problems could be presented in individual terms, and action (appeals, intervention, and so on) could be advocated or reported. From the late 1980s onwards, human rights issues have acquired a more all-embracing nature. At the same time, it is difficult for human rights organisations to find a distinctive media voice. In spite of these problems, new opportunities have been offered by the information revolution through the spread of technologies and the erosion of Cold War (pseudo) certainties and (genuine) polarities.

The communications revolution is affecting lifestyles and the organisation of social life globally. It is also changing the way human rights are perceived and reported. Television coverage of some recent events — the 1984 famine in Ethiopia, the occupation of Tiananmen Square in 1989, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo, the 2001 war in Afghanistan — seemed to lead and influence the responses of the international public and even governments.

Yet human rights violations have been stories since the early age of the mass media. These reports have often been difficult to separate from propaganda, which has an even longer history. News of abuses — and its use to influence and manipulate policy and public opinion — has a long past, and news organisations have always accepted that information about many issues now called human rights is 'newsworthy'.

Professional human rights research and reporting organisations did not come into existence until recently. In the last half century, nevertheless, remarkable progress in reporting has occurred and public attitudes as well as public policy have been significantly influenced in a large number of countries.<sup>22</sup>

Over the same period, the media themselves have become the subject of debate in relation to rights — and not only because freedom of expression is a right that affects the media more than any other institution. Media institutions have acquired far more influence in the last fifty years, which they are accused of exercising arbitrarily or irresponsibly and without real accountability.

Well before discussions of a ‘new world order’ and globalisation took off, debates had started about the ‘new world information order’.<sup>23</sup> Issues raised included the dominance of the Western media, the threat of cultural imperialism, the balance of international news flow, and distorted coverage of developing countries.<sup>24</sup>

Both terms (‘world information order’ and ‘globalisation’) suggest that the two traditionally accepted arenas of news are inseparably linked: the Western or Northern internationalised media (CNN, *The New York Times*, Reuters, large communication empires); and the local media and information outlets/sources in the South, in which most national non-governmental organisations work.

The overlaps, links and dependencies between these two arenas are central. In particular, the role of Western-based organisations in directing the flow of information from and to local media needs careful attention. Domestic or regional NGOs, for example, may prefer to place a story in *The New York Times*, rather than their national media, because the information will reach an international audience with wider effect — even if the local public may be deprived of news as a result. Without losing sight of these links, we will look at these arenas separately, because they pose different problems.

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<sup>22</sup> David Held, “Democracy and Globalisation”, *Global Governance* 3, 1997, pp. 251–267.

<sup>23</sup> The long forgotten New World Information and Communication Order, championed during the 1970s by the Non-Aligned States (and supported by the UNESCO and the MacBride Commission) was a first reaction to this inequality, and to under-representation of the South.

<sup>24</sup> For some, globalisation is a threat. For the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, for instance, it “risks downgrading the central place accorded to human rights by the United Nations Charter in general and the International Bill of Human Rights in particular”. In parallel, the right to communicate is being extended into new areas. The Vienna Plus Five Global NGO Forum on Human Rights (Ottawa, June 22–24, 1998) recognised the implications of the new developments in communications for democracy and cultural identity in different countries.

## International media

### *Concentration*

The marked trend towards concentration of the media industry reflects a wider process of global concentration in the private sector. Significant mergers of newspapers and wire services have taken place in Europe and the United States. More unusually, organisations from the traditional ‘news’ and business news sectors have combined in large multi-media groupings with organisations that specialise in entertainment (films, magazines, music, web-based services) or in technical products that were previously considered separate domains. *The Guardian* has combined with *The Observer*, *The Washington Post* with *Newsweek*, but also CNN has combined with Time Warner and NBC with Microsoft. News Corporation, owned by Rupert Murdoch, includes a clutch of newspapers, a film studio, a broadcasting company with twenty-two stations and an international cable operation.

This restructuring has significant implications for organisations that work in the field of human rights. Those who gain access to the main sources of broadcast news can, at a stroke, reach a much larger audience. At the same time, competition for time and access is fierce, and specific professional skills are required to accommodate the institutional culture and technology of the dominant news distributors. Originators of news are less able to dictate the content of news reports they inspire. Similarly, corporate interests may influence policies regarding distribution of politically sensitive news (such as information on human rights). These interests may be hard to discern and are not subject to argument. In Canada, for instance, where five companies control most major newspapers and television stations, journalists have complained about corporate interference in their work (in particular the policy of mandating editorials), arguing that such policies constrain journalism.<sup>25</sup>

As the largest corporations seek to spread their interests and risks across a wide range of outlets, marketing of information has become increasingly sophisticated (especially in developed economies). Specialist publications serve numerous interest groups and trade sectors and a similar process of diversification is taking place rapidly in television and radio as technological progress permits the broadcast of more and more channels. Information and advertising are increasingly tailored to niche audiences. There are new opportunities for human rights organisations that have the skills to adapt their message to these specialist interest groups.

Control of these highly diverse markets nevertheless lies with the distributors (who are often the source of finance) and major corporations again control international and national distribution in the larger markets — whether the product is news, financial information, film, music or communications equipment. Public criticism of media ‘moguls’ focuses most often on their (alleged) ability to manipulate the political agenda of governments. This criticism is not new. Newspaper barons were similarly criticised in the 1930s, and the powerful have used

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<sup>25</sup> See DeNeen L. Brown, “Journalists Feel Shackled by New Owner”, *The International Herald Tribune*, January 31, 2002, p. 2.

their control of information to manipulate public opinion since the invention of the printed book. Even where it exists, however, direct political intervention is not the only (or necessarily the most important) factor to consider.

### *The impact of technology*

Technology is a tool that, in itself, is neither good nor bad. However, it can be put to positive or harmful uses, and changes in technology have consistently generated widespread political, economic and social consequences that were never foreseen and that political authorities were not able to control. As scientific thought has become established in the advanced economies, technological change has accelerated.

The impact of technology on the communications industries in recent decades has been far-reaching. After mass production of the book (1400) came railways (1800), the telegraph (1850), the telephone (1900), radio (1910), the aeroplane (1920s), the motor vehicle and moving pictures (1930s), television (1950s) and computers (1960s). Each invention (and others might be listed) transformed the production or communication of information.

Computers have already passed through several phases of innovation. The Internet emerged in the 1970s and is now sweeping the world. Satellite communications are transforming private and business communication (cellular telephones, satellite television and so on) and have profoundly altered the reporting of news. The introduction of fibre-optic cables in the 1980s multiplied exponentially the amounts of information that can be transmitted down telephone lines. The introduction of digital broadcasting (radio and TV) will greatly expand the number of television and radio channels that consumers can receive. Technological change and its impact on communications are set to continue.

The combination of advanced computers, the Internet, digital technology and fibre-optic cables has transformed the range of options available to consumers at home and in business. Once the infrastructure is in place, video communication and other services become feasible at relatively low additional costs and a vast array of programmes can be accessed flexibly. Domestic and professional lifestyles will change, generating important economic consequences. New multimedia technologies will make it even easier to find, collect and exchange information of all kinds. Where people could not make judgements in the past because they lacked information, increasingly they are now overwhelmed by the amount of information to which they have access. *In coming years, the highest need will not be to find information but to make good judgements about what information is useful and what conclusions may be drawn from it.*

The rapid replacement of technical systems (partly to serve marketing needs) also has consequences. These changes require customers to adopt a repurchasing cycle that is expensive and beyond the means of poorer people and impoverished societies, who as a result lose access to the information that is put out. In a free market, technological change will tend to widen the gap between those who already have good access to information and those who do not.

In some cases, nevertheless, new technology can be used to close the gap. Large communications groups are launching low-orbit satellites that will carry television and telephone signals more cheaply. The cost of putting these satellites into orbit (like the cost of laying a national network of telephone lines or electrical cables) is high, but their running costs (once in place) are low. Since the satellites are not geo-stationary, they are used intensively as they pass over industrialised states and under-used over poorer countries. It is in the operators' interest to make these satellites accessible at marginal cost to such countries and this creates an opportunity to provide poor societies with access to high technology cheaply.

The advent of audiovisual educational materials will change education. Students are likely to read fewer books and absorb more information audiovisually. Here too, there may be opportunities for people in poor societies to bridge the educational gap — since computers are increasingly cheap to purchase, and educational software (once written) is easy to distribute and relatively inexpensive. In some ways, this form of learning is effortless and more effective; at the same time, it may depress 'active' reflection and independent thought. Children will grow up in a world, and in educational institutions, that depart increasingly from the ancient tradition of higher learning established in civilisations around the world.

In sum, technology cuts both ways. It can be used to reinforce injustice and unjust power structures but also to promote or protect human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights. By and large, most innovations in the field of communication have had positive effects overall because they have increased access to information — and this is almost always beneficial.

### **Downsizing, dumbing down and 'infotaining'**

The formation of concentrated multimedia corporations, combined with the impact of new technology on the production and transmission of information, is profoundly influencing the values of journalists and media organisations.

Traditionally, the quality of news broadcasting was measured against the public service tradition pioneered in television and radio by the BBC, and in newspapers against the 'high seriousness' of newspapers like *El Pais*, *Le Monde*, *Al Quds al Arabi*, *The New York Times*, *The Hindu* and the old London *Times*. These defined the higher values to which journalists laid claim: independence, respect for fact, (passionate) adherence to certain values and principles of conduct, writing of high quality and sustained argument, coverage of what was important and so on.

In the 1960s and 1970s, television companies and newspapers added 'investigative reporting' to their range — a form of respectable campaigning that usefully combined high-mindedness with commercial advantage. Investigative programmes (like CBS' *60 Minutes*) or investigative press units (like the London *Sunday Times* 'Insight' team) became indicators of prestige for their organisations, because they were expensive to operate and symbolised their organisations' high moral and journalistic ambitions.

Re-organisation of the media into large international conglomerates, and the emergence of fast global communications and printing technology have transformed this environment. News flows extremely fast, no outlet can expect to control or monopolise a story for more than a few hours, and the skills of production are dominated by the need to process volumes of information efficiently and co-ordinate its distribution, rather than by essentially editorial skills. The individual journalist plays a less crucial role in the production of television news and newspapers than used to be the case. Scale (reach), mastery of technology and organisation are far more important factors today.<sup>26</sup>

Under the pressure of these various changes, new and competitive values — led by the US media — have come to influence the presentation and character of news.

- *News is all pervasive.* Those who have access to cable or satellite television or short-wave radio can tune in to news twenty-four hours a day. This frantic investment in transient information gives news a status that is not easy to explain (since most of the news that most people hear most of the time does not affect them directly).
- Viewed as a whole, *the news output of the dominant providers is standardised.* There is little difference in content between the information given by different providers. In most cases, the same stories lead and are treated in a similar way. With minimal variations, this is true even from one continent to the next.
- In practice, *the large media corporations do not question one another's journalistic values or priorities* — even though they are in fierce competition for audience. This tends to reduce diversity and, more fundamentally, choice. Arguably this is itself a human rights issue.<sup>27</sup> It may not have a direct effect on the news coverage of human rights issues, however, since most of the dominant providers of news accept that (certain kinds of) human rights stories should be reported.
- The need to recoup the colossal expense of *news gathering operations* and the speed at which news is perceived to change *have reduced serious analysis.* 'News' has been promoted at the expense of documentaries and research programmes (that are expensive to make and

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<sup>26</sup> Even if television, in particular, sustains the illusion that this is not so by allowing a few 'faces' to become personalities identified with the idea of news: Kate Adie in the United Kingdom, Christine Ockrent in France, and above all, CNN's Christiane Amanpour, who has come to represent a global image of human rights in many parts of the world.

<sup>27</sup> If mass media narrow the choice of information available to people, in effect they cause — even impose — a decline in the quality of human interchange.

cannot be marketed in the same way, because their audience is naturally smaller).<sup>28</sup> The effect is to reduce depth of thought and choice.<sup>29</sup>

- In the same vein, most television companies survive on income from advertising and this causes *programmers* to *adapt programme content to appeal to the largest audiences*. This reduces the supply of ‘minority interest’ programmes, aesthetically and intellectually challenging themes, and politically controversial material that fails to achieve top audiences.<sup>30</sup> However, this may change. As technology permits more channels, niche broadcasting will grow — as in magazine publishing. An early large-scale example of this might be the International Channel in North America, or the United Kingdom’s Channel Four.

In consequence, consumers of television news in particular have fewer opportunities to assess the information they consume. CNN and similar specialised news channels will replay immediate film of an event *ad nauseam* but rarely show the complexity or the origins of a human rights issue or situation. The argument is that it is simply too difficult and expensive and time-consuming to do so. For similar reasons, news producers tend to shy away from complex human rights stories that have no clear-cut sides or answers. Conflicts become ‘too complex’ (Bosnia) or ‘not important enough’ (Western Sahara). In this context, too, media agencies can be guilty of self-censorship — intimidated indirectly by the complexity of an issue, or local government policies and regulations or eventually mere laziness.

The result is that the dominant discourse that large corporate producers of news produce and reproduce enfeebles discussion of complex issues, including human rights. A position taken up or an opinion formulated by an authoritative media source tends to become a fact, unquestioned, while core content is reprocessed — essentially unaltered — across a range of different media outlets. The base of analysis may be slender, but the accumulation of such reports gives them authority.<sup>31</sup> This is why ‘spinning’ a story is effective. Once the core idea is abroad, it reproduces itself and prolonged or energetic intervention is required to stop it from doing so.

Though the decline in editorial quality has been much discussed, it is rarely noticed that ‘dumbing down’ seems to have occurred precisely at a time when media firms are seeking more

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<sup>28</sup> News production resembles a mass-production factory. It is expensive to set up and maintain the news gathering and distribution system; and each new story is expensive to make. Once made, however, it can be reproduced (rebroadcast) cheaply. By contrast, documentaries and analytical programmes resemble hand-made products. They have a personal signature and an individual character, and producing a second one is almost as costly as producing the first. A good example is Sorious Samura’s work, particularly *Cry Freetown* (2000) and *Exodus* (2001).

<sup>29</sup> As Susan Moeller notes, ‘the formulaic coverage of crises shoehorns [them] into a preordained time slot, ignoring the inevitable slop of a crisis beyond its formulaic moments.... Why should the coverage of the crisis last for a shorter span of time than the crisis itself’. See Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue — How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*, New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 313.

<sup>30</sup> John Keane, *The Media and Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

<sup>31</sup> Consequently, notes Edward Said, a media élite has emerged whose stories are essentially the product of a corporate culture conditioned by audience ratings, advertising income and profit margins. In other cases, far from analysis and calm reflection, the media mainly derive their mission from government, and generate no corrective or dissent. See Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, London: Vintage, 1997.

highly educated and cosmopolitan niches for their products. It is worth looking for the opportunities that such a trend offers. From the perspective of human rights coverage, might such niche-positioning improve coverage in some respects?

In some ways, the accusation of dumbing down is linked to the complaint that foreign news coverage is not as good as it used to be (see Chapter Four). It is heard in too many contexts to be easily dismissed. The need to reassess their audiences, at a time when these audiences have access to technologies that sharply affect the way people communicate and the way news is transmitted, creates significant challenges for media companies. As seen above, the history of the modern media is coterminous with the history of very rapid technological changes. Nevertheless, the editorial quality of most national and international media outlets is thought to have declined in recent years. Of most concern to us here is whether the conjunction of demographic change (in the media's audiences) and technological mutation (in what these audiences can get in terms of information) has the effect of reducing rather than improving coverage of human rights issues.

Accusations of dumbing down also reflect confusion in the editorial offices about 'what people want to know'. The famous *New York Times* slogan, 'all the news that's fit to print', of necessity implies 'all the news that *we* think people want to read'. This slogan is not controversial (though it is presumptuous) and is compatible with market economics; it can be used successfully or unsuccessfully to organise an editorial programme. The conventional media — print and broadcast — nevertheless find themselves in a competitive atmosphere, the parameters of which are difficult to define because so much more information is available to consumers through new technology. They seem to be unsure whether they are trying to do what other media outlets do, but differently, or trying to do something altogether special.

This problem is not as recent as is sometimes imagined. In the mid-1970s, the top editors of the *Readers' Digest*, then the most widely read mass publication in the world, concluded that they were not competing with other magazines and mass circulation newspapers, but with television.<sup>32</sup> This judgement was based not only on the *Digest's* reach, which is comparable to that of television, but also on editorial content. Interestingly, however, the editorial strategy that emerged from this reflection stated that the *Digest* should continue to do what it did already, because it was already doing some of the things that television does; it should simply do them better.

In many respects, the problem of dumbing down relates to the loss of original markets. If the editors of *The New York Times* determine that their paper is no longer local but national and international, everything from editorial content to tone will be affected. Will this lead to loss of identity? This is not certain. *The New York Times* is fairly easy to distinguish from *The Washington Post*, *Le Figaro* from *Le Monde* or *Libération*, *The Guardian* from *The Times* or the *Telegraph*, *El Pais* from *Diario 16*.

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<sup>32</sup> For the past twenty years or so the *Reader's Digest* (in all language editions) has claimed about one hundred million readers in all language editions.

The phenomenon of the ‘international’ newspaper is not new, as evidenced by the *International Herald Tribune*, which is published in Paris and combines coverage from the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Since the 1980s, the *Financial Times* has led the way with simultaneous European and American publication of a (virtually) identical edition — a path now followed by several leading papers. A development of potential significance for human rights coverage is the proliferation of weekly editions of newspapers for overseas readers. Among British papers, where this phenomenon has become highly developed, the weekly editions are much more targeted to particular niches in the market than their parent editions. The weekly edition of the liberal *Guardian*, for example, was once the only weekly British paper and therefore had a readership that was probably broader in composition than its mainly left-of-centre domestic audience. Now, in a more crowded market, it appears targeted at an audience of ‘progressive’ expatriates — aid workers and others — in partnership with the French political monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

The *Weekly Guardian* is pioneering another development that may yet prove significant. The Southern African edition of the paper has been subsumed within the *Weekly Mail*, an independent South African paper that developed out of the ruins of the prestigious *Rand Daily Mail* in the 1980s. The partnership clearly benefits the South African partner through an infusion of investment, and the Northern partner through a regional distribution network (and considerable editorial value added from the South African side). With the Independent group also moving into South Africa in a big way — Irish-owned but also with a British left-of-centre paper as its flagship — there is evidence that, in the context of globalisation, media operations will diversify internationally reflecting the political values of segments of the market (just as they do nationally).

If editorial strategists go after a broad audience, they become aware that different parts of the package they offer tend to affect one another, in terms of audience-acceptability. Editorial strategists and the business managers of news organisations often miss this when they say that human rights never rate high on their readers’ surveys. All this means is that readers who prefer the business news will, in responding to the survey, rate it higher. It does not imply the same readers do not follow or appreciate human rights news.

The trend to superficiality is reinforced wherever news is integrated into television programming as one element of an entertainment package (‘infotainment’). Human rights issues become ‘stories’ or ‘human interest stories’, forced to adhere to certain emotional clichés. Since the content of news programmes is very similar, competition between the providers of news leads them to focus less on content than presentation. News on more popular programmes and newspapers is put across in a zippy fashion that subordinates content to fun (homely stories, personal tragedies and so on). Other programmes are built around the presenter’s personality, thereby personalising the content of news. Others present information in terms of antagonistic debates.<sup>33</sup> These techniques emphasise presentation rather than content and, in the end, lead to simplification of the information imparted and a general loss of perspective.

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<sup>33</sup> Such as CNN’s *Crossfire*, BBC’s *Hardtalk* and Al Jazeera’s *Al Ittijah al Mu’akess* (“the opposite direction”).

This has led — and will probably continue to lead — to some decline in the accuracy and consistency of coverage of international human rights stories. The drive for efficiency encourages errors or superficiality in the newsroom and to reduced investment in expensive areas such as foreign affairs and investigative reporting, thereby causing a fall in the capacity and scope of global journalism. The few outlets that have a genuinely international reach and capacity are CNN and the BBC, and the news agencies (AP, AFP and Reuters, notably). The reemergence of the news agencies will not tend to improve human rights coverage because they do not generally cover human rights except in the context of a breaking news story (which human rights rarely are, except during humanitarian crises).

Interestingly, the Internet also offers less potential as a source for human rights news coverage than might be expected. Internet technology permits a Web war to take place, parallel to real wars or other forms of political competition. Does the side with the computer skills have a clear advantage? It depends on how much an editor wants to trust information posted on the Web. In an efficient Internet site, much of the information is taken directly from other news sources. In other words, the Internet is a source of information, and can influence editorial decisions, but so far does not appear to add elements that will transform the editorial culture as such.

The editorial effect of new technology is explained thus by Thomas Bray: “The Internet and other new technologies that facilitate transmission of information make it inevitable that editors get [or can get] more information than they used to. This influences the editor-reporter relationship. Traditionally, the editor trusts his reporter and the reporter controls his sources. Reporters must trust their sources, at least until they prove to be unreliable. Editors can get information that makes them less dependent on sources, by way of the reporter. Ultimately, the editor must have confidence in his reporters. Relying on uncertain sources whose information (on the Internet for example) is not verifiable is a dangerous slope to get on”.<sup>34</sup>

## **Technological changes and constraints**

Not surprisingly, journalists vary in their appreciation of the role of technology. Deborah Potter, of *NewsLab* in Washington, D.C., refers to “lost thinking time” to describe the inability of news editors or consumers to get depth and perspective on constantly breaking stories.<sup>35</sup> (Indeed, online services have programmes that automatically send clients breaking news items.) Some believe that television, in particular, is ‘priming’ the print news. John Naughton argues that “the fact that television is simultaneously the dominant communications medium and the one most sensitive to ratings means that it exerts an inexorable pressure on other media to conform to its values. There is a sense in which a newspaper story does not become really influential until it is ‘taken up’ by television, and this amplifying power of the medium is what enables it, rather than print, to define not only the news agenda, but also other agendas which

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<sup>34</sup> Interview, Detroit, Michigan, November 14, 2000.

<sup>35</sup> Remarks at the review seminar organised by the International Council on Human Rights Policy, Geneva, November 27–28, 2000.

are important to society”.<sup>36</sup> Some older journalists view with dismay the appearance of television sets (tuned to CNN) in the newsroom. Certainly, print coverage of major news events is often written on the explicit assumption that readers will already have watched a version of events on television. Others hold to the older notion that the television networks are more likely to follow the next day’s leading print headlines in organising their prime-time news.

Of greater significance in terms of human rights coverage is the fact that most print journalists agree that television news distorts coverage by inexorably setting up manichean situations in which perspective is lost. Witness the new audiovisual grammar (sound bites, adversarial fora, flashy editing in the style of pop music videos, dramatic narration and instant history scripts<sup>37</sup>) often coupled with professional shortcuts (different criteria for similar stories, repackaging, duplication and absence of fact and lack of information-checking). The fact that information is available easily means instantaneously that the media can present a narrative of events that may be more or just as persuasive to audiences (even if it is simplified or wrong) as the government presentation of its policy. In their capacity to persuade, the camps are relatively evenly matched, and both sides are aware of this and of the risks and responsibilities it brings.<sup>38</sup>

Control of sources is indeed vitally important to news coverage. Compared with print, that control is far less certain in television news. As James Fallows points out, television reporting is not reporting at all. “‘Rough and fearless’ television reporters (such as the staff of the widely watched American programme ‘60 Minutes’) are often as not working from a script when they engage in ‘interviews’”.<sup>39</sup> This is not lack of control over sources: it is not even having sources. It is more like having a supporting cast in a programme that is not news but indeed a form of entertainment. In its coverage of the unfolding crisis in Afghanistan in the last quarter of 2001, the BBC wrote reports in London that were relayed to correspondents on the ground to recite to camera. The reason was simply that correspondents with the Northern Alliance had less information about the situation in government-held territory than their editors on the other side of the world. There is nothing unusual or shameful in this. What many observers felt was unethical was the attempt to give added authority to reports written in London by making them seem like eyewitness accounts. Even two decades earlier, research by the Glasgow Media Group concluded that British television news, far from being filled with coverage of events, was in fact dominated by talking heads.<sup>40</sup> Television has undoubtedly accelerated the advance of punditry, which many now see as a blight on the face of the print media too.

As James Sadkovich aptly noted: “Journalists and editors tend to.... live for and in the momentary event; ....they focus on personalities and concrete phenomena rather than on ideas

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<sup>36</sup> John Naughton, “With the Rusty Sword of Truth — Television’s Influence and the Systemic Crisis in Serious Journalism”, *Times Literary Supplement*, July 24, 1998, pp. 16–17.

<sup>37</sup> Only a few weeks after the end of the 1991 Second Gulf War, Time Warner put together a compilation of imagery on the conflict that filled five hundred floppy disks, five videotapes and a book which it distributed to school libraries as the most authoritative chronicle of the war.

<sup>38</sup> David Morgan, “Mass Media and the Policy Process”, in Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, *The Information Revolution and the Arab World — Its Impact on State and Society*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1998, p. 103.

<sup>39</sup> James Fallows, *Breaking the News — How the Media Undermined American Democracy*, New York: Vintage, 1997.

<sup>40</sup> Glasgow University Media Group, *War and Peace News*, London: Open University News, 1985.

and abstract concepts. Consequently, despite disclaimers of objectivity, fairness and balance, news coverage often reflects corporate concerns, the hidden agenda of government officials, and the unconscious biases of journalists who filter and distort the realities being reported”.<sup>41</sup> Though not systematic, this happens in innumerable cases.

Do these changes in technology directly affect human rights coverage? Or is human rights coverage still primarily a matter that is best understood in the context of the editorial environment? The nature of television affects human rights coverage in the way it sets up good guy/bad guy situations. This can have a baleful influence on policy-making, which inevitably affects the way the media are judged. Powerful images on television — the case of Somalia in 1992 and the fall of the Twin Towers in New York come to mind — create a sense that ‘something has to be done’ and policy is then designed in a kind of intellectual hole. Note that this is not the fault of the technology as such. Compelling television images of dogs and fire hoses being used against American civil rights demonstrators helped galvanise public opinion and policy-makers in that country, and it cannot be said that policy-making was then made in an intellectual hole. On the other hand, as several commentators have pointed out, the Somalia policy was devised with no clear sense of the Somali situation. Television coverage of crises tends to homogenise them and flatten out differences. Audiences (which include policy-makers) are given little sense of what makes a news story distinct but rather a strong feeling that an oft-witnessed drama is playing itself out once again in a remote corner of the globe.

### *Physical access*

Many of the obstacles reporters face are old ones, of course. One is the sheer difficulty of getting physically to the story. This issue presents itself in an acute form when journalists cover human rights issues. Human rights violations occur often in places that are difficult to reach, and where information is hard to find. When covering human rights in Kosovo or Burundi, for example, reporters have been in danger of being killed by people who did not want their activities to be widely known. In such cases, resource problems, though important, are secondary.

Another issue is what might be called the ‘Sheraton syndrome’. When reporters are sent on assignment to a distant or dangerous crisis, they tend to congregate in the same hotel. This is not a new phenomenon; it is well described, for instance, in Evelyn Waugh’s 1935 satirical novel *Scoop*. While it is easy to criticise such a herd mentality, the fact is that the hotels in question are sometimes the only places where reporters can stay. Their congregation makes it easier for human rights activists to find and give journalists the information they need, just as it becomes easier for violators to control their activities. This is chiefly an issue when there is a sudden crisis or a continuing war. It happened, for example, in Sarajevo when Bosnia was at war, and during the 1991 Second Gulf War (when CNN’s Bernard Shaw was reporting live on the American bombing of Baghdad from his room in the five-star Al Rasheed Hotel<sup>42</sup>). At

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<sup>41</sup> James J. Sadkovich, “The Response of the American Media to Balkan Neo-Nationalisms”, in Stjepan G. Meštrović, ed., *Genocide after Emotion — The Postemotional Balkan War*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 113–157.

<sup>42</sup> Mr. Shaw did not waste that opportunity to make a quip about his colleagues (and competitors) from ABC, CBS and NBC who were “safe in the hotel’s basement”.

other times, where the human rights problem is chronic rather than acute, the reporter is more likely to find that he or she can wander around at leisure.

Environments of low technological infrastructure also render human rights coverage more difficult. When Norbert Zongo, a Burkinabé journalist, was murdered in 1998, *Zongo Giwa*, the magazine of the Ghana-based Media Foundation for West Africa put together extensive dossiers on the case, which was not reported immediately or widely in the Western media. On December 16, 1998, a brief notice appeared in *The New York Times* based on an Agence France Presse dispatch.<sup>43</sup> The next day it was noted in much the same way in *The Atlanta Constitution*.<sup>44</sup> The case was not reported in the US media until June 2000 when it was described at some length in *The Washington Post*, having made its way through the judicial system.<sup>45</sup> In between, it had been covered in Europe, by the BBC, AFP and other major media and wire services. The case continued to be followed inasmuch as investigation into the case continued in the Burkina Faso judiciary, but its history suggests that such human rights issues are not well-covered unless someone who knows the country well is on hand to ask questions.

