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# Media contribution to peace building in war torn societies

*Abstract*

Since the end of the Cold War, several military conflicts, some of which had been going on for decades, have successfully been resolved. Yet, the mere ratification of a peace treaty does not solve the problem of how to repair, materially, socially, humanly, war-torn societies.
Without systematic efforts of peacebuilding, conflicts might endure, and there is always the danger that violence might break out again.
The present paper focusses on the role of the media in these times of transition from war to peace. Based on empirical research on the news coverage of the Gulf War and the Bosnia conflict in American and European media, the paper aims at finding out whether and how the media may support the transition from war culture to peace culture. Such an attempt might involve each of the following aspects: deescalation-oriented conflict coverage, strengthening of the civil society and demolition of stereotypes and prejudice.
Special emphasis will be given to means by which a peace process itself, and even its disturbances and crises can be depicted in a way that supports the reconciliation of the former war parties, and that does not fall back into the logic of polarization.

## 1. Media contribution to war culture

### *1.1 Social psychological aspects of war culture*

War culture is characterized by dualistic thinking and the polarities it generates. To strengthen the peace process means to undermine these polarities. The question is how to do it. One way Interiano (1996) forsees this is to acknowledge that no one has the absolute standards of truth, since truth is highly relative and gives way to a variety of interpretations.

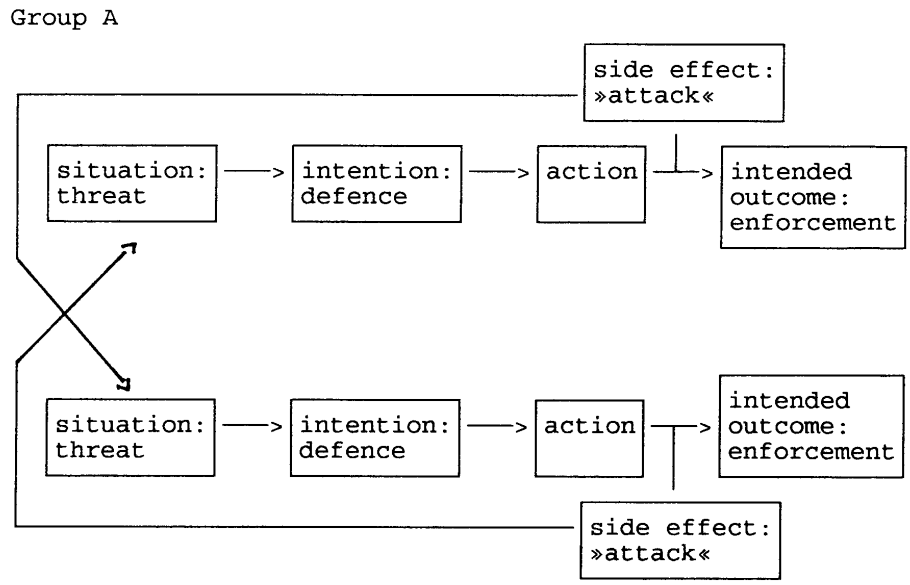


Figure 1: The autonomous process of conflict

The autonomous process of conflict Each conflict involves three modes of reality. The contrary "subjective realities" that the conflict has for each of the parties involved, which result from their own entanglement in the conflict, and a - so to speak - "objective reality" which can be seen from outside of the conflict only. While each of the parties tends to believe in the justification of its own goals, intentions and actions which they fear to be threatened by the opponent, an inspection of the conflict from outside may unveal how these feelings of justification and threat interact with each other and transform the conflict into an autonomous process (cf. Figure 1) in which each of the parties believe to defend itself against a dangerous aggressor (Kempf, 1993).
In order to break this autonomous process, it is essential that the parties learn to be critical about their own view of the conflict, and to enter into a process of role taking. The more a conflict has ecalated, the more diffult this becomes, however. Intractable conflicts are demanding, stressful, painful, exhausting and costly both in human and material terms. This requires that society members develop conditions which enable successful coping. One type of the conditions which war culture provides is a psychological infrastructure which consists, for example, of devotion to the own side and its leadership, maintenance to its objectives, high motivation

to contribute, endurance and readiness for personal sacrifice. Bar-Tal (1996) proposed that societal beliefs fulfill an important role in the formation of these psychological conditions. They are part of society's ethos, and construct society members' view of the conflict and motivate them to act on behalf of the society and to harm the enemy. According to Bar-Tal, these societal beliefs include:

1. Beliefs about the justness of one's own goals.
2. Beliefs about security.
3. Beliefs of positive self image.
4. Beliefs of own victimization.
5. