Give Peace a Channel: Launching an International Satellite TV Channel for Conflict Resolution Dialogue.

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Give peace a channel!

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This is a call for concerted action to establish and institutionalize an international television channel for conflict resolution through which individuals and communities divided by social conflict can be brought together for face-to-face dialogue, in order to overcome geographic distances, prohibitively high travel costs, and inhospitable political realities that have kept them apart.

It is anticipated that this proposal will be of interest to a broad range of stakeholders including media organizations and journalists, government officials and diplomats, scholar-practitioners engaged in conflict resolution, and civil society and religious leaders trying to bridge potentially destructive inter-communal differences.

The specific course of action proposed by this author, a practitioner of international conflict resolution who has been working toward this vision for some years, consists of three cumulative phases; these steps may be taken in response to specific conflict-related issues (e.g. the Danish cartoon controversy over the Prophet Mohammed's image) or much broader, longer-term issues (e.g. dialogue between Islamic and Christian civilizations, across diverse regions of the world):

1. A series of videoconferences bringing together two or more geographically separated communities. Communications at this initial stage of the movement do not have to be widely broadcast or televised, but they can be used to familiarize dialogue participants with the method of video-linked face-to-face dialogue on selected topics that interest all sides.

2. One to a few carefully designed and facilitated inter-communal dialogues televised for a broader appeal, as an experimental pilot-test program. These dialogues may be broadcast live or otherwise recorded with the consent of the participants will-

The purpose of this second phase is to enable the dialogue facilitators and participants on all sides to actually discuss their conflict in full view of TV cameras and later evaluate challenges and opportunities they face in relation to the unique characteristics of their conflict. To minimize possible risks, it may be advisable first to involve relatively small local media organizations with limited outreach capacities, instead of large international media networks, at least at this pilot-test phase.

3. Regular televised inter-communal dialogues intended to promote conflict resolution and public education actively and widely – The third stage of the proposed campaign involves larger media organizations with national or international outreach. It is intended to generate sustained and maximum impact on all levels of conflict-inflicted societies, from the grassroots to top political leadership. The ultimate goal is to secure stable sponsorship of such a mechanism of televised dialogue by an influential media organization that is willing and able to institutionalize a special conflict resolution channel.

There are numerous details involved in each of these steps, administratively, methodologically, and philosophically. Yet the purpose of this paper is to present a broad sketch of the basic vision, as well as a working template for ongoing discussion and concerted action, setting aside procedural details that have to be worked out in a context-specific manner.

Background

The basic outline of the proposed vision has come to be crystallized through a number of videoconferences that the author has attended in the Washington, DC area, especially since September 11, 2001. They include the televised dialogue between George Mason University (GMU) in Virginia and the University of Baghdad held several weeks before the United States officially launched the military campaign in Iraq in 2003 and the ceremony commemorating the tenth anniversary of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda held jointly by GMU and the National University of Rwanda. The former, in particular, was televised by Al-Jazcera and viewed by millions of people in Iraq and other Middle East countries at the height of the mounting political tension.

One of the important lessons learned experien-
tially on these and other occasions is the humanizing effect of face-to-face dialogue. Indications of such humanizing effects were mostly anecdotal in nature, but clearly evident among a number of dialogue participants whom this author interacted with in post-dialogue debriefings. Through these interactions, it was also observed that humanization could take place regardless of whether dialogue participants were able to agree on how to resolve their conflicts substantively and how controversial their exchange of views and feelings was.

To refine the method of video-lined conflict resolution dialogue and start testing this 'humanization hypothesis' empirically, the author, with the active support of the California-based peacebuilding NGO Global Majority, designed and facilitated a similar dialogue process between university students and academics in Amman, Jordan and California in 2007.

**Rationale: four guiding principles**

The exact substantive content, its underlying philosophy, and procedural steps to be taken to realize proposed televised dialogues need to be defined differently from context to context, conflict to conflict. Yet experience suggests that there are at least four guiding principles that define the basic parameters of such dialogues across diverse social contexts.

**Principle 1: Activating peace potential in globalization.** Globalization, like modernization, is a multifaceted concept that encompasses political, economic, cultural, and other spheres of social life. At the heart of globalization, one may argue, is supra-territoriality (Scholte, 2000) – the underlying social momentum toward a fundamental change in the way we interact with geographic distances in general and territorial boundaries between states in particular, making geographic divides a less insurmountable barrier in human interactions. These trends have been accelerated in recent decades by advanced communication technologies and transportation systems.

In this age of globalization, the mass media powerfully influences the lives of peoples and communities divided by social conflict, either positively or negatively. As demonstrated clearly by the Danish cartoon controversy over the Prophet Mohammed’s image, media coverage on issues resonating deeply with people’s identities, historical memories, and geo-political realities has the potential for exacerbating social tension and even inciting violent protests in different parts of the world.

However, effects of globalization and high-tech information networks are not entirely negative, for they can be utilized to facilitate communication between divided communities and humanize their relationships. The proposed dialogue process is intended to demonstrate at least one way of activating the peace potential inherent in the contemporary trends toward globalization.

**Principle 2: Multi-track diplomacy for systemic social change.** Another concept that informs the proposed dialogue process is multi-track diplomacy, popularized by John McDonald and Louise Diamond (1996). It suggests that peacebuilding can be promoted not only by the conventional inter-governmental track, but also by a range of other channels and actors – from the media to NGOs to academics to business leaders, all potentially capable of building constructive relationships across nations and communities.

Multitrack diplomacy therefore is a systemic approach to peacebuilding that seeks to mobilize different levels of actors and their unique peace potential. It is applicable to the proposed method of televised conflict resolution dialogue in a number of different ways. For example, one may envision the possibility of bringing together business leaders in Taiwan and mainland China, religious leaders in Ethiopia and Eritrea, traditional artists in North Korea and Japan, and medical doctors in Iran and the United States.

Such a holistic approach is useful not only at the international level, but also at the intra-national and communal level (for example, bringing together ‘pro-business’ and ‘pro-environment’ opinion leaders for a televised dialogue in the United States). The hypothesis under consideration is that more proactively and frequently multitrack diplomacy is practiced, the more transparency is demanded in inter-governmental relations, assuming that such dialogue for people-to-people diplomacy is designed and facilitated in a well-coordinated manner that duly takes into consideration foreseeable risks and long-term consequences for its stakeholders.

**Principle 3: Peace journalism beyond conventional war journalism.** Peace journalism as an emerging paradigm of media service seeks to offer multi-truth, multi-angle reporting, with constructive, solution-orientated thinking and a systematic analysis of structural and cultural forces that give rise to presenting issues at hand. It has evolved from
the social consciousness that conventional mainstream journalism tends to sensationalize crises, especially war and violence, and unnecessarily polarizes their stakeholders along the lines of we-ness and they-ness, who is winning and who is losing.

The proposed movement toward launching televised conflict resolution dialogues intends to further the cause of peace journalism and transform the paradigm of war journalism. More specifically, it will build on a range of advanced mediation skills that open up a humanizing communicative space for face-to-face dialogue in which all parties are invited to jointly reflect on why the conflict is happening, what it means to them and their future generations, and how they can come to envision a more constructive future.

The proposed dialogue will focus on conflict as a problem shared by its parties. It will actively challenge the tendency of war journalism that focuses primarily on the resulting violence, as well on who is winning or losing – 'points scored' on the frontlines of war fighting.

Principle 4: Active nonviolence as a code of conduct. Active nonviolence is not only a technique of political engineering, but also a deep spiritual commitment and an all-encompassing philosophical way of life rooted in centuries of cultural and religious traditions in different parts of the world. One of the prominent leaders of this approach was Mohandas K. Gandhi, a committed practitioner of Hinduism who sought inspirations from other faith traditions. In the Gandhian tradition of moral politics, active nonviolence is regarded as a means of self-reformation and social empowerment by which to manifest soul-force and self-suffering in order to restore irreducible essentials of human livelihood, without depriving opponents of theirs.