Norbert Zongo's case also confirms that coverage of human rights issues is often difficult to fit into the breaking news format (in both print and broadcast media) which controls many if not most editorial decisions. He himself was well known and popular and his newspaper, *L'Indépendant*, was widely respected. That is not always the case in countries where there are no crusading papers and where editors are in contact with the outside world through the wire services and correspondents posted in the region. Zongo's murder was nevertheless under-reported for a long period of time.

The coverage of Burundi's civil war has some of the same characteristics. Although human rights organisations had been calling attention to the dangers of conflict, and the regional press, notably in East Africa, had reported on the on-and-off violence that had characterised Burundian politics since independence, there was no contextualised reporting before the war. Reporting was brief and it did not explain the issues.

When civil war broke out in the early 1990s between the two major ethnic groups, the Hutu and the Tutsi, following the murder by Tutsi military officers of the democratically elected president Melchior Ndadaye (a Hutu), the main media institution operating in the country was the state radio.<sup>46</sup> Yet Burundi was not unreported internationally. In 1993, *The New York Times*

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<sup>43</sup> The piece read: "Burkina Faso: Editor's Death Protested — About 10,000 students took to the streets in Ouagadougou to protest the death of a journalist, Norbert Zongo, managing editor of the weekly *L'Indépendant*. Mr. Zongo, a staunch critic of the Government, died on Sunday in a suspicious road accident (Agence France Presse)".

<sup>44</sup> "Journalist's Slaying Sets Off Protests — Thousands of people clashed with police in Burkina Faso in the second straight day of violent protests over the death of a prominent journalist. The badly burned body of Norbert Zongo was found Sunday. Opponents of the government accuse President Blaise Compaoré of conspiring to have Zongo killed to silence his investigative reporting on alleged links between Compaoré's brother and the slaying of a chauffeur working for the family".

<sup>45</sup> Douglas Farah, "Death of a Crusading Journalist Puts Pressure on Burkina Faso President", *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2000, p. A.23.

<sup>46</sup> Adrien Sindayigaya, "The Media and Human Rights in Burundi", paper presented at the review seminar organised by the International Council on Human Rights Policy, Geneva, November 27-28, 2000, p. 2.

mentioned it in at least twenty-seven items, and it was mentioned over six hundred times in the British and US print media combined. In many cases, admittedly, mention was very brief, and in cultural rather than political or international-news contexts. There were nevertheless a respectable number of substantial articles.

At the same time, prior to President Ndadaye's assassination the country received little coverage. There was practically none in 1992. This is hardly surprising considering, as Douglas Farah of *The Washington Post* remarks, that the beats of reporters in Africa are vast.<sup>47</sup> As to news from inside, the resources are modest, and editorial control or interference by the authorities was severe. As Burundi slid rapidly into civil war after the murder of President Ndadaye, the state radio followed the government's line. Newspapers were censored and journalists killed. Strong evidence suggests they were killed because they tried to investigate and report on the mass murders being carried out against Hutu by the Tutsi-dominated army, and against Tutsi by Hutu militia. According to Studio Ijambo's Adrien Sindayigaya:

Gradually, things changed. In April 1995, Studio Ijambo, the first independent news and programme-producing studio, was set up by the non-governmental organisation Search for Common Ground with a view to facilitating the possibilities of dialogue between Burundi's antagonistic leaders, to promote independent media in Burundi and reconciliation among different ethnic communities. The main recipients of its programmes were the state radio itself and Radio Agatasha created by Fondation Hironnelle and based in Bukavu in Eastern Congo. This Radio was shut down in October 1996 when war broke out between former president Mobutu and Congolese rebels. At that time, Studio Ijambo could no longer go on broadcasting on Radio Agatasha. However, it went on producing programmes on political, economic and social issues, including those advocating human rights although the remaining outlet, the Burundi state radio, rejected most programmes that did not comply with the government's line. Fortunately, Studio Ijambo journalists were also correspondents of many international radio stations like the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Voice of America, Channel Africa, Radio France Internationale, Deutsche Welle, and news agencies like Associated Press, Agence France Presse and Reuters.<sup>48</sup>

The reference to the Voice of America is ironic, in a sense, because while the VOA Africa service's news and cultural programmes are respected in Africa, its editorials are subject to vetting by the United States Department of State, a relationship with the government that resembles that of Burundi's media. The United States government's intrusion into VOA, by contrast with the British government's relationship with the BBC World Service, historically has affected the VOA's credibility.<sup>49</sup>

### *Economic situation of journalists*

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<sup>47</sup> Interview, Washington, D.C., August 14, 2000.

<sup>48</sup> Sindayigaya, "The Media and Human Rights in Burundi", p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Thompson, remarks at the review seminar organised by the International Council on Human Rights Policy, Geneva, November 27-28, 2000. It should, however, be noted that, until recently and maybe even now, BBC World Service staff were security vetted by the British intelligence services, MI5.

The material environment in which news organisations and individual reporters operate affects obviously the quality of coverage. This is not necessarily a question of whether conditions are good or bad or whether a reporter has access to adequate communication technology or speaks the local language. Reporters learn to be resourceful, but ‘they cannot do what they cannot do’ (not being able to transmit or get to a place on time, for instance). The important point, often overlooked, is that factors completely extraneous to a story influence the editorial process.

To function well, news organisations need material resources — including computers and cameras, and expensive data retrieval systems. The *New York Times* Washington bureau alone numbers some forty-five editors and writers (plus support staff), more than the entire editorial staff of many other newspapers. *New York Times* used to refer to their Washington bureau as ‘the army of the Potomac’.

By contrast, many other journalistic operations are run on a shoestring. A Chilean television journalist, Mónica Pérez, explains that

the Chilean media [covering the Pinochet case in London] lacked the resources to work effectively. In the case of TVN we were a big team, but we just could not cover everything. Most [other Chilean media] sent journalists who could not speak English, who slept badly in cheap and uncomfortable hotels and whose allowances were so small they could not even eat properly. They were expected to cover every story but they did not even have enough to pay for a taxi. Only *La Tercera* and *El Mercurio* gave them a laptop, but most of them did not have agency services or cell phones. It was very cold and the station paid for me to buy special clothes, which for many others would have been a luxury. I don’t think you can do a professional job in those conditions.<sup>50</sup>

This is pertinent to the matter of human rights coverage. In many instances,

poor stringers, without laptops, cell phones or travel budgets find themselves trying to interest their editors in chronic human rights issues that are not headline news. Observe that the Chilean journalists whose situation is described above were not stringers and their topic *was* newsworthy. This gives a sense of the resources that might be available to a stringer for a Chilean (or even Belgian) news organisation trying to cover the Hissène Habré case in Senegal or the Zongo case in Burkina Faso.

Distribution is also an issue. Superficially, it may seem that the Internet will have an equalising effect in this area. It is possible for anyone to post the contents of a publication or broadcast on the World Wide Web. However, this is not the same as being in a position to distribute widely. In most areas of the United States, *The New York Times* can reach individual subscribers as early or earlier than local papers. In many areas of the world, the BBC World Service can report local events earlier and more fully than local media. This kind of power certainly affects

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<sup>50</sup> Mirko Macari, “La Presentación por los Medios de Comunicación del Concepto de Jurisdicción Universal en el Contexto del Caso Pinochet”, paper presented at the review seminar organised by the International Council on Human Rights Policy, Geneva, November 27–28, 2000, p. 2.

editorial decisions, in that editors — who quite recently thought they were working for a New York readership — now presume they work for a national and international one.

The trend represented by powerful distribution networks is visible nationally and regionally. To be sure, rethinking editorial content in terms of evolving audiences is a normal function of any business that is engaged in communications. There is a constant economic dialectic between what management, or the owners, want and what they think the newspaper's or programme's audiences want. This affects content in many ways, and puts pressure on the editorial staff.

### *Trends in consumer attitudes*

For a number of reasons, public cynicism about the media in general — and journalists in particular — is widespread and increasing. Bad journalism is one. Journalistic dishonesty is another. In the United States for instance, in 1998, Philip Glass (*The New Republic*), Patricia Smith (*Boston Globe*) and Michael Gallagher (*The Cincinnati Enquirer*) all admitted to having fabricated stories and reports. Similar cases have taken place in other countries.

In general, however, research shows that public attitudes are not consistent or coherent. (There is little doubt, for example, that journalists — classic messengers — are often blamed for the news they bring.) If journalists sometimes attract justly the opprobrium, it is also important to consider changes in the behaviour of consumers.

The number of people (especially in countries with sophisticated telecommunications) that use the Internet for news is growing very swiftly — from a low base. At the same time, at least in the United States, there is some evidence that fewer people are reading newspapers.<sup>51</sup> The commodification of news, indicated by the success of the 'news you can use' formula (e.g., reports on how to improve one's finances or health, and so on), is another new development.

There has been some debate about whether the globalisation of news gathering (and the density of news coverage) is alienating audiences, causing people to distance themselves emotionally from the invasive emotional demands on them that are made by film coverage of disasters and violence. It has been argued, for example, that Western publics may be experiencing 'compassion fatigue' and switching off from unpleasant foreign news — and giving less money to overseas aid and human rights agencies.<sup>52</sup> However, this is a complex issue. There is also evidence that levels of charitable giving and emotional sympathy remain high — and public audiences were fascinated worldwide by the dramatic events of September 11 in New York and Washington.

To what extent does media coverage generate public understanding of international and human rights issues? Media surveys suggest that, even when foreign conflicts are given saturation coverage, many people are not very aware of them. It is obvious to say that it is one

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<sup>51</sup> The Pew Research Centre for the People and the Press has conducted research which found that between 1970 and 1997 the percentage of American adults reading a daily paper fell from seventy-eight to fifty-nine per cent.

<sup>52</sup> See Elaine Sciolino, "The Disasters Multiply and Compassion Falts", *The New York Times*, May 12, 1991, p. D3.

thing to make information available and quite another to have it understood properly. Low literacy rates and short attention spans do get in the way of communication. Equally, consumers may not wish to absorb complex information. Television images in themselves cannot assert anything, they only show. Images of human suffering do not explain themselves. They make a moral claim only if those who watch believe they are under some obligation to those they see.<sup>53</sup> They can make a *coherent* moral claim only to the extent that viewers can put such images in a context (historical, political, psychological and experiential).

We are therefore looking at a new social environment. How will people respond to the easy access push-button environment of 'twenty-four/seven' multimedia news and entertainment that is opening before us? The spread of printed books — equally revolutionary in their time — stimulated dissent, new ideas and independent thinking, with profound implications for the rule of law and human rights. Much research is now being conducted to see whether (or not) primarily audiovisual communication does the same or produces a passive and introverted, even asocial, culture, in which individuals and family units will cocoon themselves in their private domain, insulated from difficult social contacts and free to watch and learn only what they want to watch and learn. It is too early to reach conclusions. It remains to be seen, still, how different societies (and human beings in general) behave when they have access to the new tools of communication that are now spreading across the world.

## **Local and national media**

In the face of transnational communication advances, a national, insulated culture is no longer possible. In many parts of the world, therefore, some of the obstacles posed by censorship and control over information have been undermined by the growth of new technologies such as video recording, fax machines, electronic mail and satellite television. These have opened new opportunities for local groups as well as intensified debates about the universality of human rights standards and patronisation by the West. New space has also opened up in many societies that have adopted democratic forms of government over the last decade. Domestic coverage of issues such as democracy and human rights is more self-generated and less dependent on international sources. Around the world, the emergence of private media has had enormous significance for broadening coverage of human rights issues.

Local groups need international organisations more for legitimisation than for original information, and they can also communicate through an evolving local media. Yet it can be argued that Southern countries have gone from second-rate to second-hand information media. Talk of 'electronic colonialism'<sup>54</sup> might be excessive, but for all intents and purposes, the media that matter are Northern and Western. The influential press agencies (Associated Press, Reuters, Agence France Press, and United Press International), newspapers (*The New*

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<sup>53</sup> Michael Ignatieff, "Is Nothing Sacred? The Ethics of Television", in Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor – Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1998, pp. 11–12.

<sup>54</sup> Deborah Wheeler, "In Praise of the Virtual Life: New Communications Technologies, Human Rights, Development, and the Defence of Middle Eastern Cultural Space", *Monitors – A Journal of Human Rights and Technology* 1, 1, Spring 1997.

*York Times*, *The Financial Times*, *The International Herald Tribune*), radios (BBC World Service, Voice of America, Deutsche Welle), and televisions (CNN and BBC) are all Northern as well.

In addition to these disparities between North and South, global concentration of the media has two effects on Southern societies and on coverage of human rights. The first is that Southern media are adopting the culture and values of Northern media institutions. Though current technology allows the spread of local messages and values, the moral vernacular used by Southern media is essentially Western-influenced — liberal and in most cases secular. This has important consequences, for sometimes their coverage may seem ‘foreign’ to local audiences and therefore in some sense illegitimate. At the same time, Southern media are more likely to challenge and question local practices.

Reacting against ‘the paternalism of state-protected media,’<sup>55</sup> civil society organisations in a number of countries are using the media to communicate their views. Many emphasise human rights and political liberalisation. In many Southern societies, watching television and listening to radio are still ‘public’ activities. People congregate to watch or hear programmes and these stir public and private debates. The way people think is affected very directly (as it was by the arrival of books) and this is transforming societies. Access to different (and glamorous) experiences and lifestyles and moralities (however superficial) influences local values and traditional forms of authority. We should beware, however, of taking this argument too far. Media globalisation certainly does not mean that all media can be understood with reference to the same limited set of criteria. In many instances, global technology has been harnessed to local media idioms.<sup>56</sup>

Secondly, new patterns of relationship between state and society and between civil society and the rest of society are emerging. State monopolies over the means of communication, as well as states’ human rights violations are coming under criticism from local groups that can use modern communications techniques to send their message to local, regional and international audiences. Telephone, electronic mail and other modern information systems are transforming relations between people in the South. This has important implications for the communication of human rights values.

New forms of activism that use the media are also emerging in the South. While news coverage is still parochial, it uses international techniques. Almost everywhere, people realise that they are under media observation (as they can observe others on their media), and this makes people aware of new options that are available to them, for example when they are misgoverned locally or abused internationally.

It is worth noting, finally, that Southern journalists are increasingly used as stringers in the South to cover Southern stories. Many of the news segments in CNN’s *World Report* programme, for example, are generated by local journalists. In most cases, however, they adopt CNN’s format, which is essentially Western. This appears to confirm — when it may be false — that the news values of CNN are truly international.

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<sup>55</sup> John Keane, “Democracy and the Media”, *International Social Science Journal* 129, August 1991, p. 524.

<sup>56</sup> James Curran and Myung-Jin Park, *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, London: Routledge, 2000.

With regard to commercial alternative media, successful commercial magazines covering events from a regional perspective play a distinctive role, though not from a politically alternative standpoint. *Jeune Afrique-L'Intelligent*, *L'Autre Afrique* and *Le Nouvel Afrique-Asie* (Paris), the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (Hong Kong) and *South* magazine would be examples of such initiatives.<sup>57</sup> To the degree that they present news from a regional perspective, they shift and influence coverage in the North.

The advent of new technologies enables companies to beam radio or television programmes to smaller audiences at an affordable cost. This, combined with the growth of a highly diverse consumer and information culture (in advanced economies), has created a lively market for alternative news sources. On the whole, alternative publications have not generally established a record of influence — though some magazines do generate a consistent flow of stories that are later adopted by mainstream media. (Examples might include *Searchlight* in the United Kingdom or *Le Canard Enchaîné* in France.) The attitude of mainline media to small alternatives is, as one would expect, ambivalent. When their stories are weak they are ignored, when their stories are interesting they are borrowed and stolen. To the degree that small alternative publications deliver a reliable product to a stable audience, they can survive. Yet their growth is very dependent on the limits of their marketing capacity. In this sense independents need to choose between joining the market (and losing much of their independence) or remaining small (and marginal).

## **Human rights organisations and media regimes**

Human rights organisations face the same dilemma. Should they be independent in the information market (recognising that they will then play a marginal role in the news process) or should they try to influence the news agenda (knowing that to build links with the mass media will require compromises)?

NGOs are themselves an important source of alternative news. They produce numerous publications, aimed at a variety of audiences, on a wide variety of subjects. Some NGO publications have a definite influence on media coverage of human rights and other subjects. NGOs have also experimented with developing their own media providers — such as the Inter Press Service or the Independent Broadcasting Trust (in the United Kingdom). These initiatives have not been conspicuously successful in influencing the mainline agenda, though some small organisations like Gemini usefully made articles available to Southern media. The fact that the large Northern NGOs (which have most clout and most money) have set up their own media and lobbying operations indicates that in practice they do not expect to finance a collective operation to manage their media relations.

In the early years of human rights advocacy, it was news when Amnesty International released information. Problems could be individualised (prisoner of conscience) and appeals for

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<sup>57</sup> Some of these publications are regional by focus (*The Far Eastern Economic Review*), others also because they are owned by independent businessmen from the regions that they cover (*Jeune Afrique-L'Intelligent*, *L'Autre Afrique*).

intervention could be relatively simple. Today it is far more difficult for human rights organisations to find a distinctive media voice — and still harder to win coverage in an increasingly competitive market. A human rights concern becomes legitimate when it is backed up by public opinion and the media.<sup>58</sup> Despite these problems, many new opportunities are offered by the spread of global communication technologies.

Many journalists and media organisations use human rights NGOs as a primary source of information. The problem for NGOs is to keep *The Financial Times* or CNN interested without trivialising and sensationalising the issues they want to see aired.

For the media, the main problem is often that the information human rights organisations provide is not tailored to meet the media's needs. In content or expression, it is often inappropriate, mistimed or simply unreliable. This raises issues of training and capacity-building in effective use of media. Increasingly, human rights organisations are tackling these issues, and developing their communication techniques so as to direct the information they produce more efficiently into the media alongside other stories.

Some of the large media foundations (for example, the Reuters Foundation) are now forming media partnerships with NGOs. These permit the latter to learn how the media function, how to target media organisations, the criteria for selection of information and so forth. Other organisations have been producing training manuals on NGO/media relations or trying to influence academic curricula with a view to ensuring that courses in journalism are integrated into academic institutions.

Co-ordination between media staff of human rights organisations and their counterparts in aid, development, disaster relief or environmental groups could be improved. Here too, the benefits of such co-operation (which can be considerable in extra policy impact) must be set against the costs (which include delays for consultation, a less clear message and forfeiture of institutional benefits).

### *Campaign strategies of large Northern NGOs*

As noted above, NGOs are part of the wider media: they contribute substantially to the production and dissemination of information. Almost all NGOs publish documents (booklets, brochures and magazines) aimed at a variety of audiences (their members, their constituency, policy-makers). Some publish extensively and are an influential source of information in their field, for the media, governments and other institutions. In relation to human rights, the publications of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Article 19, Index on Censorship, Reporters Sans Frontières and the South Asian Documentation Centre are obvious examples.

Large Northern NGOs (and some smaller ones) have responded to the new media environment by developing quite sophisticated media operations. In the last ten years, almost

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<sup>58</sup> Ninan Thomas Pradip, "Safeguarding Human Rights: Opportunities and Challenges for NGOs involved in the Democratisation of Communication", in Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, *Media and Human Rights in Asia*, Singapore: AMIC, 2002, p. 14.

all the large human rights, development, humanitarian and environmental organisations have established press offices to place information with the media. Many are staffed by professional journalists.

These press offices were formed as part of a broader investment in public campaigning. Here too, most large Northern NGOs have followed a similar path. The reasoning has been that power, influence and resources lie in the North. The quickest way to secure significant political and economic changes (in the domains these NGOs work in) is therefore to change policies in the most powerful countries. To do this, it is necessary to (i) influence the press, (ii) influence the public and (iii) influence decision-makers. To do these things, the organisations concerned have therefore recruited professional press officers, professional campaigners and professional policy lobbyists. The largest NGO networks (Human Rights Watch and Oxfam, for instance) have set up international offices as well to articulate their concerns in New York or Brussels. Increasingly, such organisations are now establishing international coalitions — on the model of the Jubilee campaign against debt, for instance — to lobby worldwide. These activities absorb a sizeable and increasing proportion of their income.

Institutional self-interest also influenced adoption of this strategy. The largest NGOs carry heavy overheads and have had increasing difficulty financing their growth from membership fees and grants. In addition, the executives of many of the older NGOs, whose membership is ageing, fear their membership is not renewing itself. Some have invested several years of public education, without visible effective results. These individuals have concluded that television and overall media coverage is the fastest way of securing profile, raising money and building support in society. Campaigning for specific policy outcomes is therefore only one of the reasons that led executives to adopt a media-focused campaigning strategy. The strategy has had several consequences.

- *Professional press offices are effective, but competitive.* The big agencies tend (even more than before) to reduce the media access of smaller NGOs. They also squeeze each other. Attempts to collaborate are frequent but only partially successful.
- *Journalists appreciate the work of press offices that understand the constraints within which the media work.* However, when NGOs operate professionally in relation to the media, they come to be treated more and more like any other organisation seeking to generate news (private companies, government departments, and so on). For the same reason, they become targets of media inquiry. While this is not at all a bad thing, the relation between NGOs and the media is no longer ‘innocent’.
- *The information that NGOs market becomes subject to the same pressures as other media information* (see above). It is more effective if it is simple, if it is written in sound bites, if it rides a strong news angle, if there is a personal interest story attached and so on. This pressure invites NGOs to collude with trends in the mainstream media, even though they may as a result present an image of their organisations that is inaccurate, simplistic and politically inappropriate.

This is exactly the problem that many large agencies face. It creates acute difficulties within the organisation, in its external relations, and in its relations with partner organisations abroad that the NGO funds or with which it collaborates. Most large NGOs have difficulty reconciling the message which their fundraising and corporate departments (and press offices and sometimes policy offices) wish to give with the messages (much more complicated and contradictory) that the operational or research staff wish to give. Executives tend to understand the priorities of both, and find it difficult to reconcile them.

In their public relations, large NGOs frequently run into difficulty because they feel they have a responsibility to be comprehensive. As a result some tend to involve themselves (and comment on) every public issue that has some relevance to their work. In practice, many of these issues have no simple resolution. This is sometimes because of the perceptions of human rights NGOs that they have a responsibility to be comprehensive and therefore respond to all situations touching on their work programmes. However, sometimes their decision-making is influenced by other factors. For example, too often, eager for profile or income, NGOs comment in simplistic and emotional terms at the start of an issue and are then unable to disentangle themselves from these first simplicities and continue to promote them. In doing so, they may do considerable damage to their relations with informed journalists and decision-makers.

They face a problem with their partners in the South or abroad. Traditionally, these large agencies considered themselves to be accountable directly to the people they served. Inevitably, however, a press-led campaigning strategy has led them to become much more responsive to the political agendas of Northern countries. (This is entirely consistent with a strategy that seeks to influence decision-making in the North.) To whom, then, are they accountable?

Perhaps the most striking case study of these related phenomena has been Amnesty International. Despite its origins as the outcome of a media campaign, Amnesty's media work was for many years driven overwhelmingly by its research and campaigning priorities, rather than by a search for greater public profile. It was able to do this partly because it was accountable to its global membership rather than to external funders, but also because it had the field largely to itself. By the 1990s, several things had changed. There were many other voices on the human rights scene. The emergence of Human Rights Watch, which was more media-friendly in its campaigning, had an influence on the large and influential US membership of Amnesty. At the same time, with the collapse of repressive governments in Eastern Europe, Latin America and Africa, much of Amnesty's traditional work on 'prisoners of conscience' became redundant. Amnesty responded not only by stepping up its media campaigning, but also by resetting its research and campaigning priorities. The underlying rationale was that funding — even from its own members — reflected Amnesty's media profile and therefore Amnesty must adapt to it. Amnesty traditionalists thought that a valuable aspect of the organisation's identity was being lost and that the whole process looked too much like the tail wagging the dog. Amnesty's leadership argued that taking account of global human rights priorities was just common sense.

Finally, parallel to the development of press-led campaigning, the large NGOs have restructured themselves organisationally. In many cases, rationalisation has

- entrenched the influence of campaigning and press staff in relation to operational and research staff, and
- simplified and centralised organisational priorities, programmes and offices.

Where they have occurred, these trends (which are organisationally understandable) have exacerbated some of the tensions and contradictions referred to above.

The sort of profile sought depends on the organisations and their activity. For some, 'good coverage' would be measured by the appearance of op-ed pieces in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* or *The International Herald Tribune*, for others, the index would be a sixty second item on (Northern) prime time television. Whereas some prefer material that is dramatic, strategically timed, attention-catching and provocative, others opt for nuanced and contextualised reports.

In trying to bring important information to the media (sometimes competing with reporters to do this), human rights organisations are operating in a context where their information is more or less interesting to editors, who are driven by more or less clear notions of what they need. *In many respects, human rights organisations have become primary producers who are competing for consumers (news organisations) that are getting other bids* (from their own reporters for instance). This situation is an invitation to certain kinds of distortions (and these need not be dishonest).

Whereas the media demand simplicity, directness, narrative, a 'good versus evil' structure and personalisation, standard human rights reports are neither prepared nor presented as such. What is more, coverage does not necessarily lead to attention, and attention does not necessarily lead to understanding. To communicate their own information, human rights organisations need to know how the public actually understands the issues, as much as they have to learn from the debate on how news is produced, selected and structured.

## IV. THE EDITORIAL PROCESS

The agenda in a newsroom is determined essentially by its reporting and editorial decision-making processes, and by the organisation's editorial culture — which in turn is influenced by various external and internal factors. The editorial process being itself a form of filtering, the question becomes which filters operate. What processes drive the decisions reporters and editors make? What is the relationship between the correspondent and the editor? How autonomous are editors in relation to the wider environment and other actors in their institutions?

### Newsworthiness

The Indonesian journalist and poet Goenawan Mohamad argues that journalists' fundamental dilemma is that they are required to produce news on a daily (sometimes hourly) basis, and at the same time reflect about it.<sup>59</sup> This has an impact on the quality of reporting. Indeed, Bill Kovach, former Director of the Neiman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University, notes that journalism is very limited in its ability to cover process — as opposed to events — in a meaningful way. Important changes in the world are communicated well by the media only when that change is the subject of full time reporting.<sup>60</sup> Sig Gissler adds that the barriers to better coverage lie in the nature of journalism — the hurly-burly pursuit of approximate truth, which often collides with deadlines, limited space and limited airtime, loose notions about what the audience wants,<sup>61</sup> the competitive pressure to be first and the myth of public apathy, namely that the audience is not interested in deeper exploration of issues.<sup>62</sup>

In addition, the editorial selection process is fundamentally event-determined. As Claude Moisy, former President of Agence France Presse, explains:

Except for the major breaking events that impose themselves for treatment, news organisations much more often select a story because it is already there, in the air, initiated by someone else, having already caught public attention, and in the process of becoming topical at that time and place. They deem that they could not afford not to cover it without failing in their obligation toward their audience or readership. Journalists and their editors are much more reactive than creative. That opens the way to lobbyists, including lobbyists for human rights. This reactivity to 'something that is in the air' also explains what the militants of a cause

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<sup>59</sup> Remarks at the consultation seminar organised by the International Council on Human Rights Policy and the Institute for the Studies on Free Flow of Information, Jakarta, March 13, 2001.

<sup>60</sup> Note to the International Council on Human Rights Policy's research team, April 21, 2001.

<sup>61</sup> Editors, in particular, are in part driven by a sense of what the audience wants, and that in turn shapes the kind of questions that the media pursue. Note from Jon Alterman to the International Council on Human Rights Policy's research team, April 13, 2001.

<sup>62</sup> Sig Gissler, "Communications/Media", in Comparative Human Relations Initiative, *Beyond Racism — Embracing an Interdependent Future*, Atlanta: Southern Education Fund, 2000, p. 38.

often deplore as a lack of consistency in the media coverage of their cause. Since the real motivation of the news people in treating a story with a human rights content is not generally to redress a wrong but to share in a collective sensitivity over a particular issue at a given time, they do not feel the necessity to pursue the coverage when they feel that the public attention wanes on that issue.<sup>63</sup>

In this sense, therefore, a definition of what is newsworthy can come only from within the news organisation. Though this question causes much anguish and frustration, it is a fundamental rule that in a free society the news organisation is the absolute master of its own affairs. This is the essence of a free press. How an organisation defines 'master' is strictly its own affair. Whether decisions are taken by a dictatorial owner, a powerful and persuasive editor, an editorial board or by staff consensus, editorial decision-making resides within the organisation.

In any news organisation, the basic editorial environment consists of the editorial meeting and everything that surrounds it. The editorial meeting usually takes place fairly early in the day, by which time the editors and reporters have caught up with everything that happened while they slept. It involves the editor or editors conferring with the reporter or reporters, and deciding what the story is for any given timeframe, which can range from the next ten minutes to the next several months. Stephen Ellis of the University of Leiden, himself a former journalist, summed up the process of news definition as follows:

The definition of what constitutes news is chiefly made by journalists, editors, and politicians, all acting in an informal collusion with the consumers of news programmes, articles or items. There has to be some degree of consensus across all the parties involved that a given story is indeed news. In order to qualify, a text has to be assumed by its audience to represent reality....since even a newsworthy story can only become real news when it is published or aired in the right place. One defining feature of news, then, is the medium or form in which it is presented.<sup>64</sup>

This decision process can, and does, vary enormously according to the resources of the news organisation concerned. In the top editors' offices in a prosperous news organisation, there will be several television consoles, with scores of available channels. Information will be coming in constantly from Reuters, Associated Press, United Press International, Agence France Presse and other news agencies. Bureaux send in their proposals and reports to their editors (for instance to the foreign editor), who in turn keep the top editor (called variously executive editor, managing editor, or editor-in-chief) apprised when they feel it is appropriate. Press releases arrive in a constant stream from private and public institutions (business firms, professional associations, NGOs and government agencies), as well as public relations agencies and all manner of lobbying firms and interest groups. Though Meg Greenfield, long-time Editorial Page Editor of *The Washington Post*, famously banned any material from what she called 'flaks' (public relations firms) and refused to take their calls, the truth is that alert editors, fully in control of their busy schedule, will filter information even from dubious sources.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Claude Moisy, Memorandum to the International Council on Human Rights Policy's research team, December 2000.

<sup>64</sup> Stephen Ellis, "Fit to Print? — Comparing Standards of News", *Harvard International Review* 23, 1, Spring 2001, p. 56.

<sup>65</sup> See Meg Greenfield, *Washington*, New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

Since editorial process is itself a form of filtering, the question becomes which filters operate, how and when.

It is also true that advocacy groups, public relations firms and lobbyists in general give news organisations a different perspective from that of government. Therefore, if a reporter can triangulate different sources, and so check the reality on the ground, he can more easily provide solid coverage, that is less subject to manipulation.

Though the editorial process is highly structured in many organisations, it is not necessarily so. Swedish reporter Alice Petré notes that the editorial process continues throughout the day and much happens on the reporters' own initiative.<sup>66</sup> An editor's reliance on reporters — including freelancers — to suggest story leads is not to be underestimated.

How much is this scene typical of rich media in free countries? In many societies, the newspaper office presents a quite different scene. Editors double as reporters, do their own secretarial work, and rely heavily on freelancers, who are freelance only because there are no permanent jobs for them. Such conditions affect directly how media organisations function and how receptive they can be to human rights information they receive.

The editorial conference is about the-editor-in-chief-finding-out-what-is-news (which she does by adding information brought to the meeting to information she already has) and then determining what is newsworthy. Scarcity of information obviously limits consideration of 'what the story is', but in Northern media centres abundance rather than scarcity of information is usually the problem. There are two kinds of news organisations, those that know very well what information they are in the business of providing, and those that are, at least in principle, in the business of providing information about everything, which is of course impossible. In the first kind, choosing stories is easier.

Take by way of example two big and famous New York newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The New York Post*. The declared goal of the Times is to publish 'all the news that's fit to print'. Limiting ourselves for the moment to foreign news coverage, by US newspapers and newsweeklies, only *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times* cover as much foreign news. By contrast, *The New York Post* made a deliberate decision some twenty years ago to simply stop covering events outside the United States, with the exception of Israel. There will be occasional reports from elsewhere. The death or election of a pope is worth a mention, and in the event of war (against Iraq or Serbia, for example), the *Post* will usually send out a correspondent or two, but that is hardly coverage.

What is interesting about these examples, one down-market and one up-market, is that they highlight the fact that news organisations must think about their audiences. This adds an additional element to the question about what is newsworthy, namely: 'What is newsworthy for *our* audience?'

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<sup>66</sup> Note to the International Council on Human Rights Policy's research team, May 27, 2001.

The transmission of human rights information in particular, raises problems and opportunities for journalists who want to cover the issue and NGOs, which seek coverage of events of concern to them. Writers can go only so far in double-guessing their editors, and editors (or publishers) can go only so far in second-guessing their audiences, without twisting the topic out of shape. This problem can be acute for freelancers.

As noted above, the information that human rights NGOs send to the media arrives alongside a great deal of material that competes for the relevant editors' attention. This is true in well-endowed editorial environments and poor ones. Human rights NGOs need to understand — this is not a matter of values but of simple practicalities — how information-loaded is the editorial environment they seek to influence.

How should a human rights story or human rights angle in a story be presented? What makes it a human rights story, or an international story with a human rights angle? Stanley Cohen has argued that it is important to distinguish the factual information in which a human rights story is set from the cognitive interpretation of human rights in the story. Margaret Cook asks: “Do human rights stories stand on their own merit or should the human rights dimension be integrated more into the overview and contextualising of a story — which in turn demands better-informed but more complex decision-making processes?”. In many instances, human rights will be just one of the issues in any given story.

### *News-worthiness — the example of Burundi*

Human rights violations occurred in Burundi for many years during both the colonial and post-colonial periods.<sup>67</sup> Major inter-ethnic massacres, which occurred in the 1980s, received international media coverage after they occurred. In 1993, however, with the murder of the country's first democratically elected president, Melchior Ndadaye, Burundi became the object of more sustained attention from international media. This came in the context of a developing genocide in neighbouring Rwanda. In April 1994, Ndadaye's successor, Cyprien Ntaryamira was killed with Rwanda's President Juvenal Habyarimana when their plane was shot down while approaching Kigali airport. Burundi remained in a state of civil war, marked by inter-communal massacres and unstable governments. When a military officer, Pierre Buyoya, seized power in a coup in July 1996,<sup>68</sup> ousting Sylvestre Ntibantunganya, the civil war intensified. Insurgent, Hutu-based movements were entrenched strongly in the suburbs of the capital, Bujumbura, and in the eastern and Southern regions of the country. Burundi's neighbours imposed economic sanctions, which persuaded the parties of the conflict to sit down together in Arusha and work out a power sharing formula based on democratic government and the cessation of ethnic cleansing by government forces and militias.

In the international media, the running Burundi story was covered in several ways. News from Burundi could be angled as an atrocity story, when reliable sources reported an episode of violence. It could be set in the context of conflict in the larger Great Lakes region, which came

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<sup>67</sup> See René Lemarchand, *Burundi – Ethnic Conflict and Genocide*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. See also the works of Filip Reyntjens, Professor of Law and Politics at the University of Antwerp in Belgium.

<sup>68</sup> Pierre Buyoya had already led a coup in 1987.

to encompass the Democratic Republic of Congo (then called Zaïre), neighbouring Rwanda, and armies from several other countries including Zimbabwe, Angola and Uganda. The international story could equally be angled in terms of the Arusha process, an attempt at peace mediation, which functioned from 1998 to 2001 with high visibility due to the involvement of Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa.

Ugandan Journalist Charles Onyango-Obbo has noted an important influence on the coverage of Burundi. Internationally, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, which influenced (and to some extent distorted) perceptions of the situation in Burundi, was perceived in the context of the Holocaust. The issues developed by the international media centred on the need for justice and, in the end, focused on the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. Locally, however, the massacres were seen in the context of similar acts in the history of Rwanda. The problem was not so much one of justice but reconciliation. “The international point of view won out in this case [to the extent that its editorial angle prevailed in the Western media] but the region is still paying the price [as the conflict continues]”.<sup>69</sup>

The media are challenged professionally to maintain a rich texture of coverage, while keeping the angle current. Marc Charney notes that “you lose the story if you let human rights obscure other aspects of it”.<sup>70</sup> Yet it is also true that with competition for print space or airtime, some angles are lost necessarily. Should a story about Sudan be angled from the point of view of a Western country’s interest in it, or from the point of view of what is actually taking place there?<sup>71</sup>

It has become a cliché of (the worst type of) local newspaper journalism that a story is only of interest if there is a strong local angle. Too often this type of highly strained connection is used to give ‘relevance’ to foreign stories. Yet there is a valid sense in which news is more ‘newsworthy’ if it has a direct relevance to the audience of the media that report it.

### *Newsworthiness — the example of Iraq*

Economic sanctions were imposed on Iraq by the United Nations Security Council in August 1990, in an effort to compel it to withdraw from Kuwait, which it invaded and claimed as a province. After US-led military operations forced Iraq out of Kuwait in February 1991, the sanctions were maintained in an effort to force Iraq to comply with arms inspection regimes. The effects of these sanctions, which are still in place, eleven years later, have been catastrophic. There have been approximately one million deaths due to sanctions-related privations, in addition to the collapse of Iraq’s GNP and the reduction of the population to mass penury.<sup>72</sup> The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) estimates that if the substantial

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<sup>69</sup> Remarks at the review seminar organised by the International Council on Human Rights Policy, Geneva, November 27–28, 2000.

<sup>70</sup> Marc Charney, Interview, New York, September 12, 2000.

<sup>71</sup> For example, Steve Miller, “NAACP to call for Sanctions on Sudan”, *The Washington Times*, February 7, 2001.

<sup>72</sup> See Report of the Second panel established pursuant to the note by the President of the Security Council of 30 January 1999 (S/1999/100) concerning the current humanitarian situation in Iraq (S/1999/356, Annex II); International Committee of the Red Cross, *Iraq – A Decade of Sanctions*, December 14, 1999; and “The Human Rights Impact of

reduction in child mortality throughout Iraq during the 1980s had continued through the 1990s, there would have been half a million fewer deaths of children under five years of age in the country as a whole during the eight year period 1991 to 1998.<sup>73</sup> An Oil-for-Food programme, based on an agreement between Iraq and the United Nations, exists to permit Iraq to sell a given amount of petroleum, on condition that the revenues are used to buy food, medicine and humanitarian essentials.

As in Burundi, the basic editorial conference question for a news organisation trying to cover the Iraq situation is the same as anywhere else: ‘what’s the story today?’. In London, New York or Washington, the Iraq sanctions story is not necessarily one demanding a human rights lead. On the contrary, for journalists in these places, the normal tendency is to look for angles in British or US diplomacy or military-security policy. The chief emphasis is on containment or removal of regime. Journalists take their cues from the sources they cover. The definition of the Iraq story as a containment or ‘threat’ story is made by the US and British government officials that international media use as sources.

This does not mean, however, that the journalists will not include human rights issues in their coverage of the Iraq question. An editor may well ask a reporter to ‘keep an eye on’ developing human rights angles, in order to be prepared for them when they appear — for example when an NGO or an IGO releases an estimate of the harm done by sanctions. The BBC and CNN have produced reports focused on the effects of the sanctions.<sup>74</sup> In the print media, a number of stories have focused on the effects of sanctions, though over a ten-year span, they are overwhelmingly outnumbered by containment, threat and diplomacy stories.

As the situation evolved and opposition to sanctions grew around the world, coverage in early 2001 tended to focus on the premise: will sanctions be lifted or modified by the incoming US administration? This was of sufficient interest that, even on the metropolitan desk of a newspaper like *The Detroit News*, the key line of the story, about the interest of local activists in ending sanctions was a quote from one of the leaders of the group: ‘There is no reason for the Iraqi people to be suffering like this’.<sup>75</sup> This — one example among others — marked a difference with the sort of continuing-crisis story that characterised coverage of Iraq in the years following the 1991 war. For example, *The Guardian* ran an anniversary piece in which it asked ‘what has been achieved by ten years of war and sanctions?’, while noting that President Saddam Hussein is ‘presiding over a police state with one of the worst human rights records in

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Economic Sanctions on Iraq”, Background paper prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for the meeting of the Executive Committee on Humanitarian Affairs, September 5, 2000.

<sup>73</sup> From fifty-six deaths per one thousand live births (1984–1989) to 131 deaths per one thousand live births (1994–1999). See UNICEF, *Iraq: Child and Maternal Mortality Surveys – Preliminary Report*, August 1999. The report can be accessed at [www.unicef.org/reseval/iraqr.html](http://www.unicef.org/reseval/iraqr.html)

<sup>74</sup> Nabil Khatib, “The Impact of the Economic Sanctions on Iraq as a Human Rights Issue in the Arab and International Media”, p. 3, paper presented at the review seminar organised by the International Council on Human Rights Policy, Geneva, November 27–28, 2000.

<sup>75</sup> Jennifer Brooks, *The Detroit News*, January 7, 2001, p. Metro-4. See also Robin Wright, “Bush team Divided on Policy Toward Iraq”, *The International Herald Tribune*, February 15, 2001, p. 1.

the world'.<sup>76</sup> That article went on to discuss the disintegration of the thirty-country coalition that had been raised to wage war against the Saddam Hussein régime, and remarked that a privileged few can live well in Iraq, while "UNICEF estimates that half a million children have died in the past ten years, partly as a result of malnutrition, poor sanitation, and lack of medical services". Thus, human rights issues *get into the coverage* but do not *lead* the story. From the perspective of human rights advocates, there is an extremely positive dimension. Human rights are seen as an element that should be factored into any relevant story, informing the analysis of all news. The weakness may be that rights issues, although included, are not articulated as such.

## **The culture of breaking news**

In the Balkans, on the other hand, the media have not neglected the question of human rights, ever since the federation entered the cycle of secession and civil war that characterised it throughout the 1990s. Indeed, the former Yugoslavia's continuing crisis was one of the reasons for the rise in visibility of human rights as an issue in news coverage. Almost all parties to the conflict, and their many supporters in the West, considered their human rights to be violated by the other parties. In these conditions, the line between objective reporting and polemics was frequently blurred. This could be seen as well in coverage of the second Palestinian Intifada, known as Al Aqsa Intifada, after September 2000. Yet, as demonstrated by the Crimes of War Project, it is by no means impossible, in theory, to report objectively on whether or not war crimes or other human rights violations are occurring in the course of a conflict.<sup>77</sup> The editorial conference question, however, should still be kept in mind: 'What's the story today?' This news-driven question can interfere with coverage of some of the more important issues, such as the work of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. One consequence is that when the Tribunal forces itself on the front page — when a major public figure is brought before it, for example — neither reporters nor their audiences are well-prepared to explain its function and background. Moreover, as Ibn Abdur Rehman, Director of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, observes, the news-driven information culture "leaves a wide area of human rights abuses uncovered". He notes that this means "ignoring follow-up needs", which certainly would be the case in Iraq, where news of a continuing human rights crisis surfaces irregularly.<sup>78</sup>

Aidan White of the International Federation of Journalists suggests that the 'breaking news' culture distracts from the time needed for editorial and ethical reflection. Breaking news is part of the *raison d'être* of news organisations. It may also be useful to think about the ethical questions that come up within the news organisation itself as well as in the relations between the news organisation and its public.

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<sup>76</sup> Ewen MacAskill, Brian Whitaker and Jonathan Steele, "Sands of Time Erode Support for Sanctions", *The Guardian*, August 1, 2000, p. 11.

<sup>77</sup> See Roy Gutman and David Rieff, eds, *Crimes of War – What the Public Should Know*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1999. [www.crimesofwar.org](http://www.crimesofwar.org)

<sup>78</sup> Note to the International Council on Human Rights Policy's research team, May 2001.

It must be kept in mind that the problems of news-gathering differ widely. To be sure, the basic issue before any editor or reporter is the same: What happened, what *really* happened and how can I report it? In different media, the significance of ‘really’ varies. In the more analytical parts of a paper or a television programme, for example when an editor assigns a long feature article on ‘the news behind the news’, the question of what really happened may simply be a matter of getting a longer historical, or a deeper sociological picture of current affairs. Yet what ‘really’ happened also has the connotation of investigative journalism, a suggestion that there is a story different from the one widely accepted. In this kind of journalism, the reporter working in a country with a free press, regardless of what his or her material resources may be (though that is not unimportant), is in a quite different position from the reporter working in a country where there is censorship.

### **Context, staffing and institutional memory**

This brings up the question of contextualising human rights stories. Human rights issues need to be explained in their context, and reporting needs to go beyond discrete incidents to include the human rights issues surrounding them. In some cases, human rights issues *are* the context. In others, global politics are more relevant locally than local politics, and the human rights stories need to be explained in the context of wider political relations. In addition, human rights issues also need to be explained in the context of the international laws, conventions and treaties that protect them.

Both in the developed and developing world, human rights violations are rarely set in the context of national laws. International stories are rarely put in context either. For instance, despite the fact that religious rights in China is an important, emerging story, little has been written or shown by the media about what it would mean to have a law based on religious rights in China. Similarly, human rights stories that are nationally based are not linked to the global context, as for example the coverage of Mexico wetbacks in the American media, or the coverage of North Africans in France. Consequently, human rights coverage in the media is fragmented. Another approach would be necessary when covering and presenting the atrocities in Sierra Leone, for example. In order to be presented in its context and reported more completely, information about arms trafficking and the global diamond trade would need to be incorporated. This would actually require an editor to reorganise the coverage of the story and to have a defence specialist cover it with the Africa specialist. However, as Miguel Bayón of *El País* argues, making the link between facts and context is difficult for media organisations (which are generally not interested).<sup>79</sup>

When a news organisation is covering a region regularly, a certain tradition or ‘line’ develops. In time, that line influences editors’ decisions as to what is newsworthy. The more extensive and regular the coverage, the more pressure there is to stay abreast of developments. The question of ‘what the story is’ is determined by material and human factors, as well as by the organisation’s judgement of what interests its audience. The first question to ask with respect

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<sup>79</sup> Remarks at the review seminar organised by the International Council on Human Rights Policy, Geneva, November 27–28, 2000.

to human rights issues is whether coverage has been affected by the general level of interest in foreign news. Recent research in the United States and Britain has shown that there had been a substantial drop in the amount of international news coverage in the United States<sup>80</sup> and British media, particularly television. This trend applies particularly to coverage of the developing world. In 2000, the Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project (3WE) released a report examining British television<sup>81</sup> in which it found that

- whereas at the start of the 1990-2000 decade, human rights and development issues were the largest category in developing country factual programming, in 1998-99 almost sixty per cent of programming on developing countries concerned travel (twenty per cent) and wildlife (thirty-eight per cent),
- the total output of factual programmes on developing countries by the five terrestrial channels in Britain (two BBC channels, ITV, Channel Four, Channel Five) had dropped by almost fifty per cent since 1989 and that
- all channels were showing fewer peak-time programmes about the developing world than at the beginning of the decade.

The quality of that reporting appeared also to have declined. According to a report commissioned by the British Department for International Development (DFID) to examine the role of television in the understanding of international affairs, the information that British television viewers received on the outside world, and on developing countries in particular, was skewed and inaccurate. The report identified “a marked imbalance in the way developing countries are portrayed, especially on news where coverage was generally limited to disasters, bizarre events or visits by prominent westerners” with the result that “viewers generally perceive the world in a negative way, blaming this on television images”.<sup>82</sup>

It is certainly the case that media organisations devote fewer resources to foreign bureaux and rely increasingly on stringers and wire services. Journalists feel generally that, when it is there, foreign coverage has little depth. It is not necessarily contradictory to suggest that there is greater interest in human rights and less foreign news coverage. However, if fewer human resources are available (because staff in foreign bureaux have been reduced), it implies greater reliance on other resources, such as stringers, wire services and the proliferating (but often unreliable) information carried on the Internet.

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<sup>80</sup> Peter Arnett, “Goodbye World – Why Foreign News is Vanishing from America’s Newspapers”, *American Journalism Review*, November 1998, pp. 50–67. Arnett, who gained worldwide celebrity in 1991 when he was one of the few Western journalists to remain in Iraq during the Second Gulf War, remarks that “foreign coverage is there, but not the commitment to publish it”, and argues that the problem is essentially editorial.

<sup>81</sup> Jennie Stone, *Losing Perspective: Global Affairs on British Terrestrial Television, 1989–1999*, London: Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project, January 2000.

<sup>82</sup> Department for International Development, *Viewing the World – A Study of British Television Coverage of Developing Countries*, July 2000. The report, which was researched by the Glasgow Media Group and the Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project, is available at [www.dfid.gov.uk](http://www.dfid.gov.uk)

One factor here is the ever-growing army of professional lobbyists that campaign for foreign causes. Pre-eminently in Washington, they increasingly exist in other major capitals. Though they operate outside formal diplomatic conventions, and their reliability as suppliers of information varies considerably, their activity is not questionable in itself. They are news sources, and evaluating the value or credibility of any news source is what a reporter or an editor is paid to do. It is important to note, however, that the quality of reporting will be affected if reporters and editors rely more on secondary sources than on their own investigations. The reason for this is that reporters and editors figure out the angles on a story, and its importance, by self-education as they work on it. If journalists are not doing the investigation themselves, in most cases, they cannot grasp all the possible angles, unless the subject happens to be one about which they already know a great deal.

Lacking that knowledge or the new knowledge gained from their investigations, editors will be tempted to take a position and fit into it the limited facts and impressions they have available to them. Always constrained by time, writing as tersely as possible, editors or writers must use background information that shapes their understanding of the issue they are covering, but which they cannot reproduce *in toto* for the next day's edition or the hour's broadcast. A good reporter knows how to use a lot of background information without letting it overwhelm a story. It is seldom the case that reporters and editors have too much background information — on the contrary, they usually do not have enough.

If the story is simply that Human Rights Organisation X has published a report on Country Y, then this may not pose a great problem. The story will undoubtedly be far superior if it is written by Country Y's paper specialist, who will then be able to place the new findings into the context of what was already known and understood. For the human rights organisation, the principal aim of putting the new information in the public domain will have been achieved. Where the question of background information becomes much more problematic is when the reporter himself has to try to work out what the human rights angles are in a particular story. Often there will be conflicting rights at play — or at least conflicting claims of rights violations — which will require experience and expertise to evaluate.

Take as an example the Arab-Israeli conflict. An editor or reporter covering this conflict is primarily concerned with the violence and what is being done on all sides to end or prolong it. That is the lead, and it necessarily begins every day with the 'what happened?' question. Have any Palestinians or Israelis been killed, has a fresh compromise been offered by either side, and so forth. Suppose that, in reporting these overnight events, the journalist ventures a bit further and states that, while both sides claim to be for peace, the Israeli side seems less inclined to be for peace since the army has been firing to kill (by aiming at demonstrators' heads). In the background information of a foreign editor (and, ideally, the reporter on the scene as well) there ought to be certain elementary givens about the nature of the conflict. Very often the media do not provide such background.

Context often determines whether given military acts (such as shooting at the heads of demonstrators) are legal or illegal under human rights and humanitarian law. This in turn can determine whether soldiers (or their commanding officers) can be prosecuted for such acts. In the case described, for example, where high velocity weapons have been used to shoot

demonstrators armed with stones, the fact that, under international law, Israel is an occupying force strictly limits its right legally to use force. At the same time, it is also legally significant if the soldiers were acting in self-defence or to maintain order. It is not by accident, therefore, that Palestinian press releases speak of the Israeli 'occupation' and Israeli statements speak of 'security'.

The potential political impact of such arguments is considerable. Despite the yards and hours of coverage given to the Palestine-Israel conflict, it is striking that this legal dimension of the conflict is mentioned rarely and almost never explained. Is such omission merely a matter of editorial judgement — differences of perspective on what matters? *When does a failure to explain (in this case, to explain the meaning of apparently simple 'human rights facts') begin to undermine the ability of reports to communicate information that is essential to readers, viewers or listeners if they are to understand what is going on?* At what point might one begin to speak of professional, not moral, negligence in such cases?

By way of comparison, in earlier times a news organisation kept its overseas personnel in place for several years, for economic but also for sound editorial reasons. Long-serving foreign correspondents still exist, notably in the British and sometimes in the French press. This practice is rarer in the United States media.<sup>83</sup> Though the European media are also changing, John Owen, former Executive Director of Freedom Forum in Europe, observes that international coverage is more balanced and analytical in the United Kingdom's quality press than in the United States'. He also considers that BBC television coverage of human rights issues is better than television coverage in America. Though this has much to do with the structure of news organisations, the career paths of the correspondents play a part.<sup>84</sup>

A growing characteristic of the media, which is perhaps associated with the decline of the specialist correspondent, is a lack of historical memory. An inability to place events in a long-term context, or to compare one set of events to an earlier one, is always going to be an obstacle to understanding. Examples are legion.

The current crisis in Zimbabwe is a story that has a strong human rights content and a historical context that is indispensable to understanding the dynamics of the conflict. Many foreign news organisations have been vigorous, not to say aggressive, in reporting human rights abuses by militias associated with President Robert Mugabe's party against white farmers. In so doing they have provided a mirror image of the ruling party's own propaganda, which has portrayed the conflict as essentially about land and race, rather than the retention of political power. Only after the crisis had evolved over a period of some months in 2000-2001 did foreign media coverage reflect fully the fact that the principal victims of ruling party violence were in fact black Zimbabweans, farm workers and peasants, rather than white landowners. This failure had to do in part with a lack of understanding of events in Zimbabwe since independence in 1980. The attack on whites was seen as being in some sense inconsistent with the policy of reconciliation that President Mugabe had espoused. The massacre of

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<sup>83</sup> Important exceptions are *The New York Times'* Roger Cohen and John Vinocur, if one views Western Europe as a whole as their foreign posting.

<sup>84</sup> John Owen, Interview, London, October 2000.

thousands of black civilians in Matabeleland in the 1980s, while not unknown to these journalists, was not factored into their analysis. Yet the readiness of the government to commit widespread human rights violations while talking the language of reconciliation should have alerted observers to the crisis that was to erupt later. It was not the case, as some critics have claimed, that the Matabeleland massacres were not reported because the victims were black. They were, in fact, reported extensively at the time. The problem is that journalists covering Zimbabwe in 2001 had almost no knowledge of what took place there in the early 1980s. Institutional amnesia of this kind is a barrier to understanding and to good reporting.

If, in order to cut costs or for whatever other reason, news organisations come to rely more on stringers than on their own correspondents, the quality and depth of their institutional memory is bound to suffer. There is nothing inherently wrong with stringers. They are often courageous, entrepreneurial and more knowledgeable about events, contacts and interpretation of events than are regional correspondents. Stringers often hold the institutional memory for an organisation in a given country.<sup>85</sup>

Nevertheless, stringers cannot participate in the institutional culture of the news organisation they work for. (If they do, and provide years of service as stringers, something is definitely wrong with the news organisation concerned; such staff should be promoted rather than exploited.) The institutional culture includes such matters as an organisation's interest in different kinds of information — including human rights — and the way in which it exercises judgement in reporting that information. In making judgements about what is true and what is important, the relationship between correspondents and editors is particularly important.

## **Relations between correspondents and editors**

In addition, several key issues have an impact on the selection of coverage. These include the degree of trust between the correspondent or reporter covering a story and his editor, and the experience, seniority, expertise or moral authority of the reporter concerned. Over time, the understanding between a trusted correspondent and his editor becomes tacit, enabling both to make difficult judgements better. At the same time, there are often tensions between journalists on the ground and editors at headquarters, particularly in the case of international affairs, because diplomatic editors will tend to have close relationships with governments and may not have the same vision of events as the correspondent. With increasing use of stringers by media organisations, this gap between where the story originates and where the decision to take it is widening.

This raises the question of how much room for manoeuvre the correspondent has to push for his story. While some editors interviewed for this report said that they generally trusted their correspondents, a number of journalists were of the opinion that editors increasingly mistrust correspondents (and even more so, stringers) and will even not publish a story if it has not been corroborated by a wire report. Several interviewees working for 'quality' media felt that

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<sup>85</sup> Douglas Farah, Note to the International Council on Human Rights Policy's research team, May 10, 2001

experienced correspondents can still influence the selection of stories and that journalists can still impose their views and push past constraints.

A related issue is the independence of the editor vis-à-vis the sources in the report. In some cases, diplomatic editors may be too close to their sources in foreign affairs ministries, while business editors may be afraid of aggravating relationships with the managements of large multinationals who provide both stories and advertising revenue.

Naturally, the conditions in which a journalist or editor operates have a direct impact on the newsroom agenda. Adrien Sindayigaya provided a stark illustration of this fact when he said that at least five journalists working for Studio Ijambo in Burundi had been killed since 1993, after people in power had publicly called them traitors. Charles Onyango-Obbo remarked that despite the danger inherent in covering human rights in Africa, the situation has improved somewhat for two reasons. First, some militias/rebels have been removed. Secondly, technology, such as satellite telephones and electronic mail, has created space for reporting human rights better.<sup>86</sup>

The merits of posting correspondents on a long-term basis used to be accepted without debate. Over time a journalist would develop both contacts and an understanding of the situation he or she was reporting on. Yet the cost and inconvenience of international travel also meant that the correspondent *had* to be in place in case a story broke. Various factors have turned this situation on its head. On the one hand, a relentless desire to cut costs has resulted in dramatic cuts in the number of staff correspondents. Stringers have replaced them, or they have not been replaced at all. The vast amount of information available creates the impression that news organisations can maintain a watching brief from afar — regardless of the fact that information must still be generated and evaluated somewhere. When a story breaks, cheap and convenient international air travel allows a staff correspondent to fly in in a matter of hours. If there is a stringer, he will be demoted from journalist to local fixer and the staff correspondent will have access to his contact book (often at the cost of considerable resentment). The fact that this approach is practical does not make it desirable. What cannot be conveyed is the experience that the stringer has developed over years or a lifetime. In many cases, even capable reporters who are parachuted in this fashion fail to grasp a situation. Lacking any context or understanding, they make comparisons with similar situations in their experience, and do not identify what is particular about this story. Their ignorance is exacerbated by the fact that often the visiting correspondent is one of a pack arriving at the same time. There is strong peer pressure to develop a common interpretation, inevitably superficial, rather than develop a well-researched analysis or question received wisdom.

Let us imagine a correspondent sent to Tunis, to meet for five hours with Tunisia's best-known journalist, Tewfik Ben Brik. He explains the situation of the press in Tunisia, which is deplorable, given the country's relatively good economic and social conditions. After the interview the correspondent leaves and, using information obtained from the Internet sites of Human Rights Watch and Reporters Sans Frontières, writes a hard-hitting, two thousand word

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<sup>86</sup> Respective remarks at the review seminar organised by the International Council on Human Rights Policy, Geneva, November 27–28, 2000.

piece on lack of press freedom in Tunisia. This is programmed by his astute foreign editor to appear the day Tunisia's President Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali arrives in Washington for a meeting with President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell. Even the headline is easy: 'Tunisians Enjoy Southern California Climate, but Few or No Press Freedoms'.

Few American editors would care to fund a correspondent to research a story in that way. More important, however, such an approach is problematic both technically and professionally. Tewfiq Ben Brik's analysis may be astute; his facts are verifiable; the reports of Human Rights Watch on the judicial difficulties of Tunisian human rights organisations, and Reporters Sans Frontières' on the state of journalism in Tunisia are well-researched. Other reports by Arab human rights organisations are available. The point is that the context would be missing and the Tunisian situation cannot really be understood without it. Precisely for this reason, the editor is likely to say: 'You have brought me back a report claiming that there is no press freedom in Tunisia. So what? Ben Ali is going to be in Washington to discuss trade. Frankly, if there isn't a civil war or an earthquake, we don't have to shift attention to their media problems'.

The situation in Tunisia did, in fact, receive some attention in the media. In early 2001, *The Financial Times* offered a mid-length story by Roula Khalaf (a good example of a correspondent kept in place), which reported "a concerted crackdown on human rights". It said that the Tunisian League of Human Rights had been suspended and that Moncef Marzouki, a spokesperson for the unrecognised National Council of Liberties in Tunisia, had been sentenced to a year in jail.<sup>87</sup> Days earlier, on December 30, 2000, *The New York Times* ran an editorial deploring the trial of Moncef Marzouki, which had just begun. The editorial went on to note that "Mr. Ben Ali now leads a one-party dictatorship, with repression of journalists, dissidents and Islamists, punctuated by occasional amnesties".

Thus (without reading too much into this example), newspapers are willing to take an interest in human rights issues. In both *The Financial Times* and *The New York Times* pieces — one in the news columns and the other on the editorial page — the lead was a human rights abuse. Yet this lead can only go so far. The chances are that for the next six months, possibly longer (assuming the repression referred to in *The New York Times* editorial does not become noticeably more fierce) — and possibly *much* longer — every time a reporter or editor mentions the Tunisian case to the foreign editor (or an editorial writer to the editorial page editor), the response will be: 'We did it, nothing new'. The response is justified: knowing nothing of the evolving situation in Tunisia, they see no reason to repeat themselves. To them, this is the difference between repeating information and covering a place. Coverage is good, repetition is boring. If you do not invest the resources to cover, you can only repeat — or simply look elsewhere.

Some veteran foreign correspondents are dismayed by what they claim are the lowered standards of foreign editors, which they view as closely linked to the decline of foreign coverage.<sup>88</sup> Foreign editors are supposed to be people who 'have been around the block' often

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<sup>87</sup> Roula Khalaf, "Abrupt End for Tunisian Spring", *The Financial Times*, January 13, 2001, p. 5.

<sup>88</sup> S.W. Sanders, Interview, March 2001.

enough to grasp almost immediately when a reporter far away is pursuing the wrong angle in a story. Put another way, the foreign editor should be able to tell her reporter that the case he is constructing does not support the conclusion he wants to draw. The foreign editor cannot do this (except when the story is so badly done that it is incoherent or illogical, which admittedly can happen) unless there are critical and knowledgeable minds at both ends. It is normal for reporters on the scene to lose some perspective — it is why the foreign editor must be in a position to help them conceptualise the material they file. In late 2000, Tewfiq Ben Brik went on hunger strike to call attention to the lack of press freedom in his country. To those who were in Tunis at the time, especially to political opponents of the government, human rights activists and intellectuals concerned with press freedom, it seemed a much larger story than it did in New York or in Dublin — though, once again, it should be noted that *The Irish Times* called attention to the case.<sup>89</sup>

One issue that is rarely if ever noticed by the press outside Tunisia is the corrosive effect of lack of press freedom on Tunisian journalists as well as news consumers. That is to say, it is excellent to call attention to the case of Ben Brik, but, as noted already, because of the lack of follow-up, it is difficult for the full meaning of the case to come through. Ibn Abdur Rehman notes that “Consistency [in covering human rights] does not mean only treating reports from the various parts of the globe uniformly (e.g., once a year, press freedom in Tunisia, down, in India, up), it should also have an element of pursuit of stories already broken”.<sup>90</sup>

Lack of consistency can produce incoherence, and not only in human rights-angled stories. As one veteran of both foreign correspondence and foreign editing remarked, “The Balkans story now [February 2001] is bogged down into a series of anecdotes that seem completely haphazard, shooting here, protests there. The reader’s eyes glaze over because he sees no bottom line. One has to think long and hard to find a foreign editor at a major publication or in the electronic media who has had extensive experience overseas and who has a reputation for erudition and expertise among foreign policy specialists in government, academe, and among the foreign diplomatic corps. The foreign editor should be moving in those circles to pick up the Washington or United Nations ends of any story his reporter is filing from overseas. Unfortunately, in no small part it has become the duty of the foreign editor to pay more attention to vacation schedules, personnel policies, the complicated structure of transportation and communication, costs, etc, than to the editorial content and quality of his coverage”.<sup>91</sup>

It has to be said that much of this complaining is part of the culture of the news business. The notion, for example, that foreign editors used to be more experienced than they are today may simply reflect the nostalgia of ageing foreign correspondents for a time they considered more heroic (a phenomenon that is not confined to the news business). It is also true that, in an age of globalisation, the somewhat exotic power of the foreign correspondent no longer has the same effect. Individuals around the world can participate in foreign events through radio,

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<sup>89</sup> *The Irish Times*, May 3, 2000, p. 10. The report used the ‘hook’ of World Press Freedom Day and the championing of Ben Brik’s case by Reporters Sans Frontières.

<sup>90</sup> Ibn Abdur Rehman, Note to the research team, May 28, 2001.

<sup>91</sup> S.W. Sanders, Interview, March 2001.

television, the Internet and the information products they buy — particularly if they have travelled to some of the places they read about. This is both good and bad for news reporting and reporting of human rights. On the one hand, it means that information consumers may have some familiarity with the issue at hand, which should cause them to be more discerning and therefore more demanding consumers. On the other hand, knowledge acquired on a business trip or a package tour is necessarily narrow; consumers may in fact impose quite superficial assumptions on the news they receive. This is one of the perverse effects of global information. The latter is neither good nor bad. As with television or computers, the technology itself is neutral. The issue is always what people do with it. In this regard, it is altogether possible that news organisations have not yet adapted successfully to their audiences' new complex mix of sophistication and superficiality.

Nor are the news organisations to be faulted because they are uncertain on how to adapt. Even as it reported on the Tewfiq Ben Brik affair in Tunisia, *The Irish Times* ran a much longer piece on the possibilities of Tunisian tourism. This is normal; many of its readers are interested in a Tunisian holiday. What is at issue here is the editor-correspondent relationship, which needs to be understood as a crucial — and endangered — mechanism for bringing out the news (whether on tourism or on press freedom) with fairness and accuracy. For this mechanism to function, the editor needs to be intellectually equipped to challenge the correspondent, constantly asking questions that risk undermining the correspondent's thesis. Foreign correspondents from *Le Monde*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian* and *The Observer* were among those interviewed for this report. They did not raise doubts concerning the intellectual qualities of their foreign editors. Excellent as these correspondents are, one would almost prefer to hear griping to have it confirmed that the system is working well. Who, in practise, is challenging the correspondents?

Having more experienced foreign editors is no panacea. The widespread use of 'sectoral journalism' can undercut the editors' pursuit of stories, even their awareness of them. Does a travel editor, for example, want to ask for a piece on sex tourism in Thailand? If made aware of the need to cover this angle, is the editor reluctant to pursue it due to the kind of advertising the travel section of the publication receives? Perhaps not, but it is this kind of questions that media critics — and human rights organisations — must ask.

This discussion underlines once again the importance of judgement in selecting stories and angles. As in most professions, and perhaps more than in some, the human factor is preponderant. How can an activity that requires management of so much that is arbitrary have clear professional standards?

## **Relations between national media and international media**

The relationships between national and international media affect the selection of news and human rights stories and decisions as to whether a given story is published. Many other factors bear on the relationship — geopolitical and corporate influences, organisational constraints and the credibility of the different sources.

Space for human rights stories in countries with no or limited freedom of the press can be created by first publishing in the international/regional media or the media in neighbouring countries. An example from Uganda is *The Monitor's* extensive coverage of abuses in neighbouring Rwanda, where next to nothing is published on this subject. Ibn Abdur Rehman cites the crucial role of the international media when local coverage, as in Pakistan, is difficult or even impossible. Reporting on his field research on the 1995 crisis in Burundi, Adrien Sindayigaya suggested that the presence of international journalists helped local journalists to report on the human rights situation and possibly helped to reduce the level of abuses. He argues that such a foreign presence created a professional space in which local journalists could operate and provided them a safety net.

Mr. Rehman noted that local leaders take more note of international than local or national coverage. Kakuna Kerina, former Director of the Africa Programme at the International League for Human Rights, deplored the fact that too often international media will only pick up a story once an international human rights organisation has brought attention to it, and rarely respond to stories that local human rights NGOs or the local media have published. Furthermore, even when these stories are published, international media rarely name local NGOs and media as sources, thereby depriving them of recognition and protection.

Many of the Southern journalists consulted during the preparation of this report felt that the international media could do more to assist local media to develop their coverage of human rights. For that to happen, international media need to report more stories originated by local media, acknowledge the value of local analysis, avoid stereotyping and attribute local sources. Kwame Karikari of the Media Foundation for West Africa suggested that international media should assist the development of media at the provincial level. Private radio stations — the media with the most penetration in the continent — have proliferated recently in Africa. Many are striving to report human rights stories while fighting legal battles with governments. He pointed to Ghana as an example of a country where independent media have developed successfully.

The squeeze on resources for international coverage has also led international media to appoint more correspondents in Africa. Since many local reporters work often for local and regional or international media at the same time, this has provided important benefits to local media — better financial conditions for those employed, but also opportunities to acquire and pass on expertise. The flip side of this trend is that correspondents from local communities are much more exposed as a result.

Western journalists in Africa not infrequently complain of having large territories to cover. Not only are they stretched thin, but they must choose between many stories that compete for their attention. As noted earlier, compared to the past, local correspondents tend to have less knowledgeable foreign editors at home to guide them. Even so, they do not face the kinds of problems encountered by Burundians. As Sindayigaya reported:

The journalists' greatest challenge was and remains the ability to reach places where human rights have been violated and then produce honest, credible and unbiased reports on a conflict

they are part of. The other one — no less important — is the physical threats that some journalists endure once they denounce human rights abuses. Journalists, therefore, often keep silent in front of human rights violations out of fear of being ill-treated by the regime whose security apparatus, the police and the army, are often complicit in the violence, as they are in looting and extorting goods from citizens. This state of things deeply affects the presentation of human rights by the media.<sup>92</sup>

Benefiting from a far better material environment than their Southern colleagues, Northern journalists also benefit from a greater sense of security. While many Northern journalists have been harmed and some have been killed in recent conflicts — with the exception of Andrei Babitsky in Chechnya — most have been caught in crossfire.<sup>93</sup> Besides the abduction and assassination of Daniel Pearl of *The Wall Street Journal* in Pakistan in February 2002, no Northern journalists outside Russia and Latin America were specifically targeted as journalists for their coverage of political issues, with the exception of an *El Mundo* reporter murdered by the Basque militant organisation, ETA. As Jean-Pierre Tuquoi of *Le Monde* notes, ‘We [the reference is to *Le Monde* specifically] are strong enough to resist the kinds of pressures that might be exerted on a local newspaper [the reference is to the Maghreb]’.<sup>94</sup>

By comparison, the situation for local journalists is stark.<sup>95</sup> Many would not be surprised by Adrien Sindayigaya’s comments. Close to one hundred media staff were killed in Algeria at the height of that country’s civil war around 1993-94. According to Omar Belhouchet, the editor and publisher of *El Watan*, most of these were victims of the ‘radicals’. Belhouchet himself narrowly escaped murder. For saying on a foreign radio station that it was conceivable that Algerian journalists had been targeted by elements within the security services, he was indicted for violating a press law, tried, found guilty and given a suspended sentence. This points to another critical difference in the editorial environment. The domestic legal context is less friendly to journalists in many countries in Southern latitudes than it is in the global media centres of Washington, London or Paris.

In other words, while Northern journalists sometimes suffer from constraining editorial environments (‘not enough foreign coverage’, ‘you cannot trust the intelligence of an editor’, and so on) and at other times enjoy extraordinary reportorial freedom, Southern journalists operate in an editorial environment that is physically and legally dangerous. No one in a New York, London or Paris editorial conference will say, ‘If we say this, will the authorities kill us or put us in jail?’ Editors would be concerned about issues of libel and litigation. They might possibly be cautious in dealing, for example, with violent groups in Corsica, who have been

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<sup>92</sup> Sindayigaya, “The Media and Human Rights in Burundi”, p. 2.

<sup>93</sup> The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists reported twenty-four murders of journalists in 2000, such as the Mozambican journalist Carlos Cardoso, in the course of investigating corruption.

<sup>94</sup> Interview, Paris, October 4, 2000.

<sup>95</sup> The New York-based Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights disagreed with this analysis of the situation of Southern and Northern journalists. In comments sent (February 4, 2002), they expressed reservations about analyses that romanticise Southern journalists and demonised Northern media operations, and stressed that the press freedom values are universal values. (The Institute also took exception to points made in this report about the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, Iraq, Algeria, Tunisia, Russia and Palestine.)

known to attack journalists. This is a far cry from the situation that Mr. Sindyigaya and his colleagues face, or the situation of journalists in Russia.

In this context, certain matters are fundamental. Do laws protect free expression and are they enforceable? Do ordinary journalists and their employers (publishers, broadcasters) have the means to get legal help if they have difficulty with the authorities or are sued by powerful private interests? Are these authorities and private interests functioning in an atmosphere of impunity, in which they can physically intimidate news professionals (or worse)?

Journalists who work in such contexts are both aided and impeded by the fleeting interest of colleagues from abroad. In some circumstances, their interest helps and protects, but in others, it makes their work harder. According to Ibn Abdur Rehman, “international news services or correspondents on flying visits pick up stories from the domestic media and often ignore the context”. Ibn Abdur Rehman uses the example of a blasphemy case, which he says was reported in a Western outlet “with no reference to the history of such cases in Pakistan”. Regardless of attitudes to blasphemy and the line between free speech and respect for others’ religions, Western journalists, who sensationalise such cases and take them out of context are likely to reinforce the instinct of local authorities to repress all information about such cases, including information in the local press. This is not a matter of ‘cultural relativism.’ Rather, it is a warning that superficial application of the ‘newsworthiness’ rule dear to Western journalists (Americans especially) can produce effects, which are just as dangerous, and appear as slanted as conscious misinformation.

Of course, governments that abuse human rights can apply restrictive measures to the foreign press too, often with great effect. Western correspondents in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, for example, operated under considerable restraints. Others have gone even further. Malawi, for example, expelled many foreign correspondents and effectively made the country off limits for journalists. Precisely because a negative human rights story cannot be run endlessly without new information, this tactic worked well. The government suffered a day of bad publicity when the journalists were expelled and many months of peace and quiet thereafter, punctuated only by the occasional piece on the eccentric authoritarianism of the country’s leader, Kamuzu Banda. The extreme brutality of Malawi’s internal regime was simply not understood in the outside world. Nearby Zimbabwe adopted similar tactics in 2001, expelling several foreign journalists. These included the correspondent of the BBC, which was not allowed to replace him. In the context of modern communications, such tactics may not work as effectively today. Nevertheless, preventing journalists from reporting for themselves will undoubtedly effect the quality of coverage, internationally and locally, even if coverage cannot be suppressed altogether.

## **Freedom of the press**

A free press — itself a recognised human right — challenges regimes that repress human rights. The challenge is more intense if that press exists in societies that repress *some* rights, or the rights of some people. For instance, it is obvious that more pressure to liberalise was

exerted during the 1980s on South Korea's government than on the government of North Korea. The South Korean press is indisputably freer, and always has been, than the press in the North. While many factors tending toward the liberalisation of the two régimes must be considered, the media in South Korea certainly played a key role in encouraging democratic reform in the country and in highlighting human rights issues; in North Korea, this was not possible.

A different region with markedly different political and press traditions offers a contemporary example, in North Africa (the Maghreb). Measured against the most straightforward criteria, the Algerian and Mauritanian media have been freer than their Tunisian, Moroccan and Libyan counterparts. They reported more news, in a more investigative and reportorial manner (who-what-where-when and both-sides-of-the-issue) and they were more varied in their interpretation of the news. The freer press of Algeria, in particular, has played a role in Algeria's indisputable evolution towards becoming a society in which citizens *demand* their freedoms and rights. By contrast, Tunisia's press is heavily self-censored, and has done little to push Tunisian society toward a more politically liberal régime.

Among other factors, a free press is an extremely powerful institution. It should be noted that, even in totalitarian societies where a free press is absent, certain elements of the unfree press can bring pressure to bear on their régimes. Pressure can be exerted through the echoes of the foreign press that reach the repressed society, through the underground press (sometimes, a press that is legal but kept under extreme constraints and with very limited circulation), or through a press that is constrained, illegal, but for various reasons is permitted to function to a limited degree.

Tunisia provides a different example of the role of an unfree press in a repressive regime. Though the major Tunisian papers do not put much pressure on the regime to evolve in a more liberal direction (pressure that, it must be repeated, consists primarily of reporting the state of things in the country), independent journalists and writers do prevent the regime from escaping criticism altogether. Independent journalists send their dispatches out of the country, and the news they send can be relayed back. The Tunisian authorities can block overseas media — France's *Le Monde* and *Jeune Afrique-L'Intelligent* have been seized often when they carry news of human rights and political issues in Tunisia — but they cannot keep information out entirely because they have adopted a policy of free circulation in and out of the country (which does not mean everyone can exercise this right).

In this decade, advances of technology will render recycling of information an almost unstoppable phenomenon. Fax machines, telephones, cellular telephones, the Internet and electronic mail have made it increasingly difficult to close off regions of the world to determined purveyors of information. That is not to say that it is always easy *in practice* to communicate. Owning a fax machine, a telephone, a computer with a modem and Internet access represent economic challenges in many regions that the vast majority of people cannot meet. In some places, possessing such machines can represent a considerable risk to life and liberty. In certain countries, it is still possible politically to control access to international telephone lines on which this technology depends.

The case of the *Post* newspaper in Zambia is a heartening example of how new communications technologies can be used to get the story out. In 1996, the Zambian government ordered a local Internet service provider (ISP), Zamnet, to remove an issue of the *Post* from its website because it contained a report based on a leaked government document. The edition was banned and the newspaper was prosecuted. After some delay Zamnet complied — by which time the relevant issue had been ‘mirrored’ on a US website and was still available for all to read. Better still, after the government tried to pressure Zamnet to close down the *Post* website altogether, the ISP countered by encouraging several other Zambian newspapers to set up websites, including those owned by the government. A victory for media pluralism, aided by communications technology.<sup>96</sup>

### Selecting the story

The resourceful journalist cannot have too much information. At the same time he must know the difference between background and the needs of his editor or producer: ‘What’s the story today?’ Editors or producers are not interested in the history of Belgian colonisation in the African Great Lakes region. They want to know if there is a story now, in Burundi, and whether it justifies (i) a brief reference somewhere in the foreign news section, (ii) a headline story datelined locally and based on named or unnamed sources, or (iii) a mission to the place in question.

Normally this decision is made in a few minutes. If, during the editorial story conference, the reporter (or foreign editor) convinces the editor-in-chief or producer that something truly ‘big’ is happening in Burundi, the latter may request a post-conference conference or even a brief written memo. In the case of magazine journalism — important to the degree that it overlaps with and complements daily news — a one-to-three page memo is normally *de rigueur*, or used to be.

Indeed, a business already famous for its short attention span, journalism is increasingly driven by ever-faster communications. Well-organised editors must husband their time, including the time they spend reading, and one of the results is the diminished use of the story memo. This too has adverse consequences on editorial standards. As Richard Harwood remarks, “Newsroom executives take on corporate habits, devoting much of their working lives to meetings and ‘planning sessions’, to budget battles, to the development and care of ‘news products’, to the writing of memorandums, to ‘community outreach’, to ‘sensitivity training’ and to personnel counselling.... Often little time is left for editing and questioning stories as well as for enforcing by example the standards on which good journalism depends. These functions, too often, are delegated to people unqualified to perform them”.<sup>97</sup>

In this context, one perspective on how subjects are prioritised was put forward by *The Washington Post*'s Douglas Farah, who is based in West Africa: “Human rights coverage is accurate but certainly not consistent. Part of it is [due to] the size of the beat most of us have,

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<sup>96</sup> Sally Burnheim, *The Right to Communicate – The Internet in Africa*, Article 19, London: 1999.

<sup>97</sup> Richard Harwood, “In Newsroom Culture, Something is Wrong”, *The International Herald Tribune*, July 16, 1998, p. 9.

more than a dozen countries and never time in any one country to really dig in and find the true human rights abuses. Part of it is an order of magnitude. The abuses of Jerry Rawlings in Ghana are not on a par with Foday Sankoh's in Sierra Leone. Yet he has committed abuses, and I guess the line is an arbitrary decision by the reporter more than anything else." This underscores the point made earlier about the relatively low priority given by American editors to the Tewfiq Ben Brik affair in Tunisia. Douglas Farah added: "I seldom recall an editor telling me to cover the human rights angle," but noted that editors "have all been extremely receptive to human rights stories".<sup>98</sup> This suggests that editors trust their correspondents, accept that human rights issues are legitimate news, but do not push such issues to the top of the agenda. They allow their correspondents to tell them what is happening.

Putting it this way is misleading in one important respect. For various reasons, Sub-Saharan Africa remains the most 'open-ended' region for the media. (Latin America comes a close second.) Except when events occur that are of international significance (as defined in New York or London), journalists are unusually free to roam about and pick up stories they want to cover. This is not true — and the reservation is an important one — of international broadcast media that set themselves the task of covering areas of the world that are not otherwise covered, and doing so from the perspective of populations living in those regions. With its 125-million audience world wide, the BBC World Service is perhaps the leading example of such an institution. It does not judge the quality of its news service by reference to the expectations of consumers in London or Washington, but in terms of its accuracy and relevance to people living in countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America to whom it transmits in local languages as well as English. In such cases, close editorial attention is given to what is covered, and coverage is consciously detailed — the opposite of trends that can be detected in the general international media, where regions of the world that are peripheral (viewed from London, Paris or Washington) are covered from the perspective of international rather than local consumers, and at a level of generality which reflects that objective.<sup>99</sup>

An African or Latin American story reported on the BBC World Service will not necessarily be covered at all by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* or the London *Times*. A story from those regions in *The New York Times* will not necessarily be found in *The Washington Post* or the London *Times* — and these papers may pick up quite different stories from Africa or Latin America. This is much less likely to happen to stories from most other regions. In these other areas, another factor influences the editorial conference environment, namely, the pressure to conform when faced by a breaking story.

If the editorial conference is the core editorial unit, the wider media industry provides the general editorial context. The material with which editors and reporters work is the daily reality

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<sup>98</sup> Interview, Washington, D.C., August 14, 2000.

<sup>99</sup> Though the BBC enjoys an excellent reputation, both among professionals and the public, the declining quality of its programmes has of late come under attack. See, for instance, Geoffrey Wheatcroft, "Who Needs the BBC?", *The Atlantic Monthly* 287, 3, March 2001, pp. 53–58. Wheatcroft argues that marketplace competition and commercial imperatives have led the BBC to promote greater accessibility at the risk of dumbing down. The World Service output, however, remains of a high quality. In 2000, the World Service launched a project on human rights entitled 'I have a right to'. This initiative (the largest ever global education project started by the BBC) works directly with partners from non-governmental and community-based organisations in thirteen countries.

of their beats (politics, sports, business and so on); but their editorial environment — what might be called the editorial mental universe — is in large part the rest of the media industry that surrounds them.

One effect of this is that media organisations fear not covering what other organisations are covering. To some extent, complaints about the herd mentality are overdrawn. Leading news leads for a reason. Nevertheless, there is something in the frequently heard complaint that editorial difference was more evident among leading news organs in the past. Nowadays, pointed out Gérard Norescou of *Le Figaro*, “there is a fear of being different. The first thing we do, in an editorial conference, is check what other papers are leading with. The real horror is when we check to see if we are doing the same as television. You have an editorial meeting, and the editor-in-chief is inquiring what is on the main evening television news hour”.<sup>100</sup>

This case of role-reversal has been mentioned already.<sup>101</sup> Whereas television news used to follow the leading newspapers, the situation is now increasingly reversed. This distresses print journalists, like Bill Kovach, who do not believe television is equipped to present stories requiring analysis. “Television is now driving coverage. It used to be the other way. Now every editor has a television over his desk and he wants to make sure his reporters are covering what television is covering. In the Middle East crisis, you see a good example of where television fails. Television cannot capture a situation like this — it shows the violence without explaining anything, which certainly cannot tell you much about what human rights are being violated, or if the charges are correct (disproportionate force, for example) or not. Dramatic pictures are driving the news.” Dramatic pictures are not necessarily enlightening. Due to what Mr. Kovach calls ‘the tyranny of weakness’, the weaker side, driven to use dramatic or violent images to call attention to itself, is now exerting a kind of tyranny on the news process because it makes good television.<sup>102</sup>

If one accepts Bill Kovach’s argument, the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon would seem to be prime examples. The targets clearly had symbolic value as buildings associated with US commercial and military primacy. The attacks were planned in the certain knowledge that they would be pre-eminently televisual. The endlessly re-run footage of the second plane crashing into the World Trade Centre was a triumph of what used to be called ‘propaganda of the deed’. The similarity of these images to the imaginings of Hollywood special effects departments only underlines the narrow gap between entertainment and news. The converse is that those with the power to do so will also keep images off the screen if they might have an undesired effect. Footage of the killing of US soldiers in Somalia, for example, had a far greater effect than the fact of their deaths. As with Middle East violence or the World Trade Centre, the problem was a combination of the powerful emotional effect of the images combined with an absence of explanatory analysis.

In this environment, the editor and her deputies do not look deliberately for human rights stories. They consider a story on the basis of the following criteria:

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<sup>100</sup> Interview, Paris, October 4, 2000.

<sup>101</sup> See Fallows, *Breaking the News*, 1997.

<sup>102</sup> Interview, Washington, D.C., November 20, 2000.

- Is it newsworthy?
- Is there enough information yet to justify assigning someone to it? (Or, has someone sent in enough information to justify developing it?)
- Is it a story that matters to the organisation's audience?
- Is it likely to offend the organisation's owners?

From this discussion, it is clear that an editor seldom begins the editorial conference by asking: 'What have we got in human rights stories today?' Though there is evidence of an increase in human rights stories in the past fifteen years, it does not follow that human rights issues are more thoroughly covered. Human rights issues and humanitarian crises, as noted earlier, are given higher profile. At the same time, they are no longer embedded in a larger context (as they were during the Cold War, for example). This encourages journalists to be reactive in their coverage. They respond when human rights NGOs and other interested parties call attention to them.

Douglas Farah, for example, noted that, "stories come up because of many different factors. A Burkina Faso story I did was generated by my reviewing clips of the country then contacting human rights groups and diplomats in Ouagadougou. The Sierra Leone reports on child soldiers, mass rape and amputees were generated by a diplomat pointing out how little attention the first two topics had received and putting me in touch with an NGO that dealt with both... The stories ended up on the front page, which shows editorial interest after I brought the stories to their attention".<sup>103</sup>

Merely because the editor-in-chief does not generally ask 'What have we got in the human rights field today?' does not mean this question is never posed. It comes up in subsidiary meetings, once a decision has been made to pursue a given story, for instance in Burundi. In other words, if the editor-in-chief determines that one thousand deaths in one night warrant immediate coverage, she delegates the story to a deputy (the foreign news editor, typically), who in turn confers with his staff to decide whether the story has a human rights angle, is a war-in-Africa story, is about the United Nations, or is a what-should-our-country-do report.

It is difficult to see why one angle should be favoured inherently rather than another. Essentially, the decision is a matter of the news editor's judgement in relation to three questions:

- what is the most substantial, important, or striking feature of the story?
- how does the story fit with what has been said recently about the region or the subject (if anything has been said)?
- what matters to the audience?

The response to these three questions usually determines the choice of angle. This is one reason why human rights angles are rarely the lead. If a foreign story is important enough to get into the news in the first place, there are then usually implications beyond the human rights of those who are its victims or subjects.

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<sup>103</sup> Interview, Washington, D.C., August 14, 2000.

