

Should the Media Actively Support Transitional Justice Efforts? Adama Dieng, UN Under Secretary-General and Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide

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The role of the media in advancing transitional justice should be considered in light of the role it has played in the past as part of warfare to fuel incitement and hatred resulting in atrocities. I therefore argue that before we contemplate on the role of the media in transitional justice, it is useful to understand both the positive and negative role the media has played in the past, both as a tool to advance reconciliation and general human advancement and also a tool to manipulate populations and perpetrate evil resulting in unspeakable horrors that have shaken the conscience of mankind.

If one would like to look at the negative role of the media, then we would need not go far to consider Julius Streicher, publisher of the anti-Semitic German weekly *Der Stürmer* who was convicted on October 1, 1946 by the Nuremberg Tribunal for crimes against humanity in connection with his incitement of the mass murder of Europe's Jewish population. One can also consider the

Media Case

, as it was commonly known before the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), where Hassan Ngeze was found guilty of direct and public incitement to commit genocide through his publication,

Kangura

. And Ferdinand Nahimana and Jean-Bosco Barayagwiza, founders of a radio station called Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) whose broadcasts after 6 April 1994 were confirmed by the ICTR's Appeals Chamber to have directly incited the Rwandan population to commit genocide against the Tutsis.

Despite the negative role the media has played in incitement resulting into atrocities as confirmed by the Nuremberg Tribunal and the ICTR, it is also true that the media can play a positive role. In the aftermath of atrocities—mostly characterised by repression, injustices and a general break down of social fabric and political order—the media can play a key but also a complementary role, especially when the society is attempting to constitute itself by picking up the pieces. Through its unique position as a public disseminator of information it can expose the various and at times competing perspectives that led to the events of the past. Through this information, the media can encourage society to refrain from and avoid acts that plunged the society into conflict in the first place. In general, the media can play a role to promote reconciliation, truth commissions and general institutional and political reforms consistent with values and wishes of the society in question. I strongly believe that if the media has the power to incite and fuel such heinous crimes as we witnessed in Rwanda and elsewhere, then, it is also possible that it can be used as force for good to promote peaceful coexistence among the population.

However, the active role of the media in advancing transitional justice is not without its own challenges. When the media is used to promote a particular agenda or particular (and in some cases preferred) version or perspectives of what happened, not only can it expose itself to ridicule and loss of trust from ordinary citizens, but it may also end up causing more harm than the good it claims to do. It may sow seeds of divisions and hatred especially when it attempts to rewrite the history of the conflict to suit a particular narrative. It may also lead to further conflict, especially if it actively seeks to apportion blame and victimhood to particular groups based on political rather than objective considerations.

I strongly believe that the media has a natural and indispensable role in galvanizing public opinion on the importance of transitional justice. I say this because I believe that every citizen and institution has a civic and complementary duty to ensure that events of the past do not reoccur through addressing comprehensively acts or grievances that led to such events. Further, those responsible for the events of the past should be objectively identified and held to account based on appropriate legal and political framework determined by the concerned society.

The media can also play a key preventive role for atrocities. It can do so through objective reporting and exposing human rights abuses and other signs that, if not addressed in time, may plunge the society into conflict. We have repeatedly seen that precursors to atrocities and a general breakdown of law and order include unaddressed and persistent human rights abuses, neglected grievances (especially of the minorities and other socially marginalized groups), and general disregard of the rule of law. The media can play a role by exposing these issues and reminding those in charge of their primary obligations to address them.

In conclusion, I would like reiterate my strong belief that the media has a huge role to play in advancing transition justice in the aftermath of conflicts. One might as well say that the media is a final frontier in truth telling. At its best, objective media has no regard for religion, political affiliation, social status, power: it is there to document the truth—all sides of the truth. As such it can play an invaluable role in ensuring that the truth is told, that lies are exposed for what they are, that those who seek to manipulate populations by insisting on differences and sowing seeds of hatred are not allowed to succeed. Without regard for either political will or the balance or imbalance of power, the media can achieve what many of us who sit on roundtables to discuss so much resulting in so little action, are unable to achieve. At times defined as the direct presentation of facts or the description of events without an attempt at interpretation, the media presents us with an opportunity to achieve our goals: of preventing atrocities and peacefully addressing our differences without resorting to violence.

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