"Speech, Power, Violence" Conference Talk

February 5, 2009

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First, I'd like to say that I'm honored to be here among such a diverse group of experts. Since I know many of you have vast experience in the Balkans, I look forward to hearing our discussion and also, I hope, to figuring out how we can work together against this scourge of hate speech. It's a huge, critical and sometimes overwhelming issue for those of us working in conflicts around the world; a colleague once described it to me as the proverbial ant climbing an elephant's leg with the intention of rape. So I applaud the Committee on Conscience for the audacity of tackling this enormous problem and pulling us together to do so. I hope we'll make some progress.

Now, in response to Kemal's powerful remarks -- I think this is a good way to kick us off because the picture Kemal has painted us of the problems that peace in the region faces today, and has faced for the last several decades, is a story that touches on a lot of the different questions that hate speech raises and I'll try to show what I mean.

So, the state of the media in the Balkans is obviously still grim. The governments and their respective media continue to churn out divisive political propaganda, pretending that it's news and showing little interest in forming any accurate account of the past. International media coverage is increasingly about worsening tensions – very little good news at all coming out of the Balkans these days.

And I think Kemal rightly points out that long-term peace is going to require acknowledgement of past abuses and their victims, prosecution of war criminals, and the development of a common history. He also highlights the importance of approaching the media distortion in terms of both media and non media action, when he describes the enabling environment and "the absence of the opposition or functioning civil society." So in effect he's shown the complex interrelationship between history, media coverage, and political leadership. All too often, I have found discussions of conflict zones to zero in on one piece or the other – especially when it comes to talking about the media piece of the problem. It's become fashionable in Washington these days – and for good reason --to

talk of "whole of government" approaches to problems of stability and reconstruction, and yet media reform seems to happen in a fairly silo-ed manner. This needs to change and I was pleased to see how Kemal had taken a fairly broad perspective in diagnosing the problems. I find often that when we talk about the media environment which nurtures hate speech, that we don't do it with sufficient regard to the very complex interrelationship that I think is kind of the subtext for your remarks and for the paper that you produced -- the complex interrelationship between history, between the media coverage, and between the political leadership, or the vacuum thereof. And it's interesting to me, because despite the recognition of the need for whole of government thinking, still, when we talk about dealing with media in conflict, media in Iraq, when we talk about media in Afghanistan, when we talk about it in parts of Africa, we tend to do it in a -- again, a fairly siloed way, as if media sector reform can be divorced from the complex relationship between the state of the state, and the state of the conflict itself. These things are quite integral to one another and have to be tackled as such -- which is one of the questions we're working on at the Institute: how do you integrate peacebuilding media with your other peacebuilding strategies?

So let's talk about solutions – solutions to the dilemma of hate speech that is. And here I'm going to try to bring my experience in working in many other conflicts to bear. I'm going to put them out there, and hope we'll have some discussion of them in the time to follow.

First, the history challenge raised by Kemal. As I'm sure all of us would agree, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions have been a valuable post-conflict tool for acknowledging past atrocities and creating a shared history. While reconciliation is never guaranteed, the process has helped heal torn societies and results in a comprehensive final report. This report creates a common historical narrative of the mass atrocities or genocide, based on both victims' and perpetrators' interviews. TRCs in South Africa, Peru, Morocco and East Timor are widely considered examples of successful peacebuilding programs. What distinguishes the experience of the TRCs in these countries from the Balkans? First, each had strong government backing – although the Moroccan government came kicking and screaming after intense public pressure. But in

each case eventually the government was fully committed to the process. Second, the public was willing to explore the past, even if it meant accepting part of the blame. Given the persistent refusal of the regional governments and public to cooperate with each other, it is highly doubtful that any current effort to establish a TRC in the Balkans would prove fruitful. In fact, all previous efforts have failed for these reasons.

So if there doesn't seem to be much of a popular support for the TRC like solution, nor much government support – is there a way that the media sector – that very bastion of hate speech that Kemal describes as the cause of the problem – can it be transformed to become part of the solution? A catalyst for peacebuilding in the Balkans?

Probably not, in the current climate, without some major intervention on the part of the international community – either international governments or the NGO world. There are some very creative peacebuilding initiatives to consider and I'll talk about them in a second – and they have occurred really in the midst of some very repressive or controlling environments. Unfortunately, history seems to show us that we only start working in these areas in the wake of a conflict – not as a means of preventing it.

But let's say this time we got smart and got out ahead of the violence. What would that look like in media terms?

We – and by "we" I mean the NGO, Common Ground Productions, where I worked in the late 90's – we had some success in Bosnia specifically with a unique radio talk show that we created called Resolutions Radio where we incorporated multi-ethnic perspectives by training the talk show hosts in conflict resolution and selecting guests who represented all sides of the show's topic. They offered their audience positive options for action and a "safe" and constructive place to air their concerns and opinions. It's a format that we used several other places as well, and adapted for television in Bosnia. Of course we had the benefit then of using outlets funded directly by the international community so that gave us a leg up, but I know from experience in other places where government controlled the media (Burundi, Macedonia, Angola) it can be done. And I'll explain what I mean in a moment.

Another approach we've used with some success is cross-ethnic reporting. During my time with Common Ground Productions—the media arm of Search for Common Ground—we introduced several of these programs into fragile countries. They had the dual purposes of providing professional journalism training while increasing cross-cultural understanding.