A relatively banal story, spotted perhaps by a business editor, might concern a major trade agreement between the United States or the European Union and a developing country. From the business editor's point of view, the news angle will usually focus on a commercial issue. Pressure from interest groups, such as human rights NGOs, environmentalists, labour unions, government, or business associations, may add elements to the story. This has clearly been true of business coverage of international debt and the Bretton Woods institutions, of labour rights in the case of companies such as Nike, of tobacco companies and pharmaceutical companies. The so-called Sullivan Principles provide another example. These attempted to set social and labour standards for companies that were operating in South Africa during the apartheid period. Because South Africa became a *cause célèbre*, business stories not infrequently mentioned the Sullivan Principles and in some cases devoted space to the South African background in general, even when this had no direct relevance to the business story being covered. Even in these cases, however, neither South African politics nor the Sullivan Principles were the lead. In most instances, almost by definition, the lead was that an important or interesting deal had been made. Otherwise, why would the story be in the business news? Even where stories explicitly concerned Reverend Leon Sullivan or the reactions of foreign companies to the campaign he and others organised, United States editors generally led with economic or business news as much as, if not more often than, anti-apartheid news.

As a general rule, the media prefer to avoid stories in which there is more than one theme. If an editor in London has a choice between 'Sierra Leone Asks for British Troops' and 'Cabinet Expresses Concern On Human Rights Violations in Sierra Leone', there is little doubt what she will do. The important story, for her, is that British troops may be sent to Sierra Leone. There is, however, no reason why the cause of their going should not work itself into the story, and if human rights are a cause they will be mentioned, however briefly.

Fred Hiatt, Editorial Page Editor of *The Washington Post*, emphasised the different character and purposes of sections of a news organisation, particularly the editorial pages and the news pages. "Issues in the news are *not* thought of in terms of human rights categories *alone*, but rather in broader terms of democratic values. For instance, on today's page the lead editorial concerns Burma and the situation of Aung San Suu Kyi, the head of Burma's National League for Democracy. The [broader] issue in this country is whether it will have democracy. The reason for writing on Burma is that it is an important country and it would be better off with democracy. In this context, human rights issues, which are important, should be addressed"<sup>104</sup>

In summary, few editors for any major organisations in North America and Western Europe question that human rights should be a normal part of the editorial agenda. In this simple sense, the editorial environment is favourable to human rights issues. Within this consensus, however, there is a great deal of difference. Fred Hiatt insists that the promotion of human rights, *as such*, is not necessarily the newspaper's responsibility. "It is indeed an important function of an editorial page to speak out for human rights, and sometimes that will be sufficient grounds to write a piece. [But we] cannot think about human rights in a vacuum; we

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<sup>104</sup> Interview, Washington, D.C., September 2000.

have to at least consider other aspects of foreign policy.”<sup>105</sup> By contrast, John Sweeney, a leading feature writer at *The Observer* (London) takes a more committed approach: “I consider myself a human rights journalist. I tell stories people, including powerful people, do not want told... I must use my freedom [as a British journalist] to say things local journalists cannot say.”<sup>106</sup> The latter approach would be regarded as much less exceptional among journalists in many non-Western media, who are much more likely to identify themselves with a struggle for human rights that may only recently have given them the opportunity to practice their profession freely.

Stephen Schwartz, Washington Bureau Chief of *The Forward*, noted that professionalism means above all not lying, using all the tools of investigative reporting; and that it is possible to be committed while remaining fair. “When your side is winning, it’s a war; when your side is losing, it’s a human rights atrocity.” In terms of news, the point of view is less important, in Mr. Schwartz’s view, than the accuracy of the information.<sup>107</sup>

Western journalists, while they vary in their sense of personal commitment to human rights or to specific cases, do not object to the idea that there may be a human rights issue that needs to be promoted — if only by getting the facts out. This does not mean they believe their job is to promote human rights. As Marc Charney remarked, “As a human being, I am interested in human rights but not as a journalist. As an Associated Press foreign editor said, ‘Keep the mind clear’. This is the best advice you can give a foreign correspondent. Do not let feelings about what is going on, however strong your feelings, interfere with the transmitting of information.”<sup>108</sup>

The same variety of attitudes is to be found among journalists in the South, who often work in far more difficult circumstances materially as well as politically. Some are strongly committed to human rights, and find that professionally they are required in their work to take positions in relation to human rights. Nevertheless, the picture is not simpler than it is in American or European newsrooms.

When Augusto Pinochet was arrested in London in October 1998, the reaction of many in Europe was that this was a human rights story. Long delayed, justice was being served at last. In Chile, the issue was perceived differently. In the words of Alejandro Guiller of Chile’s Canal 7: “In Chile, the Pinochet case is a political problem whereas in Europe it is a problem of principles: Pinochet violated human rights and this could not go unpunished”.<sup>109</sup> For the Chilean media, human rights were not the central or overarching theme — and not only because they are subject to definite political constraints and influence. As Amaro Gómez Pablos, CNN’s correspondent in London, explained to Mirko Macari: “The Pinochet case is multifaceted and in over a year and half of coverage, from beginning to end, we tried to present it from all angles: Chile’s internal politics, the international law precedent, Chile’s

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<sup>105</sup> Note to the International Council on Human Rights Policy’s research team, September 6, 2000.

<sup>106</sup> Interview, London, December 5, 2000.

<sup>107</sup> Interview, Washington, D.C., November 2000.

<sup>108</sup> Interview, New York, September 12, 2000.

<sup>109</sup> Macari, “La Presentación por los Medios de Comunicación del Concepto de Jurisdicción universal”, p. 2.

bilateral relations, the history and context of the dictatorship, among others. It doesn't seem appropriate to me to extrapolate and consider any one aspect in isolation, unless you're a specialised medium — a law journal, for example. Nor do I think it would be objective journalism to talk about the arrest solely from a factual and linearly descriptive perspective.”<sup>110</sup> What he meant here was not that the facts should not be presented, but that the framework should be large enough to discuss only facts of the arrest and the indictment, but also the historical and international context behind the events.

To this extent, therefore, human rights themes are not likely to be given a special prominence as hooks or leads for important stories. Human rights references are more likely to work their way into the thread of stories. Whether they do so, and how they do so, will depend on how deeply editors want to go into the stories concerned. As Michel Tatu remarked, stories are written with a consideration for human rights that is more pronounced than in the recent past.<sup>111</sup> Human rights issues, connected or not to larger political questions, are often selected for reporting and continuing coverage. Human rights *are* seen as a potential element in a wide range of different types of stories to a degree that was not the case in the past. There is no doubt that this relates fairly directly to the increased use of human rights language in diplomatic dealings. Thus, for example, a piece on the political future of a country would be very likely to include discussion of human rights issues. This would not so much reflect a partisan stance with regard to rights as a judgement that a poor human rights record might lead to instability. This reverses the previous implicit but common assumption that human rights violations might be a necessary price to pay for political stability. Discussion of a country's economy might well include human rights references for the same reason. To illustrate this, most think pieces on the South African economy in 2000-01 have included references to human rights abuses in Zimbabwe and their effect on regional stability, investor confidence and the South African currency.

In sum, our imagined waking journalist, catching up with what is happening after a few hours' rest, and heading for the morning editorial conference, might be inclined to agree with Carl Gershman's assessment. Interviewed for this report, the President of the United States National Endowment for Democracy said that practically everything in politics these days touches on human rights. “We are living through an age when democracy and human rights are on the agenda, everywhere. People are demanding their rights. People are demanding governments based on democratic and legal principles. So naturally, much foreign news reporting is concerned with human rights issues.”<sup>112</sup> If what he meant is that many stories touch on human rights, then much evidence supports him.

Yet few stories are angled and edited from a human rights perspective. In the next chapter, we discuss how stories are in fact covered, and look at forms of bias or miscommunication that affect the ability of reports to communicate human rights information clearly and fairly.

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Interview, Paris, October 6, 2000.

<sup>112</sup> Interview, Washington, D.C., August 16, 2000.

## V. BIAS, ADVOCACY AND PRECISION

Political, organisational, cultural and linguistic biases have an impact on what stories and events are selected — in human rights coverage as on other subjects. At their most benign, biases may be found in the pattern of coverage. Spanish media may cover the situation in Latin America more extensively than other areas. At its most extreme and pernicious, bias is to be found in the discriminatory and violent propaganda broadcast in Nazi Germany or by Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines during the genocidal killings in Rwanda in 1994.

The notion of independence is central to the values of journalism and to its fundamental mission, which is to inform the public in the most complete, objectively accurate and fair manner possible. In this sense, the struggle with bias is as old as the profession itself; it is unavoidable and unending. From self-censorship to stereotyping, to the arguments for and against campaigning journalism, the subject raises a host of sensitive and complex issues. In this chapter, we look at some of the ways in which forms of bias — conscious and unconscious, more or less pernicious — impede the quality of reporting of human rights, and sometimes lead the media to misrepresent or marginalise issues that (on professional criteria) they ought to cover more fully or accurately.

The language of this debate is, of course, somewhat slippery. Terms such as ‘bias’ and ‘balance’, ‘impartial’, ‘objective’ and ‘truthful’ are bandied about, often interchangeably. An unbalanced story is not necessarily a biased one. ‘Balance’ simply refers to whether both sides are reflected in a story. A story that only reports the government’s viewpoint, or that of a human rights organisation, is not *ipso facto* biased. On the other hand, lack of balance over a period of time would suggest bias.

Similarly ‘impartial’, ‘objective’ and ‘truthful’ do not have the same meaning. ‘Impartiality’ refers to a lack of commitment to a given viewpoint. Few journalists would claim to be impartial between the victims and perpetrators of human rights violations. But whether partisan or not, a journalist may strive to be objective, although the more honest perhaps recognise that this a chimera. They would certainly aim to be truthful (which in turn is not the same as ‘accurate’), meaning that they would report events with precision *to the best of their ability*. Committed or partisan reporting is not the same as mendacious reporting. George Orwell never suggested in his reporting on the Spanish Civil War that he was anything but a supporter of the Spanish Republic, and his reporting acknowledged that he aided, as activist and soldier, this side. Yet he was truthful, and part of the reason is the openness with which he acknowledged the limits of his objectivity.

It is worth noting here that certain media will be openly partisan (though often without acknowledging the fact). They have chosen their camp, they want one side to prevail. Their reporting and editorial policies will reflect this. For instance, in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, the US television network Fox News Channel came to

incarnate this school of thought, by adopting the views of the US Administration and criticising media positions that sought to report in a more independent or more critical manner.<sup>113</sup>

A final distinction might be made before we address some of the issues in more detail. If bias is inaccurate or distorted reporting, and if reporting necessarily involves selection, what difference is there between justified and unjustified omission? Jean-Paul Marthoz argued that professional (rather than ethical) dereliction occurs when the omission of information (for example, about human rights) not only lessens the completeness of coverage but prevents those who receive the information from understanding what it means.<sup>114</sup>

### **Institutional and political bias**

The media do not keep us informed of all the injustices that occur. Could they do so? Given the advances of technology, this is not a frivolous question. Yet most people want news that is accessible, that they can readily use. By this standard, the media must be selective. A newspaper or magazine has only so many pages, a television channel or radio station only so much broadcast time. If people ought to know about rights, they ought to know about many other things as well. In any event, they can only spend a certain amount of time informing themselves about what does not directly concern them. It also has to be said that many people only want to know so much, even about matters that directly affect their interests.

In practice, therefore, regular and detailed coverage over a prolonged period rarely occurs, although it is clearly important to the quality of news reporting and the consistency with which long-term issues are addressed. As a practical matter, regular coverage is in fact nearly impossible to maintain for *institutional* as well as *political* reasons. When a big story occurs, the institutional bias of the news organisation is to treat it for its geopolitical, international affairs value. For example, if there is an important flare up of the fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the normal bias of a news organisation is to ask what this means in terms of who is ‘winning’ the Congo war(s). After all that has happened in Central Africa in the 1990s, reports that combatants are violating human rights or committing war crimes cause no surprise in the newsrooms. Most editors would say that, although these issues are worth mentioning, the key lead must be the balance of power in the DRC, and the secondary leads should be the effect of fresh fighting on peace efforts.

Suppose, too, that an editor or producer decides that a military engagement between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lanka military requires a mention (fifty words or sixty seconds). It would again be difficult to place the human rights violations of either side in such a short item. This institutional bias is difficult to overcome; indeed, there are sound institutional reasons for it. For news editors, reports are based on a hierarchy of facts. ‘What happened first?’ What happened first is that fighting flared. If, within the constraints of space or broadcast time, there

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<sup>113</sup> Jim Rutenberg, “TV Networks Thirsts for U.S. Revenge on Bin Laden – Fox Anchors and Correspondents wave the Flag Openly”, *The International Herald Tribune*, December 5, 2001, p. 1.

<sup>114</sup> Interview, Washington, D.C., September 2000.

is room to list the effects of the fighting, human rights issues (and others) will get into the story.

Within news organisations there are departments. The hierarchy of facts may well be different for the editorial page and the news pages of a newspaper. On the editorial page, the question may be ‘What does what happened *mean*?’ From this perspective, an editor may well say, in line with the news editor, that what happened in the DRC in the last twenty-four hours was a reversal of the strategic situation and that requires comment. She is just as likely to say that the ‘deep meaning’ is that there is ‘no end in sight’ for the suffering of the ‘captive populations’ and *that* is what should be said in the lead editorial — an oblique reference to a human rights issue.

Political bias plays a role to the extent that news organisations reflect (whether or not they agree with them) the interests and perception of the country in which they are located. In relation to the conflict in the DRC, for example, the United States’ Department of State wanted the 1998 Lusaka peace accords to be successful. The main story for the United States media at the time was therefore whether American objectives were furthered or hampered by events. Political bias can be complicated further by the political *beliefs* of editors. In relation to the same crisis, for example, they may think that the United States is responsible because it supported the régime of Paul Kagamé in Rwanda or condoned the assassination of Patrice Lumumba forty years earlier; or France because it supported the régime of Juvenal Habyarimana that preceded Kagamé’s; or that Belgium is fundamentally to blame for having colonised and decolonised the region so badly. However, editors’ personal attitudes tend to influence the choice of news leads less than general political bias simply because, in the end, news organisations care first about the interests of their primary audiences at home.

Editors face other constraints that generate imperfect or biased coverage. There may be agreement that the Russian army violated human rights in its 1994 and 1999-2002 campaigns in Chechnya, but little detailed reporting has taken place and virtually no effort has been made (outside Russia) to cover or investigate violations by Chechnyan forces. This partly reflects difficulties of access. The conflict in Algeria since the late 1980s presents similar problems. It is clear that armed groups have committed numerous exactions and human rights violations against the civilian population — and that the government’s security forces have also committed abuses and crimes. Investigating and reporting these has proved difficult.

Absorbing change takes time and can be another factor in institutional bias. In post-apartheid South Africa, during the 1990s, newsrooms and editorial offices in South African media outlets adapted to the country’s social and political realities. The traditional hierarchical arrangements in the editorial offices were reconsidered and structures reconfigured. Editorial conferences became more inclusive, as management styles took account of a different cultural mix of staff, and debate and discussion became the rule. A novel (gender- and race-sensitive) way of reporting on the country’s affairs was born. In short, media managers began to operate within a new rights-based environment. Though there has been some undeniable progress, this transformation was difficult. On one hand, racial tensions and animosity persist, and, on the

other, racist material and racial stereotypes continue to slip through because the mechanisms of editorial meetings fail to detect them.<sup>115</sup>

A further complication is that bias in the media may lead to suppression, real or alleged, of press freedoms. Proponents of press freedom must raise continually this important issue. Fair and accurate media have an obligation to report fairly and accurately on the laws of the countries they cover. Libel laws are not the same everywhere, and security or sedition laws, which affect freedom of speech, exist in many countries. Sometimes it is clear that a suppressed news organisation or journalist has violated the law in force in that country, and sometimes it is clear that laws are unjust or misapplied, or applied arbitrarily, to impose censorship. While easily stated, unlike egregious human rights violations, such 'legalised' abuse may not always be easy to recognise in practice, and may not be easy to stop.

The weekly *La Nation* of Algiers went out of business in 1997, according to its editors because its reporting on human rights abuses by armed groups and by government security forces displeased powerful individuals in the government, who arranged to starve the newspaper of advertising revenue and to bring it legal problems it was not rich enough to deal with. Some observers said *La Nation* may have gone out of business because it failed as a business. Newspapers in Algiers often alleged pressures tending to suppress freedom of the press. These pressures (which allegedly culminated in late 1999) included financial pressure by the state printing establishment, state suppliers of publicity and supplies, legal procedures against reporters and editors, and physical intimidation. Presumably — though not certainly — these problems had their origin as the media moved to criticise the government or powerful elements connected to it. From the media's point of view, the issue was not bias, but reporting. Reporting something which the government does, and which is unattractive, does not mean the publisher or editor is biased.

The pro-régime bias of Serbia's state-run media was so pronounced that NATO powers decided unilaterally that these could no longer be seen as independent media, but treated as part of the régime's propaganda apparatus. This assessment was used to justify the April 23, 1999 bombing of Serb television headquarters in Belgrade.<sup>116</sup> NATO claimed that it was legally justified in taking this action. The Serbian government claimed the attack (which killed several civilian technical staff) was a war crime — and some independent commentators were minded to agree.<sup>117</sup> This action has several implications, aside from the legal ones, which will be adjudicated in time. The action echoes the failure of the international community to take action to silence the Radio Libre des Mille Collines in Rwanda, which was broadcasting propaganda for the genocide in 1994. Under the Genocide Convention, governments were required arguably, not empowered merely, to take action such as jamming the broadcasts. Signal

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<sup>115</sup> South African Human Rights Commission, *Faultlines — Inquiry into Racism in the Media*, Johannesburg August 2000, pp. 27–28. The report can be accessed at [www.polity.org.za/govdocs/reports/hrc/racism-media-00.pdf](http://www.polity.org.za/govdocs/reports/hrc/racism-media-00.pdf)

<sup>116</sup> Bill Glauber, "Serbian State Television Back on the Air Hours after Deadly Missile Attack", *The Baltimore Sun*, May 16, 1999, p. 21A.

<sup>117</sup> See, for example, Amnesty International, "*'Collateral Damage' or Unlawful Killings? — Violations of the Laws of War by NATO during Operation Allied Force*", London, June 7, 2000.

distortion would also have been an option with Serb television, although there is no indication that NATO considered it.

An even broader question concerns the extent to which such actions may make all journalists more vulnerable to the easy charge that they are propagandists for their governments and therefore legitimate targets in war. Following NATO's logic, what is the essential difference between the Serbian media and Voice of America or the BBC World Service, since both are also funded by government and may be said to support their governments' objectives?

The examples above suggest an obvious fact — that in newsrooms, as elsewhere, people disagree with one another. While they may concur on the definition of human rights at an abstract level, consensus breaks down as soon as political (let alone warrior) passions are released. This is true everywhere. Contradictory political attitudes are reflected in the media of countries and regions directly concerned, the international media and media elsewhere.

It may be agreed widely that human rights should be on the editorial agenda, but that does not mean that all will agree that human rights violations by Kosovan nationalists or Serb nationalists or NATO forces should be included. There may be a consensus that human rights abuses in Iraq by the regime of President Saddam Hussein deserve coverage, but editors might not want to include abuses by Kurdish militants — let alone accept that civilian suffering resulting from the economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council after the 1991 Gulf War should be covered regularly or reported in terms as violations of human rights. Issues of institutional bias need to be considered, therefore, but there are also issues of judgement. In many of these cases, the obligation is fairness, or lack of it. It is perhaps not necessary (and no doubt it is often impossible) to ask journalists to suspend their biases: this would seem close to a request to suspend their moral and political judgement. On the other hand, editors should consider different points of view, and reflect fairly and precisely those points of view in their reporting taken as a whole.

## **Propaganda and distortion**

In discussing Kosovo above, we came to the edge of true bias — reporting that not only fails to be independent but is flagrantly and grossly inaccurate, or consciously distorted, under the influence of political or other motives.

Governments and other authorities have often used human rights to manipulate or inflame public opinion, particularly when they are involved in wars. In recent years, Western governments have developed complex communication strategies which they recognise are an important element of military planning in war, and political management in peace. Governments sometimes draw on the assistance of influential public relations firms. They take legal advice to check the language of their news and policy statements against the requirements of international human rights law. In numerous ways, the interface between the government and media still relies on ancient traditions of personal communication between politicians and the press corps, but in many other ways both sides have transformed themselves. Journalists

need to be more watchful than ever about the risks of being politically manipulated by governments at home as well as abroad.

Numerous controversies about news manipulation could be cited. In relation to some of them, the facts may be contested — the point is that they reveal the slipperiness of information in this domain. For example, during the second Gulf War (1990-91) the American government was notoriously alleged to have helped prepare false testimonies (on atrocities allegedly committed by Iraqi soldiers in Kuwait) to the US Congress with the aid of the firm Hill & Knowlton. In the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, the U.S. government set up, and in the face of widespread opposition closed, an Office of Strategic Influence at the Pentagon, whose mission was to plant stories (including false ones) and influence journalists (at home, and abroad).<sup>118</sup>

In the current Arab-Israeli conflict, both Israeli and Palestinian parties have used the media and their instant news process to win communication battles abroad.<sup>119</sup>

Use of language has always been important, of course, to propaganda. However, careful use of technical language is perhaps an emerging feature of news manipulation. During the 1994 Rwanda crisis, when the United States and other countries were reluctant to become involved, the United States Department of State insisted on referring to ‘genocidal incidents’ in Rwanda, rather than to ‘genocide’ because the second term would have triggered a legal obligation to act whereas the first formula did not. Similarly, when speaking of violent incidents during the Israel-Palestine conflict, Israeli spokesmen have consistently used language of ‘security’ or ‘self-defence’, while their Palestinian counterparts have referred to ‘occupation’ precisely because these words trigger legal implications that justify and set limits on use of violence.

These examples highlight both the media’s central obligations to independent and non-partisan observers when such conflicts occur — and the risk they face, if they fail to understand and explain and use accurately such technical policy language, they will be considered partisan and dragged into the conflict as players. In fact, of course, this has happened frequently.

Following the beginning of the Al Aqsa Intifada in the fall of 2000, Robert Fisk of *The Independent* noted that

the murder of Israelis receives much coverage. The killing of two Israeli soldiers in Ramallah police station was filmed only through the courage of one camera crew. The Palestinians did their best to seize all picture coverage of the atrocity. Yet when an Israeli helicopter pilot fired an air-to-ground missile at a low-ranking Palestinian militiaman on Friday [November 10], it also killed two totally innocent middle-aged Palestinian women. In its initial reports, BBC World Service Television reported that. Yet by yesterday morning [November 13], the BBC was able to refer to the ‘assassination’ of the Palestinian without mentioning the two innocent

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<sup>118</sup> Eric Schmitt and James Dao, “A ‘Damaged’ Information Office is Declared Closed by Rumsfeld,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 2002.

<sup>119</sup> This, however, is part of the context — and always has been. Media organisations cannot be blamed if efforts are made to instrumentalise them. What they do to remain independent is what matters.

women — fifty-eight-year old Azizi Gubran and fifty-five-year-old Arachme Shaheen — blown to pieces by the same Israeli missile. They had been airbrushed from the story.<sup>120</sup>

Acknowledging the limits of what can be said in a 400-word story, Brian Whitaker pointed out that the BBC tended to portray this conflict as a series of Palestinian actions and Israeli responses. This, he noted, builds up through constant repetition into a misleading picture of the overall conflict. The Israeli occupation lies at the root of the conflict, and yet, more often than not, journalists fail to remind their readers of this — or that the occupation is illegal under UN Security Council resolutions.<sup>121</sup> Reports rarely mention, either, that Israel does not recognise the Fourth Geneva Convention in the Palestinian territories and frequently breaches the convention in its treatment of Palestinian civilians.<sup>122</sup> Nor does most coverage explain the significance of Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories, most of which are considered to be illegal under international law.<sup>123</sup>

In general, North American and Western European media coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict, in particular, suffers from what Robert Fisk has called ‘flabby journalism’. Fisk points out that by submitting to one party’s phraseology (in this case Israel’s), the BBC, CNN and Reuters, among others, have been guilty not just of journalistic error but of factual inaccuracies — and in so doing, have essentially reduced the truth.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, in August 2001, BBC officials in London banned their staff from referring to Israel’s policy of murdering its guerrilla opponents as ‘assassination’. The Corporation’s reporters were instructed to use Israel’s formula, ‘targeted killings’, instead.<sup>125</sup> Journalistic standards are not met when coverage is cryptic, ambiguous or timid — let alone consciously distorted.

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<sup>120</sup> Robert Fisk, “The Biased Reporting that Makes Killing Acceptable”, *The Independent*, November 14, 2000.

<sup>121</sup> Brian Whitaker, “Israel Wins War of Words: The Dangers of Sloppy Journalism”, *The Guardian*, April 9, 2001. Of 1,669 stories published by all British national dailies, and the *London Evening Standard*, for a period of twelve months in 2000–2001, forty-nine contained the formula ‘occupied West Bank’ and 513 featured the word ‘occupied’ or ‘occupation’. In other words, 1,107 stories (sixty-six per cent of the total) discussed the West Bank without making mention of a central fact.

<sup>122</sup> Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, adopted on August 12, 1949. Article 3 (1) stipulates that “persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed hors de combat by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause, shall in all circumstances be treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria”. Article 147 lists the grave breaches as “those involving any of the following acts, if committed against persons or property protected by the present Convention: willful killing, torture or inhuman treatment, including biological experiments, willfully causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health, unlawful deportation or transfer or unlawful confinement of a protected person, compelling a protected person to serve in the forces of a hostile Power, or willfully depriving a protected person of the rights of fair and regular trial prescribed in the present Convention, taking of hostages and extensive destruction and appropriation of property, not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly”.

<sup>123</sup> The status of the settlers themselves is the subject of a separate legal controversy, which concerns whether they should be considered to be civilians (with appropriate protection under international law) or combatants, and therefore legitimate military targets, as many Palestinians claim.

<sup>124</sup> Robert Fisk, “When Journalists Forget that Murder is Murder”, *The Independent*, August 18, 2001.

<sup>125</sup> Robert Fisk, “BBC Staff are told not to Call Israeli Killings ‘Assassination’”, *The Independent*, August 4, 2001.

In these terms, it should be recognised that coverage of Arab-Israeli conflicts by Western media has generally had a pro-Israeli bias. This is true of many individual news pieces, of coverage taken as a whole and of contextual presentation.

In similar ways, conscious and unconscious bias characterises Western media coverage and analysis of the African continent. In general, that coverage is characterised by

- **reductionism** — Discussion of Africa tends to be monolithic with the variety and complexity of the fifty-three nation continent being reduced to current situations in particular corners of the region — the cultural, economic, social and political differences between North Africa, East Africa, West Africa, Central Africa and Southern Africa are seldom mentioned. Sweeping generalisations, rather than articulated and precise reporting, are the order of the day.
- **prejudice and selectivity** — Colonial mindsets continue to provide the dominant frame of reference.<sup>126</sup> Too much analysis is in terms of Anglophone, Francophone or Lusophone countries, and the views of foreign experts working outside the continent are often presented as if they were scientific, while local views are qualified. The point of view of Africans is surprisingly underrepresented in stories about Africa.
- **sensationalism and negativism** — Human rights stories that make the newsroom cut tend to be grim and depicted graphically. Failure (of states, of individuals, of societies) and despair are emphasised regularly. Stories about ‘Africa’s endless/dreadful wars’<sup>127</sup> outnumber by far any reporting on success stories (such as the peaceful transitions to democracy in Ghana, Benin, Mali and Senegal). Legitimate reports of bad news often fail to explain causes, and often attribute developments to inherent African characteristics.

As John Matshikiza notes:

The Western media continues to shore up the myths that justify the continued denigration of the African continent....The media exert great power and influence over the minds of governments, investors and the general public alike. In continuing to spread the bad news, and failing to have eyes to recognise the good news when it is there, the media play a potent role in maintaining ancient prejudices — and these prejudices can hardly be overstressed, considering the role they have played in allowing Northern audiences to turn a blind eye to the ravages committed against the continent and its people, from slavery to apartheid to the ongoing, long-range economic control of the post-colonial era.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Recent research in the United Kingdom has concluded that some explanations present in reporting are partial and informed by post-colonial beliefs. See “Media Coverage of the Developing World: Understanding and Interest”, article on research conducted jointly by the Department for International Development, the BBC and the Glasgow Media Group. The article can be viewed at [www.gla.ac.uk/departments/sociology/debate.html](http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/sociology/debate.html)

<sup>127</sup> Epitomised by the British weekly magazine *The Economist’s* May 13–19, 2000 issue entitled “The Hopeless Continent”. As John Matshikiza points out, “imagine if the ‘the world’, in *The Economist’s* phrase, were to give up on the entire European continent on the basis of intractable problems of Bosnia and Macedonia. Or if Latin America were to be junked on the basis of ongoing drug wars in Colombia”. See John Matshikiza, “Framing Africa – How the Western Media Maintains Ancient Prejudices”, *Rhodes Journalism Review*, 20, August 2001, p. 13.

<sup>128</sup> See Matshikiza, 2001.