Practitioners of active nonviolence, either of the Gandhian type or other types, are encouraged to accept risk-taking, transparency, and accountability as a mandatory requirement for participation in such movements; they are also asked to refrain from retaliation in the face of their opponents attacking them by force or other means. Volunteers who are inspired by the cause of nonviolence but are unwilling or unable to accept these rules of conduct are prohibited from participation in the movement, at least in terms of the Gandhian tradition.

In the proposed movement toward televised conflict resolution dialogues, participants coming from communities undergoing an open period of warfare and mass violence must be informed in advance of foreseeable risks of participation. If necessary, they may have to be thoroughly trained in the ethics and techniques of active nonviolence before participation, using either the Gandhian approach or some other culturally appropriate approach. Conveners and facilitators must also thoroughly examine under what conditions they should organize or postpone a televised dialogue, given the level of foreseeable risks.

Empirical evidence on the effectiveness of the proposed approach

With these long-term visions of public outreach in mind, the present author designed and implemented a two-way dialogue through videoconferencing between the Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS) in California and the University of Jordan in Amman on September 6, 2007.

A ninety-minute dialogue titled 'American-Arab Relations: Challenges and Opportunities for the 21st Century' was co-facilitated by the present author, a Japanese national, on the American side and a Jordanian female coordinator on the Jordanian side. It was attended by eight participants, who voluntarily responded to the advertisement of the event, on each side. Out of the 16 participants in total, 10 were female and six male; six of them were Americans, six Jordanians, and the rest from miscellaneous nationalities such as Iraqi, Moroccan, and Bosnian; ten of them were graduate students, three university professors, and three NGO and civil society representatives.

Throughout the dialogue, each group faced a large screen on which the other group was projected. The active exchange of opinions and feelings was stimulated by a list of prepared questions concerning the mutual image of Arab and American societies, evaluations of the American role in Iraq, and challenges and opportunities presented to civil society leaders and policy makers for future relationship-building between the two societies. Because this pilot-test dialogue was used deliberately to create an open and safe space to freely experiment with techniques of mediation that might be used in the future for actual televised dialogues, it was decided not to make arrangements to televise the event.

Immediately after the dialogue, a survey was
conducted on both sides to measure the impact of this experience on the participants. Because the size of the participants was small and they were admitted to the dialogue without any systematic procedure of selection, the results of the survey must be considered very limited in significance, especially in terms of their generalizability. However, the unequivocally positive ratings on many aspects of the dialogue provided by the respondents, as demonstrated shortly, appear to suggest that future empirical research on this subject is most likely to generate valuable evidence in support of the underlying rationale of the proposed vision, including the ‘humanization hypothesis’ introduced earlier.

The respondents were invited to answer questions using a five-point scale. Asked if they felt they were able to build rapport with the other side, two out of the 16 participants answered ‘very deeply, with very strong effect on me’, or 5 on the five-point scale, and eight of the total 16 answered ‘somewhat deeply’, or 4 on the scale. These two positive categories combined, 10 out of 16, or 63% of all the respondents, felt that the videoconference had positive impact on them in building rapport with the other side. (Likewise the findings presented with percentage hereafter refer to the ratio of positive responses, 4 and 5 combined, to all the responses.) As to the extent to which the videoconference changed the other side’s image positively (question b), 67% of the participants responded either positively or very positively.

The participants were also asked to compare their experience of videoconferencing with actual face-to-face dialogue, in terms of the extent to which they could communicate their thoughts and feelings with one another. Fifteen out of the 16 participants, or 94%, evaluated the effectiveness of videoconferencing very positively or positively. The participants were then asked to infer how much more or less effective videoconferencing would be compared to actual face-to-face dialogue, if real conflict parties were invited to use videoconferencing for the purpose of resolving a real conflict that the parties were undergoing.

Their responses were split: four out of the 16 respondents chose 2, ‘somewhat less effective’; four of them chose 3, ‘about the same as face-to-face dialogue’; six respondents, or 38%, sensed that videoconferencing was either ‘somewhat more’ or ‘much more’ effective than actual face-to-face dialogue. In other words, 63% of all the respondents felt that videoconference would be at least as effective as face-to-face dialogue as a means to mediate a real-world conflict between real conflict parties.