Studio Ijambo in Burundi began broadcasting its radio news programs in 1995 in the midst of high tension between Hutus and Tutsis, following the genocide in nearby Rwanda. This small studio paired Hutu and Tutsi journalists together to gather interviews and produce objective weekly news programs. Their attention to eyewitness accounts of past violence and questions about the possibility of peace offered their audience of both ethnic groups an accurate history and hope for the future. As one Studio Ijambo reporter explained, "I think that by informing people and by telling the truth, we are helping Burundi find a path towards peace."[i]

A multi-ethnic reporting project in Macedonia had similar success in crossing cultural barriers to produce professional news and forge bonds between journalists. The Macedonia Journalism Project—a joint program of Common Ground Productions and the Center for War, Peace and the News Media—brought together teams of reporters from the various ethnic groups in Macedonia to train them in Western-style investigative reporting and produce a series of print news stories. During the joint process of developing and writing the series, the journalists confronted their own cultural stereotypes and differences and reflected this sensitivity in the quality of their work.

Which reminds me of the core ingredient to most international interventions in media – namely journalist training. Kemal describes in his book "Prime Time Crime" how the Balkans lost a huge percentage of their professional journalists to government repression and war. The average journalist today is young, untrained and accustomed to regurgitating government propaganda. The idea of providing professional journalism education to these reporters is nothing new; local and international organizations have done so for years. Unfortunately, as Kemal explains in his book "Prime Time Crime" the international community was really its own worst enemy following the war, with their good intentions of training journalists but we were pretty ham-handed in our approach.

We did it in accordance with the Dayton Accord, which meant – at least in Bosnia --
buying into the separation of Bosnia into different ethnic regions, each with their own
government and media. So the international community inadvertently wound up
supporting the ethnic or sectarian division of media (Serb, Bosniak, Croat, etc).

Now I've been talking almost exclusively, as that was the focus of Kemal's paper,
about professional media and journalists. But now we cannot ignore another major
producer of news: the citizen journalist. The world of citizen media is rapidly expanding,
as more people gain access to new technologies and the flow of information increases.
User-generated content in particular poses both new opportunities and challenges. For
better or worse, large numbers of people are getting their news from, and contributing to,
user-generated content on the internet. Blogs, text messages, tweets, wikis and videos—
citizens are documenting and sharing everything from the mundane to the significant.
Following Kosovo's declaration of independence, numerous blogs encouraged people to
protest against, as one blogger put it, the "Kosovo Albanians immoral & illegal
declaration of "independence" and secession from Serbia."[ii] So it can be a force for more
violence as well as a force for peacebuilding – as we saw in Colombia where Oscar
Morales mobilized more than 10 million people in over 100 cities around the world to
march in the streets against the FARC – Colombia's guerrilla movement. And Oscar did
it beginning with a Facebook group he created: A Million Voices against the FARC.

So when we talk about hate speech in the media, including the Balkan media, we
must be thinking about new media as well as traditional or mainstream media, as both
have the power to stir people to action. This leads us to a question we might want to
discuss later: Given the fact that media can play such a key role in creating conflict,
should we be monitoring it?

This question is especially significant for the Balkans. More than a decade after
the war, media in the Balkans continues to provide biased, politically driven news that
aims to perpetuate ethnic divisions. We have already seen how susceptible the public can
be to these messages. How can media monitoring help prevent the kind of mass atrocities
that occurred during the war from happening again?

There has been debate over the effectiveness of using media monitoring to predict mass atrocities or genocide—even the recent Genocide Prevention Task Force, convened by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the American Academy of Diplomacy and the U.S. Institute of Peace, points out in its report, *Preventing Genocide: A Blueprint for U.S. Policymakers*, that pervasive hate speech does not always lead to genocide or mass atrocities. I'm sure we will hear more on this topic throughout the conference, considering so many of you work on genocide prevention. But I would like to suggest that with new, sophisticated technology, media monitoring can be an effective tool for tracking and analyzing trends in ethnic tension and violence. It does not need to predict precisely where and when mass atrocities or genocide will take place. But I would like to hear from the experts here about whether they feel it can give us valuable insight into both the political and social context of the situation, which can help us identify high-risk environments. For example, the fact that the *Politika* so blatantly misrepresented Madeleine Albright's comments tells us something about the political sentiment of Serbia – which is consistent with a December 2008 article on the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty website describing a Serbian Facebook group that praised mass atrocities at Srebenica and attacked Muslims. More than 1,000 young people had joined the group by the time the reporter found it, which tells us something about the social context.

Once again, new technology provides us a variety of opportunities. The Holocaust Museum's *Genocide Prevention Mapping Initiative*, Al Jazeera's "Tracking Gaza" initiative, Ushahidi's Kenya map and Sokwanele's Zimbabwe map are all initiatives that use new technology to gather data on incidents of violence and uses interactive online maps to display them. Ushahidi—a group of volunteer developers and designers from Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Malawi, Ghana, the Netherlands and the U.S. -- is also developing a platform that allows people around to world to gather and visualize information. Anyone can submit crisis information via text messages, emails or any other web form.[iii] Of course, user-generated content—especially about something as personal as hate speech and hate crimes—raises questions about reliability. It may be worth discussing how we can ensure the credibility of the data these sites gather. But the potential for this type of monitoring is great and it runs right at the place from where we began this discussion and where Kemal took us – namely the creation of a shared,

authoritative history. In Gaza, in Kenya, in Zimbabwe in Darfur we are, it seems, using new technology to do this, because of, AND in spite of terrible repression.

But none of it would be possible, and this is something that hasn't changed, without some very courageous people.

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[i] http://www.gppac.net/documents/pbp_f/5/4_radio_.htm
[ii] http://serbblog.blogspot.com/2008/02/organized-protests-against-kosovo.html, http://www.byzantinesacredart.com/blog/2008/02/join-our-protests.html, http://serbianna.com/blogs/michaletos/?p=293
[iii] http://ushahidi.com/