For many years, issues related to Muslims and Arabs have been presented in the Western media with a noticeable (though varying) bias. The dominant stereotype of Muslims portrays them as backward, fanatical and unstable, with a constant propensity to violence. The Arab-Israeli conflict is a case in point. As Edward Said has remarked, unspoken assumptions find their way into the coverage and lead to a dehumanised portrayal of Palestinians, variously “including anti-Semitism, suicidal rage to get on television, sacrificing children as martyrs [and an] ancient hatred of the Jews”.<sup>129</sup> Similar stereotypes were reinforced during coverage of the second Gulf War in 1990-91.

Coverage following the attacks in September 2001 on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington provided further examples. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the US government and its allies went to some pains to stress that their ‘war’ was not against Islam, but only against ‘terrorists’. Yet this distinction was contradicted on a daily basis in most coverage of the Islamic world. This characteristically assumed that all negative behaviour by Muslims is consistent with their religious and cultural tradition, whereas ‘moderate’ and reasonable (that is, pro-Western) behaviour was seen as embracing modernity — this being *ipso facto* non-Muslim. It is instructive to compare, for example, media coverage of the behaviour of Christian ‘fundamentalists’, such as the Branch Davidians sect in Waco, Texas or the parties to the conflict in Northern Ireland. It would be rare indeed to find media reports suggesting that, by murdering each other on a regular basis, Protestants and Catholics were acting in accordance with the values and traditions of their faiths. Such violence is seen as a puzzling departure from Christian norms. (In the British media, this is often explained with resort to yet another stereotype: both sides are Irish and therefore inherently violent and unstable.) In the Western media, it is possible to say things about Islam that would be unacceptable if they were said about Buddhism or Christianity or Judaism.<sup>130</sup>

Naturally, good quality Western coverage of Islam and the Arab world, and African affairs, can be found. Nor are stereotypes confined to these areas. Portrayal of Asian societies, in particular, often suffers from similar weaknesses. The point is that when reporting fails to resist stereotypes, and does not challenge such simplicities and prejudices, it contradicts core values of responsible journalism, and impoverishes the communication of information, which may be of vital importance. Arguably, this was a problem for the media when the US Administration declared war on international terrorism after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

### **Naming: language and stance**

We have already noted above the importance of language, and that journalists need to understand the technical legal significance of terms used by governments and other authorities. “The fact that [most] reports from Rwanda carried references to hostile tribes [or ‘ethnic’ groups] coloured readers’ perception and influenced their reaction [to the genocide in 1994].

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<sup>129</sup> Edward Said, “America’s Last Taboo”, *New Left Review* 6, November–December 2000, pp. 45–53.

<sup>130</sup> Edward Said, *Covering Islam — How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, New York: Vintage, 1997, p. 140.

The reports from Kashmir and India's Northeast always refer to 'militants', 'terrorists', and 'secessionists' and these expressions, used without verification, create prejudice against victims of state terrorism".<sup>131</sup> Many media adopted without question the tag 'war against terrorism' in relation to the 2001 US attacks on Afghanistan. Yet a moment's reflection shows that the phrase is so imprecise as to be meaningless. The 'war' is in a formal sense an undeclared one. It seems to bear more relation to symbolic wars such as the 'war against drugs' or the 'war against crime'. For journalists to use such terminology is an abdication of their professional responsibility to report and explain.

Terminology is therefore a key issue to which audiences are not indifferent. The media's job is to report what people say on each side of a controversy, because the controversy is (part of) the story. Who chooses the definitions? Should the media confine themselves to reporting and explaining the definitions that interested parties and outside observers are using? When time permits, news organisations do this, under the rubric 'news analysis' or 'background brief'. However, during a breaking story they sometimes do not have time, and must make choices that will displease some of their audience. Is the Israel-Palestine conflict a 'war'? Is the strife in Algeria a 'civil war', 'banditry' or 'state repression'? Was the September 11, 1973 military coup in Chile an 'armed insurrection' or a 'murderous repression'? For legal reasons, indeed, as well as to give audiences the facts, these are vital matters. News organisations must choose terms carefully and explain their origins and meaning.

Dealing adequately with the past raises further questions, as noted above in reference to retrospective examinations of dramatic events — sometimes due to legal developments. Between 1954 and 1962, the French army in Algeria committed *prima facie* war crimes. Shooting, raping and torturing suspects is a crime, and in the context of an armed conflict it is a war crime. One of the reasons the French government refused to call its 'measures to restore order' a 'war' until 1999 was precisely to avoid the risk that senior officials might be charged with war crimes. Likewise, the United Kingdom government refused to refer to its military campaign against the Irish Republican Army as a 'war' partly in order to prevent Irish republican prisoners in British jails from claiming certain privileges.

The term 'war' has a specific meaning, in diplomatic and legal terms; and separate bodies of law apply to the conduct of governments in war and peace. Yet, when the campaign waged against Al Qaeda was described by the United States and other governments as a 'war', the term was accepted generally and used by much of the media uncritically. This has potentially serious implications in several areas. The media did not begin to attract consistent attention, however, until the United States refused to describe detainees it considered to be Al Qaeda militants as prisoners of war and began moving them from Afghanistan to the Guantanamo military base in Cuba that was, in effect, not clearly within US or under international legal jurisdiction. Even after weeks of pressure from its allies the United States Administration refused to grant these detainees the full protection to which prisoners of war are entitled under the Geneva Conventions.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibn Abdur Rehman, Note to the research team, May 2001.

It is for the media to use clear terms and explain them, and to try to avoid the loaded terminology employed by those in power — not reinforce loose language in their reporting. The conclusion these remarks point toward is that *the media cannot avoid partaking of the bias of the actors in a human rights violation unless they clearly explain the facts, in context, with precision.*

One nevertheless hesitates to affirm this, because it appears so obviously to be idealistic — a case of wishing the best, rather than working with what is possible realistically. In extreme situations, the media are unlikely to be able to report either as objectively as this standard requires, or to have the information that would enable it to do so. Is it conceivable to expect that a story datelined London during World War II might have begun: ‘Bomber Command violated conventions to which the United Kingdom has been party since 1902 when it destroyed large tracts of the city of Dresden yesterday, advancing Allied military goals’?

Arguably, the nearest thing to an answer is that the media have an obligation to report as accurately as they can from where they are standing (physically, morally and politically), while clearly stating their position. In practice, this is often what happens. It was George Orwell’s stance in his reporting on the Spanish war.<sup>132</sup> From this perspective, it would clearly not have been wrong morally or professionally to report from behind German lines in World War II. Still, reporters should do their utmost to make clear the constraints under which they report. If a journalist knows that she is merely transmitting information that she cannot verify, she should make this clear. Should she desist entirely from transmitting that information, which may be extremely one-sided?

Should one go further, and argue that journalists should familiarise themselves with human rights law, in order to avoid the risk that, by omission or ignorance, they might misinform? Gbolahan Gbadamosi, Chairman of the Nigerian Union of Journalists, replies that good judgement on the part of journalists is important and rests on adequate training and relevant experience. Therefore, it should be cultivated by news organisations.<sup>133</sup> The evolution of international human rights law, its more explicit use as a point of reference by governments, and the growing complexity of many of the reporting issues that arise, do suggest that the media have to think seriously about the way they cover some issues, and about their responsibility to do so accurately. This may require new forms of training for journalists.

Some training institutions have begun to take note of this point. The Institute for the Advancement of Journalism in Johannesburg, for example, has produced a thoughtful manual on human rights reporting aimed at media practitioners across Southern Africa. It is a relatively straightforward process for training bodies to produce such material and courses, in conjunction with human rights organisations and academic specialists. The initiative, however, will always have to come from the management of media organisations, since it is they who pay for the courses, both through fees and by releasing staff to attend courses. For this area of training to take off, an indication of commitment is needed from major media organisations.

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<sup>132</sup> George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, London: Secker and Warburg 1938, p. 58. Orwell’s strategy is not a safe one, of course: discarding the prejudices of a majority does not guarantee that the prejudices of the minority are more truthful or that the majority view is in fact false.

<sup>133</sup> Note to the International Council on Human Rights Policy’s research team, May 28, 2001.

## Polarisation and conflict

Independence is particularly difficult to achieve when journalists are reporting a conflict in which their own country is a party. For several reasons, the usual attitude in the media during the initial stages of a conflict is that human rights violations are being committed by the other side. The reasons include:

- the proximity of the reporter to *sources* that have an interest in representing the situation this way,
- outright  *censorship*, preventing the reporter from saying what he saw on his own side,
- *danger*, preventing the reporter from travelling to the other side and reporting from there, and
- outright *bias*, that is to say a feeling that one is with one side, no matter what.

These reasons and others apply differently to different media. For example, in the case of Burundian reporters trying to cover the human rights violations (which usually involved massacres) that characterised the civil war in their country, all four reasons applied. Many Burundian reporters have been murdered for trying to report objectively, and most of their principal sources (army authorities on one hand and victims on the other) could not be assumed to be objective. The Studio Ijambo correspondent Adrien Sindayigaya recalls one example of the kind of problem he faced:

On the night of October 30, 1998, at least one hundred civilians were killed by soldiers of the Tutsi-majority army in the town of Mutambu, located thirty kilometres from Bujumbura. This took place after fighters of the National Liberation Front (FNL), the armed branch of the opposition PALIPEHUTU, had attacked a camp sheltering displaced people, mainly Tutsis. According to eyewitnesses, “FNL fighters killed six people, wounded one and stole five cows. A few days later, soldiers came and killed many people in broad daylight at Rutovu, a hill about a half a mile from the town”. During the ten days following this massacre, no radio station or newspaper said a word on it — though some were aware of it. When rumours of this massacre reached Studio Ijambo, a group of Hutu and Tutsi journalists took a vehicle and headed for the reported site of the massacre. The trip was not easy because, under the pretence of insecurity, the army prevented the journalists from reaching the area. Human rights observers were also prevented from going to the scene. Eventually, the Studio Ijambo team reached the place after much persistence. After seeing some bodies and talking to survivors, such as local officials and soldiers who wished to hide their identity for safety reasons, journalists came to the conclusion that more than one hundred civilians had been killed by the national army.<sup>134</sup>

Yamila Milovic, Production Manager at Radio Mir in Sarajevo, noted that Serb authorities restricted many foreign correspondents to the Hyatt Hotel in Belgrade during the NATO-Serbia war, and soon afterwards expelled many of them.<sup>135</sup> Both measures complicated

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<sup>134</sup> Sindayigaya, “The Media and Human Rights in Burundi”, p.6.

<sup>135</sup> Yamila Milovic, “The Media and Human Rights in Kosovo”, paper presented at the review seminar organised by the International Council on Human Rights Policy, Geneva, November 27–28, 2000, p.3.

coverage. Correspondents travelling with NATO forces (not unlike correspondents travelling in 'pool' teams with the United States-led anti-Iraq coalition during the 1991 Gulf War) were also granted 'selective' or 'filtered' access, a constraint often reinforced by their sense that the side they were covering was in the right. James Fallows commented that, in conditions of war, what he calls the normal, decent, patriotic and human emotions become frayed. To illustrate this, CBS correspondent Mike Wallace stated that he would 'go on shooting' a scene in which American soldiers were being killed even if he were in a position to intervene and save their lives.<sup>136</sup>

As conflicts continue, the bias with which journalists perhaps started out tends to be challenged. The challenge itself may reveal a different set of biases, but at least it reflects a professional attitude in that *scepticism* reasserts itself. This is not to be confused with the professional cynicism for which Fallows criticises Wallace. Scepticism is the basic reportorial attitude, or should be. How do I know anything? Do I trust my sources? What are other sources saying? These are normal and necessary professional questions.

In a classic example, the French media began, late in the Algerian war (1954-1962) to question the official version of events that imputed atrocities only to the Algerian independence movement. Likewise, the Algerian media, after at first reacting to the 1990s Islamist insurrection in Algeria by accepting as its premise the official version of events — all atrocities are committed by the 'terrorists' — began to doubt it. The questioning landed several journalists in court.

Another example may be the case of the United States war in Vietnam, which as a practical matter began in the late 1950s. It took several years — until 1967 — before the American media began to report critically on the way the US and South Vietnamese troops were waging their side of the war. This example is interesting because rapidly the 'geographic bias' of the US media was almost entirely reversed substantial numbers of reporters, both in the mainstream press and in more marginal media, questioned whether the US was fighting a 'moral' war. They questioned this at times explicitly, and at times simply by the way they covered events. (Showing a US soldier burning down a civilian dwelling, for example — without contextual explanation — strongly suggested someone's human rights were being violated, namely the homeowner's.) In this case, one might say a pro-American bias was replaced by an anti-American bias. This was, in fact, more pronounced in the non-US Western press, and within the US press it was more pronounced in the editorial centres than in the field. Although reporting from the field did not change profoundly, with the change of editorial bias there came a change of emphasis and therefore a change of 'angle', and this had an overall impact on how the war was covered. From the perspective of human rights coverage, the accent on 'communist terrorism' against villagers was replaced (in emphasis) by the stress on 'brutality' against villagers by United States and South Vietnamese army units.

All the issues of geographic bias may be overcome, though not necessarily all at the same time. In the end, we learned that atrocities and human rights violations were indeed committed by American forces in Vietnam, by French forces in Algeria — and, in both cases, by their

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<sup>136</sup> Fallows, 1997.

enemies as well — and that the degree and consistency of these atrocities did not change much over time, except in terms of opportunities. In the Balkan wars at both ends of the twentieth century, atrocities were part of the war-fighting styles of all sides. It is for historians, not reporters, to try to integrate these war events into the larger history of the wars in question. How reporters overcome their biases in wartime (and as we see from these examples, their biases are not necessarily, in the long run, on their country's side) is the less important issue here. The main question is: *Can reporters provide accurate information and be consistent in the context of the unfolding story?*

As Michel Tatu, veteran correspondent (in Moscow and Washington) and editorialist for *Le Monde* noted: “The use of human rights in covering a situation can be selective, revealing our biases, for example: Serbs bad, Albanians good. It can be a form of cultural imperialism if we project it on Third World countries when we do not understand their situation well.”<sup>137</sup> The point is well made, but if journalists have a good understanding of human rights standards it may help them to avoid the biases of selective atrocity reporting. Human rights and humanitarian law, taken together, provide a set of verifiable standards against which all parties can be measured, without consideration of the rights and wrongs of the war or cause in question. A fuller understanding of these standards would result in less bias, not more.

Ignorance is therefore an issue — a cause of bias. In this context, some issues are simply not *perceived* — or not perceived, as they could be, in terms of human rights issues. In other cases, rights that are clearly understood as rights are not reported because they are not event-driven, they are dull to describe and technically complex. *The Wall Street Journal's* William McGurn noted one example — the issue of property rights. This is relevant in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, but he was thinking of China. “People in China are reclaiming their [property] rights, but this is overlooked by many in this [news] business because of the focus on political rights”<sup>138</sup>.

Examples could be multiplied of the failure of the media ever to present social or economic issues using the vocabulary of rights. Coverage of the HIV-AIDS pandemic — a news story by any normal criterion — is seldom cast in terms of rights. It is invariably seen as a human tragedy and often as a crisis that will wreak economic havoc in parts of the world, notably sub-Saharan Africa. Yet the notion that governments (and corporations) might have *responsibilities* deriving from *rights* to health care seldom feature in media coverage. It is only in the rare event that others pose the issue that a rights perspective on HIV-AIDS is reflected. South African activists mounted a long campaign for the government to provide generic antiretroviral drugs for rape victims and HIV-positive women who were pregnant. This campaign was reflected to some degree in the South African media. Yet the international media picked up this angle only when international pharmaceutical companies brought a case against the South African government over its planned provision of generic drugs. By then, the angle was impossible to ignore, since the court decision would have had potentially global implications. This, of course, was an *event* that could be reported in the familiar methodology of the newsroom.

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<sup>137</sup> Interview, Paris, October 6, 2000.

<sup>138</sup> Interview, New York, September 2000.

Not only economic, social and cultural rights are ignored, however. In their coverage of the crises of the past decade — in the Balkans, Central Africa and Afghanistan — the media have produced acres of newsprint and hours of coverage on the issue of refugees. Once again, however, the issue is almost never cast in terms of rights. Instead, the question is seen either as a security issue — what impact will refugee flows have on the host states and on regional stability? — or a question of humanitarian needs. Few journalists are aware that international refugee law is a species of human rights law.

In both these examples, the media's failure to understand human rights beyond a narrow spectrum of civil and political rights reflects the dominant discourse among governments of Europe and North America. Diplomacy is now conducted partly in the language of human rights, but the language is used discriminately and applied rigorously only in certain areas of policy. When governments attach human rights conditions to their aid packages, what they have in mind usually are issues such as freedom of speech, freedom from arbitrary arrest and torture and freedom of political participation. They seldom focus political attention as sharply on the right to work, or have access to land, or social protection — still less to freedom of movement across national boundaries. It would no doubt be 'good' and challenging journalism if the media were to question government's selective approach to the rights they champion. For the most part, however, they tend to share that selectivity — for which they cannot be pilloried unduly.

It was consideration of shortcoming like these that led Adrien Sindyigaya to observe that many reporters do not know what human rights are. He argued that human rights NGOs could help by educating reporters about their content and range.<sup>139</sup>

In a larger sense, the issue is whether the reporter's news organisation (and ultimately, the media in general) can be accurate in its coverage and can cover the story at hand consistently, in ways that give the audience enough depth of background and continuity of coverage to form a notion of what is going on. By consistency is meant, as well, the media's ability to cover different stories with a high (or at least the same) standard of fairness and accuracy.

### **'Human rights is abroad'**

A less obviously pernicious but very widespread bias is the assumption that human rights violations occur 'abroad' and belong with the foreign desk.

Few would claim that human rights problems exist on the same scale everywhere. It is also mistaken to claim that violations do not exist in, or that international human rights standards are not relevant to, industrialised states. In practice, the United States media, for instance, rarely treat the United States as a country with human rights problems, in spite of reports by domestic human rights organisations.<sup>140</sup> Police brutality cases, which are covered prominently

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<sup>139</sup> Sindyigaya, "The Media and Human Rights in Burundi", p. 8.

<sup>140</sup> An example is provided by the International Human Rights Law Group's programme on racial discrimination in the United States.

when they are covered at all, are treated as police stories, not human rights stories. They are police stories, of course, and with reference to our imagined editorial conference, it may seem more logical for editors to answer their daily ‘what happened?’ with ‘the police messed up’ than with ‘there is a human rights problem’. A good example of this occurred when the story came out early in 2001 that a man had been jailed for thirty-three years for a murder that not only he had not committed but that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) knew he had not committed.<sup>141</sup>

Explicitly in the United States, and to an extent in Europe, Australia and Japan, the press (as well as the political establishment) associate human rights issues with countries abroad. The American foundation Freedom House, which for many years has published an index of political rights and civil liberties, uses issues like personal security as one measure in a complicated scoring process. Although it uses the issue of ‘personal security’ to subtract from the freedom rating of a country like Colombia, and argues that ‘purely criminal’ violence in countries like Russia or South Africa also lowers the freedom of their citizens, it has never applied these measures to the United States, even when that country had one of the highest crime rates in the world. Freedom House represents a conservative wing of US human rights activism, but until recently the position of liberal organisations such as Human Rights Watch was not that different. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (which has been reporting on the United States, and the United Kingdom where it is based, since the 1960s) now target systemic human rights problems in the American justice system, including the high rate of imprisonment (often in deplorable conditions) and application of the death penalty in many states.

When a clear human rights abuse occurs in a country in Western Europe and North America, the media are likely to cover it (though often as an issue of civil liberties rather than human rights, especially in the United States). In the US context, the designation of human rights as civil liberties has several implications. First, it suggests that human rights violations are something that happen elsewhere. Second, it implies that the US is not subject to international human rights standards. Thirdly, it could be understood that rights belong purely in the civil and political sphere — there is no social or economic equivalent to ‘civil liberties’. In the course of the interviews conducted for this project, American editors associated spontaneously and almost systematically human rights issues with foreign news.

Because of this tradition, as a rule it does not occur to North American and Western European editors to look out for human rights violation stories in their own regions. There is some difference between European and North American attitudes here. The history of the European Court of Human Rights, with its findings against European governments, has strengthened the idea that they too are subject to human rights standards. Since a European Court finding against one’s own government is newsworthy, the European media have had more occasions than their US counterparts to bring human rights home. Human rights are also more deeply embedded in the language of European law and politics. The European country closest to the

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<sup>141</sup> Carey Goldberg, “An Innocent Man Goes Free 33 Years After Conviction: F.B.I. Misdeeds, and Silence, Are Exposed”, *The New York Times*, February 2, 2001, p. A12. The man had been framed because the FBI agents needed to close the case.

US in this regard is the United Kingdom — but even there, in 1998, Parliament passed a Human Rights Act incorporating the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law. This does not alter the underlying point — that for the media human rights are generally an issue of foreign coverage — but they do nuance it.

Human rights NGOs may influence this editorial attitude. To the degree that they emphasise human rights problems abroad, especially in non-Western countries, they may reinforce an editorial environment in which news editors associate human rights with ‘elsewhere’.

There is a paradox here. Although Western media and human rights organisations (especially in the United States) tend to associate human rights violations with distant governments, they also tend to report in greater detail human rights issues that are closer to home. It is much easier to cover a case of police brutality in New York, or an asylum or illegal immigration case in Paris, than comparable stories in Nairobi — and most New York readers are perhaps more interested in a case close to home than one far away. A French journalist explained, when interviewed for this report, what he called the ‘*Kilométrage* Theory’ of reporting on human rights. “The closer to home, the more intense the interest in a human rights story, in all its details and ramifications”, said Gérard Noreseou of *Le Figaro*. “The farther away you go, the less well understood things are, and the less well covered. And frankly”, he added, “the less we care”.<sup>142</sup>

The notion that human rights are abroad is largely a Northern one, although an interesting variant upon it is to be found in the South. We have already noted that Southern journalists, themselves often victims of human rights violations, have tended to see human rights issues as something close to home. However, in the past particularly, some newspapers in sub-Saharan Africa would run stories on human rights issues elsewhere as an oblique means of commenting on domestic matters. African media audiences are sophisticated at reading between the lines of censored media. Indeed, by the late 1980s the connection between human rights abroad and at home was so obvious that even pro-government media might have fallen into the trap. Therefore, for example, the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation, servant of an anti-Communist government, relayed with relish news of the collapse of Communist governments in Central and Eastern Europe. Yet ordinary Malawians, caring little for Cold War polarities, were more interested in the example of movements of citizens toppling a self-perpetuating one-party system. By 1993 Malawi was a multi-party state.

### **The impact of NGOs and public relations groups**

Reporting on human rights issues is itself a way of encouraging human rights activism, but it also encourages more reporting on human rights. The reporting itself becomes part of the editorial environment as, tautologically, news produces news. If a place stays out of sight, it is not covered, and if a subject matter acquires high visibility, a chain reaction develops.

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<sup>142</sup> Interview, Paris, October 4, 2000.

Non governmental organisations have played an important role in this process. Human rights NGOs have established themselves as vital sources of information, before and during crises, and as long-term monitors of human rights. Information about human rights violations is systematically released by NGOs, often in great detail and with accuracy.

Human rights organisations have therefore become essential sources of information for media — while media organisations have become increasingly weary of human rights organisations trying to direct journalism priorities. Paradoxically, as media organisations face increasing economic constraints they have chosen or been forced to rely increasingly on NGOs for a large part of their international coverage. This raises some issues of independence.

At the same time, reporting human rights is becoming increasingly complex. As media outlets cut costs and hire increasingly younger and untrained staff, new skills are needed in the media if they are to cover such issues accurately. After the arrest of Pinochet in the United Kingdom in 1998, which occurred while arrangements for establishing an International Criminal Court were being negotiated in Rome, Human Rights Watch received numerous calls from journalists requesting briefings and explanations of the legal issues. Journalists who are not familiar with international law and with the workings of the United Nations and other international bodies are unlikely to understand fully the implications and ramifications of the international story they are covering. They are also likely to be more easily misled by governments and in some cases by NGOs. Bearing this in mind, Claude Moisy warns against the tendency for assimilation when both NGOs and media are on the ground and stresses the need for the media to remain at a certain distance. He argues that there are serious limitations to the commonality of interests of human rights organisations and media outlets.

Human rights advocacy and organisations have also played an increasingly important role in turning the media's attention to issues that were previously ignored or unknown, or reviving issues in protracted and slow crises situations and turning them into news. Often, this has led to more accurate, more complete and more consistent coverage.

NGOs have done so through elaborate and effective lobbying and communication strategies to disseminate their findings — that have benefited undoubtedly from the spread of the Internet — and through defining angles to stories that will attract media interest, such as a personal or emotive angle. In fact, some human rights organisations have become such effective operators that the media use them as a source on the majority of human rights stories. Over time, this can itself distort potentially coverage, and certainly it reduces awareness of the work of local media and smaller national and regional NGOs.

This said, coverage of human rights issues has benefited certainly from the interaction of NGOs and heightened media interest in human rights.

To be certain, NGOs are not the only actors exerting such influence. Most major capitals support a population of professional fixers, advocates and campaigners. Around the world, governments themselves have become much more organised in managing, pre-empting and creating reports in the media that reflect their interests and point of view. Business organisations also run press offices that seek to initiate and influence media coverage of issues

that interest them. All these organisations — government public affairs departments, private public relations firms, human rights NGOs and others — lobby on human rights.

There is little doubt that private lobbying makes a difference. Mr. Tatu noted dryly, for example, that “the Serbs had no public relations”.<sup>143</sup> Stephen Rosenfeld, retired correspondent and editorialist of *The Washington Post*, recalled how much attention was given to Soviet human rights violations, but that not all cases could be covered. He pointed out that quite personal initiatives by journalists themselves can make a significant difference to what happens and what gets covered. “Choices can be completely unscientific”, he said. “A group of Zimbabweans arrive in Washington, want to make their case, but are sorely under-equipped — inadequately prepared for the political life in the city. No literature. Scarcely a proper telephone. The point is: are you going to do their homework for them, knowing how much space you are going to devote to their story, or cover a story where for the same space you do not have to do two days of legwork first; it may be just as compelling a story, after all. For better or for worse, journalists make choices like this every day.”<sup>144</sup>

Mr. Rosenfeld added: “Once you decide to cover, you have an impact. At *The Washington Post*, we wrote seven editorials on Sakharov in one ten-day period. Another time, [journalist] Meg Greenfield got very interested in the Iraqi Kurds whom Saddam Hussein was attacking with poison gas. She influenced the coverage of this issue. Much of journalism is the result of this kind of enterprise on the part of an individual who decides to follow the story.”<sup>145</sup>

For better or worse, public relations firms can influence a reporter’s or editor’s decisions. This said, it should be noted that, no matter how hard they try (and no matter how much money they receive from their clients), public relations firms can only go so far if they do not control access to information. The more interesting question is the manner in which the media assimilate information that public relations sources provide, which in itself can be useful and accurate. There is a necessary, and variable, hierarchy of sources, which includes many elements — public relations firms, lobbying firms, NGOs and many more. “Human Rights Watch”, notes Mark Dennis, “is credible”, but this does not mean the journalist using it as a source should not be wary of its agenda.<sup>146</sup> The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) or the Washington Near East Institute can be regarded as credible sources, but they are known to have a clear pro-Israel agenda. A public relations firm like Cassidy and Associates (Washington) is known to be a ‘hired gun’ or a ‘flak’, but that does not mean its information is inherently false.

Reporters and editors note that increasingly, they come across human rights non-governmental organisations that are highly biased. This is partly a consequence of the political evolution of modern lobbying. It has the salutary effect of making reporters even more sceptical, and forces human rights NGOs to be as thorough and transparent in their research as possible. “They

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<sup>143</sup> Interview, Paris, October 6, 2000.

<sup>144</sup> Interview, Washington, D.C., November 15, 2000.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Interview, November 21, 2000.

know the cost of not levelling”, notes Marc Charney.<sup>147</sup> Not only do they lose their value as sources, but they discredit their cause.

Journalists are therefore right to be wary of their sources among human rights organisations. They should ask who sponsors them. News consumers can get insight into the quality of the news they are getting by asking who the owners of their news suppliers are. It is also useful to know what the evolving international context is, both from the point of view of the nation in which the media are, and the nation in which the coverage is (or is not) taking place.

As *The New York Times*’ Chris Hedges noted in the same context, the information provided by the United States Department of State’s Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy and Labour (the human rights bureau that started under the Carter administration with the institutionalisation of the position of Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights) is often good. In this respect, that office functions as a human rights research organisation, with a large staff spread out throughout the world (operating out of the American embassies). Overall, nevertheless, he adds, the information is not as good as that provided by Human Rights Watch. This would seem to be due, at least partly, to the Department of State’s shifting interests in grading the human rights situation in any given country.

Indeed, the information compiled and published by the Department of State is sometimes at odds with the official policy the Department wants to promote. The resulting contradiction is not necessarily subversive — after all, the Department could say: ‘We know the situation in Country X is as we reported it, but we also believe the mutual interests of our country and Country X require that we do thus and so’. In the same way, when a human rights NGO takes money from a government its credibility is not necessarily undermined, so long as it works in a way that is transparent and independent.