Asked to describe their justifications for their response to this last question using their own words, the respondents offered a wide range of written comments such as: ‘Nothing can replace face-to-face dialogue, but this [videoconferencing method] is probably the closest ...’ (a participant on the American side); ‘This method is more effective than face to face, more comfortable discussing issues’ (a participant on the Jordanian side). It is inferred from these and other comments that there emerges no consensus as to the usefulness of videoconferencing when tackling real conflicts, nor can there be any simple justification for or against the use of this method.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly for this proposal, the participants were asked to imagine the whole event being broadcast live via an international television channel. They were then asked if they could have more or less openly and frankly communicated their thoughts and feelings to the other side than in the video dialogue that they had just completed.

In response to this hypothetical question, three out of 16 people chose 4, ‘somewhat openly, but not as much as this time’; as many as 13 respondents, including all eight participants on the Jordanian side, chose 5, ‘as openly as this time, or even more’. In other words, 100% of the respondents, with the two positive categories combined, felt comfortable with the whole dialogue, including the critical exchange on the US role in Iraq, being televised live internationally.

While the generalizability of the results under consideration is limited, their implications are highly evocative, especially in the following three ways. First, it is worth examining the humanizing effect of videoconferencing and televised dialogue through more systematic empirical research, inspired by the preliminary evidence in support of such effects.

Second, whether actual face-to-face dialogue is more effective than video-linked or televised dialogue is a far more complex question that it appears at first glance. It therefore merits full attention as a subject of serious empirical research.

Third and final, conditions under which conflict parties feel comfortable and forthcoming to participate in live televised dialogue for conflict resolution
have to be explored and discovered, for the preliminary evidence suggests that live TV coverage may not be as intimidating as an outside observer might think.

Concluding thoughts
In conclusion, it is emphasized that with creativity, effective networking, and a sustained commitment, one can find a way to activate the peace potential inherent in globalization and take concrete measures to utilize them for multi-track peacemaking. Although the specific details outlined in this proposal may have to be modified or even rejected by the unique needs and contexts of local application, its basic spirit and rationale, one may argue, merit the full attention of political communities across different parts of the world.

In the age of information technologies, there are hundreds, and perhaps more, of movie channels available via satellite television networks. Yet there is not a single channel, to the present author’s knowledge, dedicated specifically for the purpose of bringing together communities divided by social conflict.

It is hoped that concerted multitrack efforts will one day culminate in the establishment of a ‘24-hour dialogue channel for conflict resolution’ that institutionalizes a permanent forum for concerned citizens at all levels of society to have their views heard and together build sustained momentum for constructive social change. Hence the proposed campaign slogan: Give peace a channel!

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References


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Memory and denial: Rwanda 15 years on

Gerald Caplan

April 2009 marked the 15th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda of a large part of its Tutsi population and of many Hutu who refused to embrace violent extremism. It is ironic that both the first and the last genocides of the 20th century took place in Africa.

In 1904, soldiers representing Imperial Germany deliberately sought to exterminate the Herero people of Namibia, then the German colony of South-West Africa. Anxious to occupy the lands of the Herero, the German colonial army came precious close to achieving its grisly, racist goal. Before it ended, some three-quarters of 80,000 Herero were dead. Exactly 90 years later, the racists were powerful Hutu extremists in Rwanda who conspired to annihilate the minority Tutsi people, largely to avoid sharing power and wealth with them.

Like the Germans before them, the genocidaires in Rwanda were remarkably successful in executing their plot. Before they were defeated, about three-quarters of all the country’s Tutsi had been murdered, often in the most sadistic ways imaginable. Exact numbers remain unknown to this day, but it is possible that as many as a million Tutsi were killed in the 100 days of the genocide.

But very like South-West Africa, outside influences were key to events in Rwanda. Had European missionaries not invented an ideology that blatantly set Tutsi against Hutu, had the Belgian colonial government not institutionalised this false ideology, had the French government not offered all possible support to the Hutu government of Rwanda in the years immediately leading to the genocide, the genocide might never have happened. Once triggered, it was the Security Council, urged on by the United States,