Journalists are well aware of this, since they themselves are not entirely free of pressures from their owners. For example, the employees of NewsCorp, the international media conglomerate owned by Rupert Murdoch, have seen their reporting on China affected by Mr. Murdoch’s business dealings with China. It is not altogether different at the Voice of America, where editorial writers might be told by the Department of State not to *criticise* Chinese human rights violations even though the Department of State’s own bureau of human rights *documents* them.<sup>148</sup>

## **Editorial freedom**

In Chapter Three we noted the increasing global control of information by a small group of conglomerates (Time-Warner, NewsCorp and Mediaset). This in turn has an impact on regional information networks (M-Net in Southern Africa, Star in the South Asian sub-continent, Al Jazeera in the Arab World and ECO in Latin America, for instance), which end

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<sup>147</sup> Interview, New York, September 12, 2000.

<sup>148</sup> Formally speaking, they are not Voice of America journalists but employees of the International Broadcasting Bureau, reporting to the Department of State.

up viewing and reporting their own events using a foreign frame of reference and presentational style. This is the issue of 'cultural imperialism'.<sup>149</sup> Sensitivity and resistance to this may have a real impact on the way that coverage of human rights issues is perceived. Within local media it is often presumed that international coverage of human rights issues validates local coverage; that a human rights issue is not real until it is picked up by the international press or broadcast media. Of course, this presumption derives from real experience of situations where international media can play a positive role. Where civil society is weak, where the legal framework protecting freedom of expression is lacking and where the media are government-owned or controlled, it is difficult for journalists to report on human rights. Hence the importance of international coverage. Yet these same constraints may also prevent the outside media from understanding what is happening. There is a considerable danger in these circumstances that insensitive reporting of human rights issues will reinforce the notion that an external ideology is being imposed on Southern countries in order to better exploit them.

The freedom of the editorial environment from outside pressures has been a recurring concern for journalists in countries where the principle of press freedom is well established, because it has never been quite as good in practice as it is in principle. Today, many journalists and media critics are concerned about the unprecedented degree of concentration in the media, the ownership of media properties by firms or individuals that the news organisation might be covering, and so forth. Nearly twenty years ago, Ben Bagdikian noted that some fifty media companies dominated the mass media. In 1997, he revised his estimate to ten.<sup>150</sup> In many countries of the South, however, even the principle of a free press cannot be taken for granted.<sup>151</sup> This affects the editorial environment in such countries in ways that Northern reporters or editors can compare scarcely to their own frustrations.

State-controlled media are of course common and raise many issues of indirect censorship and political control.<sup>152</sup> Mirko Macari described the situation in Chile, and Nabil Khatib, Jerusalem Bureau Chief of the London-headquartered Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC), gave other examples in the Arab world.<sup>153</sup> As he pointed out, it is difficult to appreciate the regional coverage of the decade-long question of sanctions against Iraq without knowing that the media in the region are usually government-owned, though there is growing private sector involvement. In some countries, state-controlled media are the most serious constraints on

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<sup>149</sup> Richard Carver, "Themes and Trends in African Broadcasting", *Who Rules the Airwaves — Broadcasting in Africa*, London: Article 19 and Index on Censorship, 1995, pp. 5–22.

<sup>150</sup> See Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1983 and 1997 editions. See also Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*, Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999.

<sup>151</sup> For interesting case studies on West Africa, for instance, see the Media Foundation for West Africa series on the legal issues affecting media performance, in particular Halidou Ouedraogo, "The Law and Media in Burkina Faso" (1999); Amie Bensouda, "The Law and Media in the Gambia" (1998); Tiawan S. Gongloe, "The Law and Media in Liberia" (1998) and "The Law and Media in Sierra Leone" (1998).

<sup>152</sup> On self-censorship, see, for instance, Michael S. Sweeney, *Secrets of Victory — The Office of Censorship and the American Press and Radio in World War II*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

<sup>153</sup> Macari, "La Presentación por los Medios de Comunicación del Concepto de Jurisdicción Universal", and Khatib, "The Impact of the Economic Sanctions on Iraq".

imaginative and accurate human rights reporting — just as public service broadcasting (such as that provided by the BBC World Service), though essentially financed by government, sets the standard for independent and accurate news reporting of issues that are sensitive domestically around the world.

Nabil Khatib also pointed out that, at the same time, newer news organisations in the Middle East, notably Arab News Network (ANN), Al Jazeera and MBC, are exceptional in their willingness to tackle controversial issues in ways that are likely to offend powerful regional interests.<sup>154</sup> Since its creation in November 1996, the Qatar-based Al Jazeera has almost single-handedly transformed the debate on human rights and democracy in the Middle Eastern and North African region. Its interactive talk show programmes with callers from Mauritania to Oman offer 24-hour uncensored international news coverage using fifty correspondents in thirty-one countries. More importantly, the network, which operates in a region where freedom of expression is limited, has quickly gained international credibility for its editorial independence.<sup>155</sup>

Nabil Khatib observed, nevertheless, that Al Jazeera's editors work on guidelines that resemble those used by their colleagues in MBC, even if the authorities in Riyadh and the rulers in Doha have different political interests. Mr. Khatib wrote that "one of the senior editors at Al Jazeera explained [to him] that deciding on the piece of news and the manner to cover the news is not closely co-ordinated with the higher administrative level. In other words there is no direct censorship, but the editor has to read the general policy and use his judgement in covering the issues".<sup>156</sup> This is not radically different from the position of NewsCorp.

Finally, the vastly different political, economic and cultural conditions under which the media of different countries operate cannot be overemphasised. These differences impact directly on coverage of human rights; indeed, working conditions determine in many ways the degree to which the media can address issues of public interest, including human rights.<sup>157</sup> Kakuna Kerina, Director of the Africa Programme at the International League for Human Rights, noted that for a reporter it is one thing to be under some pressure to conform to an organisation's editorial programme and style, and quite another to be under a threat of murder, in Sierra Leone, for example. "In effect daily life is a human rights issue. Whereas for a

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<sup>154</sup> Khatib, "The Impact of the Economic Sanctions on Iraq", p. 3.

<sup>155</sup> See, Thomas L. Friedman, "An Arab TV Station Nourishes Democracy", *The International Herald Tribune*, February 28, 2001, p. 9; Mohammed El Nawawy, "Satellite Channel Sets a New Standard in the Arab World", *The Baltimore Sun*, July 30, 2001; and Alain Constant, "Al Jezira, CNN du Monde Arabe", *Le Monde*, October 7, 2001, pp. 4–5.

<sup>156</sup> Khatib, "The Impact of the Economic Sanctions on Iraq", p. 5. Although the station, whose leitmotiv is 'the view and the other point of view' (*al ra'i wa al ra'i al akhur*), was once accused of being pro-Israeli and pro-American because of its readiness to interview Israeli officials, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, the United States asked the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani (who grants the channel a thirty-million dollar annual subsidy), to rein in the influential and independent station because it was giving airtime to anti-American opinions. Al Jazeera had carried a faxed statement and two videotaped messages from Osama Bin Laden — the second videotape was reportedly made available to US officials in advance of its airing by the station, and portions were edited out according to their suggestions. See BBC News, "US Urges Curb on Arab TV Channel", October 4, 2001. The network has also received complaints from the governments of Algeria, Egypt, Kuwait, Mauritania, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia for their coverage of matters relating to these respective countries.

<sup>157</sup> Claude Moisy, Memorandum to the research team, December 2000.

daily paper in Lagos conditions, hierarchies — and in short the human challenge of getting the edition out — is structurally not different from what you find in London or New York, reporters and human rights activists should understand that [in a country where order has broken down] you cannot expect the same attitude to prevail in a newsroom as you would elsewhere”.

This does not mean standards should shift. It may, however, mean that news organisations ought to keep their consumers informed regarding places where access and reporting conditions are difficult. This holds for human rights organisations as well: for example, it is easier for an NGO campaigning for abolition of the death penalty to research conditions under which it is applied in the US than in North Korea or China. This obviously does not imply that NGOs should diminish their research in the US for the sake of balance, only that they should be all the more explicit about the difficulties of obtaining information elsewhere.

In general terms, the editorial environment and the domestic legal context tend to be more friendly to journalists in Northern latitudes than in Southern ones. If the background of a human rights situation is covered inadequately in international media, which are both influential and powerful, it can assist the work of local media. Biased coverage or failure to cover important human rights issues, can equally make the work of local media even more arduous, and restrict further their freedom to report.

### **Advocacy: fact and comment**

Not only are human rights reported more than covered, they are susceptible, as Aidan White observes, to ‘contamination’. This risk can be overstated. There are always many sources and sources are rarely pure. Information is shaped, massaged, delivered, received and interpreted many times over before delivery. Yet, as already noted, journalists do not help their cause when they present their work as objective and are subsequently forced to reveal that they were not well-informed and did not possess all the facts. The simplest first step to avoid this problem is to be as forthcoming as possible about impediments to reporting. As Deborah Potter observed, these include restrictive press laws and harassment of journalists.<sup>158</sup>

A separate but related issue preoccupies the profession. A strong culture and tradition within journalism asserts that no advocacy of any kind should intrude upon the news columns, which should simply transmit news. According to this view, the place of polemical journalism and advocacy, usually called opinion journalism, is the editorial page. Claude Moisy argued that the best thing journalists can do is to transmit accurate information: “We seldom differentiate between advocacy journalism, information journalism, entertainment journalism, promotional or commercial journalism. They are all legitimate forms of communication and they sometimes coexist in the same news organisation while obeying largely incompatible principles.” Differentiation, he nonetheless added, is crucial because “nothing is more dangerous for

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<sup>158</sup> Aidan White and Deborah Potter, respective remarks at the review seminar, November 27–28, 2000.

freedom of information in the world, than to assign to the news media any other responsibility than to report the facts as well as possible”.<sup>159</sup>

Are journalists simply providers of information on which others make judgement? In the context of information provision, how does one deal with the issue of the pollution or corruption of that information?

This question presents itself quite sharply in the case of human rights reporting because ‘human rights’ is both a body of national or international law — therefore aspiring to objective judgements based on agreed standards and evidence — and at the same time a discourse that appeals strongly to the emotions, and in ways that are both powerful and highly politicised. In reporting them, journalists and broadcasters must work in this ambiguous terrain. It is clearly difficult to report on issues of morality in the heat of conflict or when reporting the experiences of people whose rights have been violated.

We have seen that in most of the ‘quality’ press and media in the North it is not controversial for human rights to appear on the editorial agenda. This is true in the South as well. The Ghanaian journalist and academic Kwame Karikari adds that Third World media not only address human rights, they do so, often, in an overtly partisan way as part of a general movement for more freedom in their societies (which may or may not have implications for the professional standards they apply).<sup>160</sup> This distinguishes the Southern media — especially the printed press — from many of their Northern counterparts. The reason for this partisan approach is probably the fact that many journalists in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe were themselves recently participants in struggles for human rights. They would, no doubt, claim the same ethical commitment to telling the truth as the Western journalist, but would probably regard the notion that journalists can be impartial observers of society as unrealistic (and fundamentally ideological).

Many Southern journalists, and their media organisations, have been not only participants but also beneficiaries of human rights struggles. Had it not been for the establishment of basic rights such as freedom of expression, they would not be pursuing their chosen profession (or at least would be doing so in a highly circumscribed way). To take the historical view, the same is true in the West. Yet for journalists who have experienced the denial of their own human rights, the question of whether or how to report them has a greater degree of urgency. As Charles Onyango-Obbo, Editor of *The Monitor* of Kampala, notes, this does not mean it is necessarily more common for human rights stories to appear on the editorial agenda of a Southern news organisation.<sup>161</sup>

This consensus does not please everyone in the way it is applied in practice. Some journalists, who as individuals are partisans of human rights, such as Reporters Sans Frontières’ Vice-President and former Agence France Presse Bureau Chief Claude Moisy, argue that the job of

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<sup>159</sup> Note to the International Council on Human Rights Policy’s research team, December 2000.

<sup>160</sup> Remarks at the review seminar organised by the International Council on Human Rights Policy, Geneva, November 27–28, 2000.

<sup>161</sup> Remarks at the review seminar, November 27–28, 2000.

the media is to communicate information and facts objectively and accurately, and that identification with human rights issues is dangerous and unprofessional to the degree that it undermines the fundamental role and responsibility of media organisations.<sup>162</sup>

John Sweeney noted that journalists have a traditional role as defenders of the oppressed and denouncers of injustice.<sup>163</sup> A middle course is expressed by Stephen Schwartz who suggested that journalists must be fair, but not neutral. “You would have reported as fairly and as accurately as possible the events of the American civil rights movement”, he noted, “but you still would have taken sides.”<sup>164</sup> These arguments are valuable because they are provocative, and they take place often among reporters and editors, forcing them to examine their work.

In addition to transmitting information, the media have therefore always had an advocacy or editorialising, function. It is indeed important to differentiate between advocacy journalism and information journalism.<sup>165</sup> However, ‘attachment’ or ‘civic’ journalism runs the risk of strong bias.<sup>166</sup> Still, for journalists working from within repressive regimes, in particular, it is difficult to accept the rejection of journalistic activism.

Did the Pinochet affair encourage journalists to look for similar cases to report? It certainly incited activists to make use of the law under which he had been charged to bring new cases like the one against Hissène Habré. It is no doubt likely that breakthroughs in coverage led to more of the same kind of story. As the Hissène Habré case developed, journalists ‘discovered’ other human rights issues in Chad, and several articles appeared both in minor and important outlets — further evidence that one human rights story can create an atmosphere in the editorial environment that is conducive to others.

In an op-ed piece written for *The Chicago Tribune*, James Ron and Charles McCall called on the United States government to account for its own past war crimes and human rights violations in a wide range of places, from Guatemala to Iran.<sup>167</sup> This is just one article, but it also helps to confirm the idea that news on a subject will eventually produce editorials on that subject, and in this sense news coverage can drive opinion-making (read editorial writing) which in turn can drive public opinion.<sup>168</sup> Long after the massacres in Bosnia and Rwanda — among others — editorials appeared in many countries arguing that such things should not happen again.

While the separation of fact and comment is one of the guiding principles of the Western journalistic tradition, it would be disingenuous to suggest that the two are not at least related in this fashion. If a newspaper exposes abuses of whatever sort — not only in relation to human rights — this is followed up customarily by editorial comment demanding that ‘something must be done’. Identifying what that ‘something’ should be may be considerably more difficult

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<sup>162</sup> Remarks at the review seminar, November 27–28, 2000.

<sup>163</sup> Interview, London, December 5, 2000.

<sup>164</sup> Interview, Washington, D.C., November 2000.

<sup>165</sup> Claude Moisy, Note to the research team, December 2000.

<sup>166</sup> Cees Hamelink, Note to the International Council on Human Rights Policy’s research team, May 31, 2001.

<sup>167</sup> *The Chicago Tribune*, December 24, 2000.

<sup>168</sup> Media coverage of East Timor during the period of Indonesian occupation might provide a classic example of editorials influencing public opinion and eventually official policy in the United States.

than exposing the abuse in the first place, but that has seldom stopped the media from expressing an opinion. It is in this fairly direct sense that news reporting can drive a movement for change.

Is it *advocacy* to seek out human rights stories? Or should journalists limit themselves scrupulously to the *transmitting* of information on human rights? Many of the cases cited here — Augusto Pinochet, Hissène Habré, the question of torture in Algeria, the use of force in the Israel-Palestine conflict — raise this question. In the case of Pinochet or Habré, the prosecution of former dictators *was* news. Algeria was old news. Israel-Palestine is current news — primarily ‘war’ news, perhaps ‘international political’ news. Should journalists be advocates for human rights angles by pre-empting the perspectives that would be more logical (war and international politics) in the Israel-Palestine case, or by bringing up an old story in order to introduce a human rights angle that had not been considered previously?

It can be argued that a journalist should not be concerned about what use is made of the information he or she unearths or interprets. Still, a journalist working on a story about the impunity of a public figure for human rights crimes would naturally wish to see the issue pursued beyond the pages of her own publication.<sup>169</sup> One covering a case of judicial abuse would encourage other journalists or legal activists to look at similar cases. A journalist covering mistakes on death row would also want anti-death penalty activists to bring forth other such cases, whether or not he or she approved philosophically of the death penalty.

This carries an obvious danger, of course, which is that a personal commitment to the issue under investigation could cloud the journalist’s judgement and lead him to ignore or even suppress facts that do not suit his case. This may sometimes be a problem in practice, though in principle it is clearly commonly accepted journalistic ethics. The contentious issue is more likely to be in the *selection* of stories rather than in how they are then researched and reported.

An issue arises in this context that should be addressed. If the media make themselves advocates for human rights, might they not also make themselves advocates for inhuman behaviour? This is what occurred with the development of hate media such as the Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines in Rwanda. This was certainly an extreme case, but it should not be assumed that the issue only arises in such extreme cases. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, some journalists in the United States (Jonathan Alter of *Newsweek* and Tucker Carlson of CNN, in particular) have argued that the use of torture could be a legitimate tool in the investigation into the terrorist attacks.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> At the outset of a publicised two-part article on Henry Kissinger, in which he calls for the indictment of the former American official for war crimes, journalist Christopher Hitchens states unambiguously that it is a report written by a “political opponent of Henry Kissinger”. See Christopher Hitchens, “The Case Against Henry Kissinger”, *Harper’s Magazine* 302, 1809–1810, February 2001, pp. 33–58, and March 2001, pp. 49–74.

<sup>170</sup> See Jim Rutenberg, “Media Stoke Debate on Torture as US Option”, *The International Herald Tribune*, November 6, 2001, pp. 1 and 4; and Bruce Hoffman, “Should We Torture? — A Nasty Business”, *The Atlantic Monthly*, 289, 1, January 2002, pp. 49–52.

In earlier times, the Hearst newspaper chain, one of the most powerful media companies at the end of the nineteenth century, advocated war against Spain. Its unbalanced reporting and editorialising about conditions in Cuba, then a Spanish colony, are credited by historians with helping to provoke the Spanish American war of 1898. The consequences of this war were disastrous for the people of the Philippines, who were subjected to massacres and forced labour régimes for many years after the American conquest. This situation was denounced in some American media, and by such writers as Mark Twain, but not in the Hearst press.<sup>171</sup> Similarly, the popular French newspaper, *Je Suis Partout*, was an advocate of aggressive anti-Semitism throughout the 1930s, and during the 1940s, when France was under German military occupation, it named alleged anti-German activists in its pages, leading in many cases to their arrest, deportation or murder. Nowadays, it might be argued that some media coverage of immigration is similarly irresponsible and inflammatory.

So we return to true bias. Whatever attitude a journalist brings to a given event, the question remains: does the journalist cover the situation that has made that event? Continual coverage does exist. It is apparent in many other areas. One can follow the financial pages or the sports pages and get a continuing, ‘anthropological’ coverage (by no means exhaustive) of these domains. One is given a great deal of information: who the main actors are, to whom are they related, what deals and regimes they make and follow. In sports or money, how the system works and how it keeps changing. Consistent and full coverage can be achieved, at least in free societies that have a free press. At present, it is not yet true enough of coverage of human rights.

The media report on events *when they happen*, and thereby risk giving an inaccurate picture of *what really happened*. This is part of the media’s business, as well as the work of social scientists. It is also true that the constraints, pressures, and nature of the business being what they are, the reporting of *what really happened* cannot be done in all areas and in this regard, some areas — sports, finance, for example — are covered more consistently and therefore better than certain other areas.

This is, of course, not to suggest that trying to get all the facts necessary for an informed judgement on any given situation is a hopeless task. If the background of a human rights situation is covered inadequately in the international media, which are influential and powerful, how can struggling domestic media outlets possibly be expected to manage the job? No one ever has all the facts, and judgements in social and political affairs cannot be made on the basis of having every possible fact, or no judgements would ever be made. In the same way, editorial decisions must be made on the basis of incomplete knowledge. This is a form of ‘contamination’ — the contamination of the dateline, or time-of-filing. Respect for accuracy requires that this kind of constraint be made perfectly clear.

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<sup>171</sup> Mark Twain, “A Salutation to the Twentieth Century”, *The New York Herald*, December 30, 1900. The key passage reads: “I bring you the stately matron named Christendom, returning bedraggled, besmirched and dishonoured from pirate raids in Kiao-Chow, Manchuria, South Africa and the Philippines, with her soul full of meanness, her pocket full of boodle and her mouth full of pious hypocrisies. Give her soap and a towel, but hide the looking-glass”.

What this suggests is that the *continuing coverage of human rights issues cannot be left to the news organisations alone*. That is, in fact, the case. Human rights advocacy organisations increasingly have become research and reporting organisations. As *Newsweek's* Mark Dennis notes, due to the constraints and biases they are under, news organisations distort human rights issues.<sup>172</sup> Therefore, they need the reporting of human rights organisations.

In this context, scepticism is as necessary as ever. As *New York Times's* Marc Charney noted, the more compelling a situation, the more scepticism is warranted.<sup>173</sup> There are situations where the media are not present. This occurred in Chechnya, for example, in 1994 and again in 1999-2002, where, except for the presence of human rights NGOs' researchers, the second Chechnyan war would have been covered mainly from behind Russian army lines. Margaret Cook observed that some issues would not be covered by Australian television if human rights NGOs did not, in effect, bring the stories to the media organisations. Deborah Potter expressed a worry, frequently heard, that human rights reporting can only be damaged by a vicious institutional chain-reaction in the media which is reducing attention spans, introducing faster and more accessible technology, and shrinking in-depth foreign news coverage.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Interview, Washington, D.C., November 21, 2000.

<sup>173</sup> Interview, New York, September 12, 2000.

<sup>174</sup> Margaret Cook and Deborah Potter, respective remarks at the review seminar, November 27-28, 2000.

## THE MEDIA AND RACISM

Professionally, journalism is not necessarily concerned with human rights issues in general, or the struggle against racism in particular. Yet, as institutions and individuals whose principal mission is to inform, the media and the journalists play a key role in shaping how people think about each other, and influence directly and indirectly public policy on race issues. They cannot afford to ignore discrimination, wittingly or unwittingly.

Racism in the media manifests itself in several ways:

- widespread and systemic *under-representation*, and sometimes invisibility, of groups and communities that suffer racism.
- *stereotyping* of such communities and misrepresentation of their situation and problems, by for example, ‘racialising’ crime or racial framing of stories. Roma are often portrayed as social misfits, and laziness, theft and crime find their ways too easily into reports about ‘gypsies’. Coverage of African-Americans in the United States focuses disproportionately on sport, entertainment, poverty and crime.
- *insufficient scope and depth*, and cliché-ridden coverage of community issues.
- usage of *coded language* and terminology that reinforce a racial subtext.
- *denial* of racism, which is too often narrowly confined to racial discrimination that is extreme and explicit (for example, extremist groups).

It should be noted that there has been progress in the media’s awareness of these issues, and of their performance on these matters. Increasingly, attention is being paid to these problems. Much more remains to be done, however, on race-related coverage, and in helping journalists understand the multiple characteristics of racism.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, the selection and presentation of human rights stories in media coverage influence our perception of the world around us in many ways. Policymakers, in particular, pay close attention to the selection and content of stories as presented by a handful of highly influential media.

Many journalists, including some of those interviewed for this report, do not feel that there is a problem in their coverage of human rights issues. Though they acknowledge inadequacies, they are of the view that human rights issues are covered no worse or better than other subjects are. They do not feel they need expertise they cannot obtain while on the story. News organisations do not consider human rights stories, as such, to be inherently more important than any others.

Chris Hedges, previously *New York Times* foreign correspondent in Yugoslavia and Middle East Bureau Chief for *The Dallas Morning News*, observed: “In Bosnia we covered consistently and accurately when we had access. When denied access, as in the Serb parts of Sarajevo, we couldn’t cover”.<sup>175</sup> However, Joe Stork, on the staff of Human Rights Watch, says much depends on whether the editor in the home office trusts the judgement of the local correspondent and really wants the story.<sup>176</sup> Mark Dennis, correspondent for *Newsweek* in Yugoslavia, notes that it is often difficult to translate human rights issues into effective “media style communication”<sup>177</sup> while Roy Gutman, who investigated Bosnian Serb war crimes when he was a *Newsday* correspondent in Yugoslavia, suggests that some war crimes are reported inadequately in part because reporters do not know them when they see them.<sup>178</sup> It is often a different story in the south, where reporters are frequently more alert to human rights issues. As this report shows, for many of them rights are abused routinely — their own rights and the rights of people whose stories they cover.

Marc Charney of *The New York Times*, said that, in general, reporters should recognise human rights violations when they see them and should not need special expertise to do so (as might, for example, a reporter covering economic news).<sup>179</sup>

Journalists worry about accuracy. One journalist remarked that the media are often not as accurate in their coverage of human rights issues as they should be; they may report some, or much, of what happens but they are subject to the tendency to portray the issues in a good versus evil context and they can be co-opted by one side or another.<sup>180</sup> Bill Kovach

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<sup>175</sup> Interview, Chris Hedges, September 11, 2000.

<sup>176</sup> Interview, Joe Stork, August 5, 2000.

<sup>177</sup> Interview, Mark Dennis, November 21, 2000.

<sup>178</sup> Interview, Roy Gutman, Washington, D.C., June 23, 2000.

<sup>179</sup> Interview, Marc Charney, New York, September 12, 2000.

<sup>180</sup> Interview, Thomas Bray, November 14, 2000.

commented: “The media focus on the drama, not the broader questions, the process-stories. We do not get an accurate picture of what is at issue, probably not with regard to the story itself and certainly not with regard to human rights in a crisis, for example the Middle East conflict”.<sup>181</sup>

In journalism, as in many areas of political and public life, the universality of human rights becomes blurred whenever sides are taken. Abuses by one side are played up while violations by allies are played down.

As a result, coverage varies in quality. Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times* remarked: “On the domestic side, there is not much that escapes media coverage. On the international side, there is — not necessarily because a reporter does not notice and report it, but because of the competition for limited space, even in a paper like *The New York Times*.”<sup>182</sup> Chris Hedges pointed out that if a journalist does not have access, he simply cannot cover, and journalists do not always have access.

G rard Norescou of *Le Figaro* (Paris) pointed out issues of geographical and political bias: “We are only interested if we are implicated — for example we were interested in Soviet violations of human rights in Afghanistan, or the Taliban’s there today, and for the rest we assume a lot of countries are lousy countries where it’s normal for human rights to be violated.”<sup>183</sup> Michel Tatu of *Le Monde* noted that, while it may be a good thing to be interested in human rights, information that is not put in context is always likely to distort by ‘demonising’ and ‘angelising’ the actors — the last thing a reporter should wish to do.<sup>184</sup>

Here are some of the problem areas of human rights coverage:

### **Ignorance of *what* human rights are**

Within journalism there is a serious lack of knowledge of what human rights are. Many journalists — like many politicians and others working in civil society — are not familiar with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the international human rights treaties and mechanisms. Often they do not understand the difference between human rights law and the laws of war. As a result, human rights are often erroneously regarded as relevant only to reporting of conflict.

Lack of familiarity with human rights standards leads some journalists to fear that, if they integrate human rights into their report, these may become politically biased. In fact, the contrary is likely to be true: knowledge of human rights will make most reports fairer.

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<sup>181</sup> Interview, Bill Kovach, Washington, D.C., November 20, 2000.

<sup>182</sup> Interview, Barbara Crossette, New York, September 12, 2000.

<sup>183</sup> Interview, G rard Norescou, Paris, October 4, 2000.

<sup>184</sup> Interview, Michel Tatu, Paris, October 6, 2000.

Given that human rights have become to such a large degree a language of international relations, the media have a professional obligation to understand what these rights are, in order to be able to portray and better explain the world to their audience.

This applies to a lesser extent to journalists in the South. They may also be unfamiliar with many aspects of human rights, but they are more likely to have engaged with human rights issues on a daily basis. They may also owe their ability to write and publish to the success of a human rights struggle.

### **Confusion about *where* human rights are**

Editors in the settled democracies of the North, suppose almost always that human rights violations occur abroad. The paradox is that the Western media often cover human rights issues close to home thoroughly — the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, for instance, or questions of child abuse and racism — yet these media often do not make the link that place these stories within the context of an international regime of human rights standards and national responsibilities.

This is not just a matter of how something is labelled. In issues such as treatment of refugees or the right to health, the media are missing important explanatory elements of the story if they do not understand government obligations in these areas.

### **Unawareness of the *scope* of human rights**

The corollary to constantly placing rights abroad and in conflict situations is that the media very often see human rights in terms of a narrow spectrum of civil and political rights. Social, economic and cultural rights are almost entirely absent from the human rights discourse of the media.

### **Fear of partisanship**

Many journalists, particularly in the South, consider they have an ethical obligation to report from a pro-human rights perspective. Many others see their role as being simply to relay the facts objectively.

There is no doubt that the latter cautious approach has much to recommend it. However, objective reporting is not achieved merely on presenting facts. It involves a constant process of selection, in which the aim must be to describe and explain as fairly as possible, within the material and ideological limitations of the journalist's position. Indeed, the illusion of lofty objectivity is itself an ideological position — and arguably a limiting one.

Balance in journalism is certainly important, but it is often achieved over time and it is not always possible, even if desirable, in single instances of reporting, whatever the mode of dissemination.

There is no contradiction between committed reporting and truthful reporting. To understand and be in favour of human rights, as a media professional, is not to jettison professional standards but to underscore them.

### **The battle for space**

Human rights issues are *reported* more than they are *covered*. In part, this may be due to ignorance of human rights standards, as discussed. The constant competition for space and time and the culture of breaking news are also factors that reduce the time that is available to consider human rights issues professionally and in more depth. The battle for space is a daily struggle fought out within most news rooms, but the tyranny of the breaking story and the pressure to deliver ever-more dramatic images and sensational coverage in a highly-competitive news environment militate against deeper and more explanatory coverage. For all the talk of pluralism, a ‘herd mentality’ often influences news gathering: fear of being different and missing a news angle encourage greater uniformity of coverage and editorial texture.

### **The view of human rights organisations**

Human rights organisations have different agendas and different objectives in relation to media coverage. In general, human rights organisations consider that human rights issues do not get sufficient media coverage and when they do figure on the news agenda, the coverage is often lacking in depth. At the same time, the situation is improving, and will continue to do so as more human rights groups carry out credible research and develop their capacity to provide media with reliable information.

Human rights activists are partisan, and rightly so. They should recognise that journalism has a different perspective, which is equally valid. There is a need to bridge the gulf of misunderstanding that sometimes appears to exist between rights activists and journalists. For their part, human rights NGOs should accept the media are legitimate (and complex) instruments of communication and participants in a policy process rather than as instruments of human rights promotion. They should appreciate the role and values of the media.

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Although the phrase ‘human rights violation’ appears more often in news reports these days, it does not necessarily follow that reporting has become more accurate and consistent. However, the sheer volume of media power deployed in theatres such as Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan in recent years has to some extent at least encouraged more rather than less honesty. There may also be grounds for optimism in the emergence of widespread policy discussion about terrorism and national security, social inclusion and the environment,

development and fundamental democratic rights — even if it remains true that more can be done to encourage thoughtful public discussion about human rights.

Human rights are mentioned more often, the language of rights is more frequently used (sometimes even to conceal actions that contravene human rights) and there is a sense that the media increasingly see human rights organisations as a valuable resource in an important area of news gathering. Similarly, the dialogue between the media and human rights organisations is strengthening and reflects a greater seriousness about human rights coverage on the part of many people in the media. These are considerable steps forward. Much more should be done.

## VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below are addressed to journalists, media organisations, human rights organisations, governments and international organisations in the spirit that they can be used as pointers for action to improve the way media outlets conceive of, research, cover and report human rights, and how human rights organisations interact with journalists.

While journalism has taken up the challenge of reporting human rights within the context of the traditional news agenda, more can be done to improve the quality, scope and reliability of news and information covering this field.

### **To journalists, editors and media organisations**

Shifts in international policy in recent years have put issues of global governance, universal principles of human rights and internationalism in trade, social and security policy on the news agenda. These and other developments make it more necessary than ever that journalists and media organisations be well-informed about rights issues and, therefore, better able to promote wide-ranging debates within their societies.

- Journalists should be given opportunities to become better informed about international human rights instruments. This can best be done through a range of awareness raising activities including:
  - specific pre-entry courses on human rights issues for individuals attending journalism schools (as part of the curriculum);
  - mid-career and in-house *training* on international human rights standards, including national perspectives on human rights law and policy;
  - internal *editorial* programmes to *review* coverage of human rights issues; e.g, refugee and asylum matters, rights of children, racism and racial discrimination, gender policy, health issues; and
  - actions to promote *exchanges of views between journalists and human rights organisations* at national, regional and international level. Such meetings, briefings and seminars should be organised by journalism schools, media organisations and journalists' professional groups.

- Media organisations and journalists’ groups should promote *higher standards of diversity* within the newsroom while strengthening the capacity of journalists to work professionally and in secure conditions. Media should build public confidence in the quality of information they circulate. Practical steps could include:
  - the adoption of employment and recruitment policies that promote *ethnic and gender balance in the newsroom*;
  - actions by media organisations to *improve the safety of media staff*, including freelance employees, through appropriate forms of hostile environment and risk-awareness training and provision of appropriate technical equipment;
  - regular updating of editorial reporting, editing and style handbooks and materials to *familiarise journalists and editing staff with human rights terminology* and to reinforce ethical principles in reporting human rights issues. These should take account of guidelines from journalists’ professional groups on rights issues, such as reporting on children, intolerance and hate speech;
  - encouragement of professional co-operation between reporters and correspondents working for different media in different regions to *better understand local conditions* and to develop a more informed, diverse and reliable network of information sources; and
  - forms of self-regulation strengthened to build public confidence and to help journalists to *examine critically their practices and frameworks for covering human rights*. Structures for self-regulation must be independent and must provide an accessible bridge between media, journalists and the people they serve.

## **To governments and international organisations**

Professional journalism and freedom of the press are essential to the creation of democratic societies in which universal and fundamental rights are respected fully. Absent free, independent and accessible media, citizens cannot enjoy the benefits of democratic pluralism. In a world in which the media play an increasingly important role in shaping opinions, it is vital to separate clearly the exercise of political power and the work of journalists at all levels.

- Governments should commit themselves to *eliminating all forms of official interference* in the work of journalists and should remove all obstacles to the exercise of free media.
- Where public funding of media exists — for instance, in state or public broadcasting or through the printed press — *safeguards should be incorporated into regulations* to ensure that there is no political interference or conflicts of interest and that the editorial independence of journalists is guaranteed.

- Governments should *provide open access to official information and* should *train official spokespersons* on the need to provide media with up-to-date and reliable information relating to human rights obligations.
- *The right of journalists to act ethically should be protected and enhanced* through, for instance, recognition of the right of journalists to protect their sources and protection from dismissal or disciplinary action for acting according to professional conscience.
- Intergovernmental organisations should develop more effective and more integrated programmes of assistance to *encourage media excellence in the reporting of human rights issues*, particularly through
  - co-ordinated assistance programmes to media in developing countries; and
  - confidence-building measures to promote high standards through, for example, the sponsorship of research activities, journalism prizes and liaison between international media and local media outlets.

In general, in addressing human rights issues, the media should pay particular attention to *context* and *terminology*.

Journalists cannot report all stories and cannot report any story completely. In relation to human rights issues, they should aim to include as much context and background as their audiences require if they are to understand the significance of official policy decisions and make sense of the facts and events that are reported. This is a basic test of adequacy. The research suggests that more explanation will very often be required to meet this standard.

Language that contains bias should be avoided, particularly when it is used by governments or those in power. Human rights and humanitarian law terms have precise meanings. Journalists should familiarise themselves with human rights terminology, and avoid using terms imprecisely. They should also abstain from stigmatising individuals or groups. Guilt and innocence by association should both be avoided. Identity should not be labelled in terms of race, religion or other grounds where the effect will be discriminatory or prejudicial.

### **To human rights organisations**

Journalists, the media and human rights organisations play distinct and different, but equally, vital roles in creating open societies that are able to defend and promote fundamental rights.

To play their parts effectively, journalists groups, media and human rights organisations need to better understand their different roles and responsibilities. Human rights organisations can contribute to this process by:

- *promoting internal discussion* among human rights activists *on the work of media* and journalists;

- *establishing direct contact with journalists' groups and media organisations* to discuss media-related rights issues and ways in which both groups can co-operate to create better legal, political and social conditions for the exercise of journalism;
- *organising joint meetings* with media organisations and journalists to discuss concerns about human rights coverage and how to co-operate in providing accurate and reliable information on human rights questions; and
- *suggesting confidence-building measures* to promote better understanding of the human rights agenda through, for example, the sponsorship of national journalism prizes and research grants to journalists working on human rights stories.

## **APPENDIX I: INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS STANDARDS**

**African Charter on Human and People's Rights** was adopted by the Organisation of African Unity on June 27, 1981 and entered into force on October 21, 1986. The Charter stresses that civil and political rights cannot be dissociated from economic, social and cultural rights. It established a commission, whose function is to promote the rights declared in the Charter, ensure their protection and interpret the Charter upon the request of member States.  
[www.oau-oua.org/oau\\_info/rights.htm](http://www.oau-oua.org/oau_info/rights.htm)

**American Convention on Human Rights** was adopted by the Organisation of American States on November 22, 1969 and entered into force on July 18, 1978.  
[www.oas.org](http://www.oas.org) (click on documents then treaties and conventions)

**Arab Charter on Human Rights** was adopted by the Council of the League of Arab States resolution 5437 on September 15, 1994. There are no ratifications to date.  
[www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/arabcharter.html](http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/arabcharter.html)

**Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam** was adopted by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference resolution 49/19-P in August 1990 during the Nineteenth Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers.

**Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment** was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly resolution 39/46 of December 10, 1984 and entered into force on June 26, 1987.  
[www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/h\\_cat39.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/h_cat39.htm)

**Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)** was adopted by General Assembly resolution 34/180 of December 18, 1979 and entered into force on September 3, 1981.  
[www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/e1cedaw.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/e1cedaw.htm)

**Convention on the Non-Applicability of Statutory Limitations to War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity** was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly resolution 2391 (XXIII) of November 26, 1968 and entered into force on November 11, 1970.  
[www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/p\\_limit.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/p_limit.htm)

**Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide** was approved by the UN General Assembly resolution 260A (III) of December 9, 1948 and entered into force on January 12, 1951.  
[www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/p\\_genoci.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/p_genoci.htm)

**Convention on the Rights of the Child** (CRC) is the most widely ratified human rights treaty. It was adopted by the UN General Assembly resolution 44/25 of November 20, 1989 and entered into force on September 2, 1990.

[www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm)

**Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees** was adopted by the UN Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons convened under General Assembly resolution 429 (V) of December 14, 1950. It entered into force on April 22, 1954.

[www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/o\\_c\\_ref.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/o_c_ref.htm)

**Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms** (also known as “Declaration on Human Rights Defenders”) was adopted by the UN General Assembly resolution 53/144 of December 9, 1998.

[www.unhchr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/\(Symbol\)/A.RES.53.144.En?OpenDocument](http://www.unhchr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/(Symbol)/A.RES.53.144.En?OpenDocument)

**European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms** was opened for signatures by the Council of Europe on November 4, 1950 and entered into force on September 3, 1953.

<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/CadreListeTraites.htm>

**International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** (ICCPR) is the most widely ratified human rights treaty covering civil and political rights. It was adopted by the UN General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of December 16, 1966 and entered into force on March 23, 1976.

[www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/a\\_ccpr.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_ccpr.htm)

**International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** (ICESCR) is the most widely ratified treaty covering economic and social rights. It was adopted by the UN General Assembly resolution 2200A of December 16, 1966 and entered into force on January 3, 1976.

[www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/a\\_ceschr.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_ceschr.htm)

**International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination** (ICERD) was adopted by the UN General Assembly resolution 2106 (XX) of December 21, 1965 and entered into force on January 4, 1969.

[www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/d\\_icerd.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/d_icerd.htm)

**International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families** was adopted by the UN General Assembly resolution 45/158 of December 18, 1990 (not in force).

[www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/m\\_mwctoc.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/m_mwctoc.htm)

**Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (UDHR) is the premier human rights instrument of the United Nations. It was adopted and proclaimed by the UN General Assembly resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948.

[www.unhchr.ch/udhr/index.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/index.htm)

## APPENDIX II: LIST OF JOURNALISTS AND EXPERTS CONSULTED

Most of the journalists and human rights experts below were interviewed in the course of the preparation of this report. They spoke to the lead researcher, or were consulted by the researchers preparing the case studies or by the project co-ordinator. The other individuals offered advice on the research itself. We thank all of them.

J. Lance Alloway, Internews, Indonesia

John Andrews, *The Economist*, France

Ade Armando, Media Watch and Consumer Centre, Indonesia

Pilar Bernstein, Departamento de Prensa de Televisión Nacional, Chile

Boris Bezama, *La Segunda*, Chile

Kabral Blay-Amihere, West African Journalists Association, Ghana

Carroll Bogert, Human Rights Watch, United States

Max Boot, *The Wall Street Journal*, United States

Jorg Brase, ZDF, Germany

Thomas Bray, *Detroit News* and *The Wall Street Journal*, United States

Sebastián Brett, Human Rights Watch, Chile

Steven Brill, *Brill's Content*, United States

Charles Brown, United States Department of State, United States

Rodrigo Cerda, Radio Chilena, Chile and United Kingdom

Matías Chaparro, Unidad de Análisis de Noticieros de Televisión del Ministerio Secretaria General de Gobierno, Chile

Marc Charney, *The New York Times*, United States

Mona Chun, Centre for Sustainable Human Rights Action, United States

John Corry, *The American Spectator*, United States

Barbara Crossette, *The New York Times*, United States

Jenny del Río, *El Mercurio*, Chile

Marc Dennis, former *Newsweek* correspondent in the Balkans

Tanya Domi, former OSCE Mission BiH Information Director, Bosnia

Philippe Doucet, *Le Figaro*, France

Jeffrey Fager, CBS, United States

Douglas Farah, *The Washington Post*, United States

Aida Feraget, former *Oslobodjenje* journalist, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Carl Gershman, National Endowment for Democracy, United States

Osama Ghazoly, ART, Egypt

Alejandro Guillier, Televisión Nacional and Departamento de Prensa de Chilevisión, Chile

Juan Carlos Gutiérrez, CBS, Chile

Barbara Haig, National Endowment for Democracy, United States

Chris Hedges, *The New York Times*, United States

Fred Hiatt, *The Washington Post*, United States

Norman Hill, Philip Randolph Institute, United States

David Hoffman, *The Washington Post*, United States

Mehmed Husic, Independent Union of Professional Journalist, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Rym Ibrahim, CNN International, London

Donny Iswandono, Aji-Indonesia, Indonesia

Sasa Jankovic, Radio OXYGEN, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Bob Jobbins, BBC, United Kingdom

Alfredo Joignant, Corporación Tiempo 2000, Chile

Will King, CNN, United States

Nada Klajic, Radio MIR, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Kevin Klose, National Public Radio, United States

Bill Kovach, Committee of Concerned Journalists, United States

Hamid Latifi, Alliance of Kosovo Journalists, Kosovo

Jake Lynch, Sky News, United Kingdom

María Isabel de Martini, La Tercera, Chile

Bruce McCollm, former president of Freedom House, United States

William McGurn, *The Wall Street Journal*, United States

Rosen Milev, Association for Mass Media and Communication Culture on the Balkans, Bulgaria

Susan Moeller, the Joan Shorenstein Centre on Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University, United States

Claude Moisy, Vice-President of Reporters Sans Frontières, France

Colum Murphy, former Spokesman and Advisor to the United Nations High Representative at The Dayton Peace Agreement, Switzerland

Javier Navia, *La Nación*, Argentina

Gérard Norecou, *Le Figaro*, France

Ati Nurbaiti, *The Jakarta Post*, Indonesia

Susan Osnoss, Human Rights Watch, United States

John Owen, Freedom Forum, United Kingdom

Amaro Gómez Pablos, CNN International, United Kingdom

Alberto Pando, CNN, Chile

Doug Payne, formerly with Freedom House, United States

Mónica Pérez, Televisión Nacional (Canal 7), Chile

Alice Petré, journalist, Sweden

Tessa Piper, The Asia Foundation, Indonesia

Wiratmo Probo, ISAI, Indonesia

Susanto Pudjomartono, *The Jakarta Post*, Indonesia

Ignacio Ramonet, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, France

Ibn Abdur Rehman, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

Dusan Reljic, European Institute for the Media, Germany

Kate Roberts, *The New York Times*, United States

Tina Rosenberg, *The New York Times*, United States

Stephen Rosenfeld, *The Washington Post*, United States

Eliana Rozas, Escuela de Periodismo de la Universidad Católica, Chile

Paola Sais, La Tercera, United Kingdom and Chile

S. W. Sanders, former *Newsweek* and *Business Week* correspondent in Asia

Stephen Schwartz, *Forward*, United States

Elaine Sciolino, United States Institute of Peace, United States

Roger Silverstone, London School of Economics and Political Science, United Kingdom

Jhonny Sitorus, Tempo News Room, Indonesia

Tara Sonenshine, United States Institute of Peace, United States

Lucy Spiegel, CNN, United States

Jonathan Steele, *The Guardian*, United Kingdom

Joe Stork, Human Rights Watch, United States

Agus Sudibyo, Media Watch, Indonesia

John Sweeney, *The Guardian*, United Kingdom

Sam Tannenhau, *The New York Times*, United States

Michel Tatu, *Géopolitique Africaine*, France

Penny Tuerk, BBC, United Kingdom

Jean-Pierre Tuquoi, *Le Monde*, France

Wandy N. Tutupoong, The Asia Foundation, Indonesia

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## USEFUL INTERNET SITES

[www.aimpress.ch](http://www.aimpress.ch)

*Alternativna Informativna Mrežna (Alternative Information Network) is an independent news agency of journalists from Yugoslavia.*

[www.amic.org.sg](http://www.amic.org.sg)

*The Asia Media Information and Communication Centre aims to spearhead the development of media and communication expertise in the Asia-Pacific to foster socio-economic progress.*

[www.awmc.com](http://www.awmc.com)

*The African Women's Media Centre trains African women journalists.*

[www.cmpa.com](http://www.cmpa.com)

*The Centre for Media and Public Affairs is a research and educational organisation that conducts scientific studies of the news media.*

[www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org)

*The Committee to Protect Journalists is an organisation dedicated to the international defence of press freedom.*

[www.crimesofwar.org](http://www.crimesofwar.org)

*The Crimes of War Project is a collaboration of journalists, lawyers and scholars who seek to raise awareness of the laws of war among the media, governments and the human rights and humanitarian communities.*

[www.fair.org](http://www.fair.org)

*Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting scrutinises media practices and offers criticism of media bias and censorship.*

[www.gla.ac.uk/departments/sociology/media.html](http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/sociology/media.html)

*A research based grouping of academics within the sociology department of Glasgow University working to promote the development of new methodologies and substantive research in the area of media and communications, including human rights and humanitarian reporting*

[www.iaj.org.za](http://www.iaj.org.za)

*The Institute for the Advancement of Journalism in South Africa conducts training for better journalism.*

[www.ifj.org](http://www.ifj.org)

*Official site of the International Federation of Journalists.*

[www.ijnnet.org](http://www.ijnnet.org)

*The International Journalist Network is an online service for journalists and media professionals.*

[www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org)

*The Independent Media Centre is a network of collectively run media outlets.*

[www.journalism.org](http://www.journalism.org)

*The Committee of Concerned Journalists is a consortium of journalists working to clarify the principles of their profession.*

[www.mediafoundationwa.org](http://www.mediafoundationwa.org)

*The Media Foundation for West Africa is a regional non-governmental organisation based in Accra which defends and promotes the rights of the media.*

[www.newslab.org](http://www.newslab.org)

*NewsLab focuses on research and training for television newsrooms, helping them find better ways of telling complex stories that are often difficult to convey on television.*

[www.nyu.edu/globalbeat](http://www.nyu.edu/globalbeat)

*Global Reporting Network, a programme of the Centre for War, Peace, and the News Media at New York University's Department of Journalism and Mass Communication. Contains a useful international list of experts.*

[www.people-press.org](http://www.people-press.org)

*The Pew Research Centre for the People and the Press is an independent opinion research group, which studies public attitudes toward the press, politics and policy issues. See also the Pew Centre for Civic Journalism ([www.pewcenter.org](http://www.pewcenter.org)).*

[www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org)

*School of journalism.*

[www.presswise.org.uk](http://www.presswise.org.uk)

*The PressWise Trust works to promote higher standards of human rights. It has collected and indexed journalist codes of conduct from over eighty countries. See also the PressWise RAM project on refugees, asylum-seekers and mass media ([www.ramproject.org.uk](http://www.ramproject.org.uk)).*

[www.publicintegrity.org](http://www.publicintegrity.org)

*The Centre for Public Integrity's mission is to provide the public with the findings of investigations and analyses of public service, government accountability and ethics-related issues.*

[www.rsf.fr](http://www.rsf.fr)

*Reporters Sans Frontières (Reporters Without Borders) defends press freedom around the world.*

[www.unhchr.ch](http://www.unhchr.ch)

*Official site of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.*

[www.webstar.com.gh/waja](http://www.webstar.com.gh/waja)

*The West African Journalists Association is a regional grouping of journalists' associations and unions, which promotes unity and higher professionalism among journalists and defends and monitors press freedom and other human rights in the region.*

## **About the International Council on Human Rights Policy**

The International Council on Human Rights Policy was established in 1998 following an international consultation that started after the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna.

The Council's Mission Statement reads:

The International Council on Human Rights Policy will provide a forum for applied research, reflection and forward thinking on matters of international human rights policy. In a complex world in which interests and priorities compete across the globe, the Council will identify issues that impede efforts to protect and promote human rights and propose approaches and strategies that will advance that purpose.

The Council will stimulate co-operation and exchange across the non-governmental, governmental and intergovernmental sectors, and strive to mediate between competing perspectives. It will bring together human rights practitioners, scholars and policy-makers, along with those from related disciplines and fields whose knowledge and analysis can inform discussion of human rights policy.

It will produce research reports and briefing papers with policy recommendations. These will be brought to the attention of policy-makers, within international and regional organisations, in governments and intergovernmental agencies and in voluntary organisations of all kinds.

In all its efforts, the Council will be global in perspective, inclusive and participatory in agenda-setting and collaborative in method.

The Council starts from the principle that successful policy approaches will accommodate the diversity of human experience. It co-operates with all that share its human rights objectives, including voluntary and private bodies, national governments and international agencies.

The International Council meets annually to set the direction of the Council's programme. It ensures that the Council's agenda and research draw widely on experience from around the world. Members help to make sure that the Council's programme reflects the diversity of disciplines, regional perspectives, country expertise and specialisations that are essential to maintain the quality of its research.

To implement the programme, the Council employs a small secretariat of seven staff. Based in Geneva, its task is to ensure that projects are well designed and well managed and that research findings are brought to the attention of relevant authorities and those who have a direct interest in the policy areas concerned.

## Members of the International Council

<b>Theo van Boven*</b>	United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture; Professor of International Law, University of Maastricht.
<b>Stanley Cohen*</b>	Professor of Sociology, London School of Economics.
<b>David Fernández Dávalos</b>	Education Assistant, Jesuit Mexican Programme; Former President, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO University), Mexico.
<b>Maria Marta Delgado</b>	Active in the Civil and Political Rights Programme at the Uruguayan chapter of SERPAJ (Servicio Paz y Justicia in Latin America).
<b>Yash Ghai</b>	Chair, Kenya Constitution Review Commission; Sir Y K Pao Professor of Public Law, Hong Kong.
<b>Thomas Hammarberg*</b>	Regional Advisor for Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Ambassador and Special Adviser on Humanitarian Issues, Sweden.
<b>Bahey El Din Hassan</b>	Director, Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies.
<b>Ayesha Imam*</b>	Consultant on women's human rights.
<b>Hina Jilani*</b>	United Nations Secretary General's Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders; Director, AGHS Legal Aid Cell, Lahore.
<b>Walter Kälin*</b>	Professor of International Law, Institute of Public Law, University of Bern.
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<b>Goenawan Mohamed</b>	Poet; Former editor of <i>Tempo</i> Magazine, Indonesia.
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<b>Margo Picken</b>	Chief, Cambodian Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.
<b>N. Barney Pitayana</b>	Vice-Chancellor and Principal, University of South Africa.
<b>Daniel Ravindran</b>	Founder, Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (Forum-Asia).
<b>Thun Saray</b>	President, Cambodia Human Rights and Development Association.
<b>Eyad El-Sarraj</b>	Psychiatrist; Director, Gaza Community Mental Health Programme
<b>Dorothy Thomas</b>	Director, Independent Commission of Human Rights in Palestine.
<b>Renate Weber</b>	Consultant, Shaler-Adams Foundation and Ford Foundation, United States.
	Co-President, Romanian Helsinki Committee.

\* Member of the Executive Board

## Publications by the International Council

### *This Publication*

***Journalism, Media and the Challenge of Human Rights Reporting***, 2002, ISBN 2-940259-23-2, 140pp., 40 Swiss Francs plus postage. Available in English.

***Journalism, Media and the Challenge of Human Rights Reporting – Summary***, 10 Swiss Francs plus postage. Available in English, French and Spanish.

### *Already Published*

***Beyond Voluntarism: Human Rights and the Developing International Legal Obligations of Companies***, 2002, ISBN 2-940259-19-4, 174pp., 40 Swiss Francs plus postage. Available in English.

***Beyond Voluntarism: Human Rights and the Developing International Legal Obligations of Companies – Summary***, 10 Swiss Francs plus postage. Available in English, French and Spanish  
*Argues that there is a basis in international law for extending legal obligations to companies in relation to human rights, and describes the scope of existing law.*

***Racial and Economic Exclusion: Policy Implications***, 2001, ISBN 2-940259-27-5, 32pp., 20 Swiss Francs plus postage. Also available in French and Spanish.

*Examines the economic factors that contribute to racial discrimination and identifies a combination of policies to remedy the exclusion that occurs when racism and economic disenpowerment combine.*

***The Persistence and Mutation of Racism***, 2000, ISBN 2-940259-09-7, 26pp., 20 Swiss Francs plus postage. Available in English, French and Spanish. Also available in Arabic from the Human Rights Information & Training Centre, PO Box 4535, Taiz, Yemen, Tel: 9674-216277, Fax: 9674-216279, hrtic@y.net.ye

*Surveys some of the main issues that preoccupy people who suffer from racism or who study its effects.*

***Ends and Means: Human Rights Approaches to Armed Groups***, 2000, ISBN 2-940259-02-X, 79pp., 40 Swiss Francs plus postage. Available in English.

***Ends and Means: Human Rights Approaches to Armed Groups – Summary of findings***, 10 Swiss Francs plus postage. Available in English, French and Spanish.

*Sets out a framework for analysing the problem of armed groups and respect for human rights and discusses strategies for preventing human rights abuses by armed groups.*

***Local Perspectives: Foreign Aid to the Justice Sector***, 2000, ISBN 2-940259-04-6, 125pp., 40 Swiss Francs plus postage. Available in English.

***Local Perspectives: Foreign Aid to the Justice Sector – Summary of findings***, 10 Swiss Francs plus postage. Available in English, French and Spanish.

*Examines the effectiveness of human rights assistance programmes from the perspective of beneficiaries. Research focused on the administration of justice in several countries.*

***Performance and Legitimacy: National Human Rights Institutions***, 2000, ISBN 2-940259-03-8, 132pp., 40 Swiss Francs plus postage. Available in English.

***Performance & Legitimacy: National Human Rights Institutions — Summary of Findings***, 10 Swiss Francs plus postage. Available in English, French, Spanish and Bahasa Indonesian. *Assesses the extent to which national human rights institutions are acquiring social legitimacy and meeting the needs of vulnerable groups. Field research was undertaken in Indonesia, Mexico, and Ghana.*

***Hard Cases: Bringing Human Rights Violators to Justice Abroad — A Guide to Universal Jurisdiction***, 1999, ISBN 2-940259-01-1, 57 pp., 20 Swiss Francs plus postage. Also available in Spanish from: Instituto de Defensa Legal, José Toribio Polo 248, Lima 18, Peru. Tel: 5114-410192, Fax: 5114-424037. *Summarises the universal jurisdiction argument and sets out the issues that need to be considered when prosecuting human rights violators abroad.*

***Taking Duties Seriously: Individual Duties in International Human Rights Law — A Commentary***, 1999, ISBN 2-940259-00-3, 80pp., 20 Swiss Francs plus postage. Available in English. *Collects together the references to individual duties in international human rights standards.*

All publications from the International Council are available on our Internet site at [www.international-council.org](http://www.international-council.org) or [www.ichrp.org](http://www.ichrp.org). A link on the home page will direct you to a list of all the publications, then simply follow the instructions.

For more information about the International Council and its work, please contact us at [info@ichrp.org](mailto:info@ichrp.org)

## ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

In recent years, the human rights dimension has become more strongly pronounced as a consideration by the media. How does journalism deal with the selecting and the angling of a human rights story? What is the role of journalists — simply providers of information on which others make judgement, or is it more complex? How does one deal with bias or corruption of human rights information?

This report addresses these questions and examines the nature and quality of the internal media process and the exchange on human rights between the media and those organisations that seek to influence them, and delves into the difficulty of communicating complicated information. It clarifies these complex processes, calls for a fresh debate between journalists and human rights activists and identifies ways to improve the quality and consistency of journalism and human rights work in this area.

“well-written and well informed”

*Stephen Ellis, African Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands*

“Finally, a thorough examination of how human rights issues and stories relate to media coverage. This should prompt all the players involved to rethink their goals and values, to work more comprehensively towards a positive result.”

*Riz Khan, journalist, former host of CNN's "Q&A with Riz Khan"*

“excellent...demonstrates with piercing analysis the need for the human rights movement to better inform and deploy the media in the human rights campaign. The report will for long remain the baseline on which the media and human rights movement judge their collaboration.”

*Makau Mutua, Director of the Human Rights Centre, State University of New York*

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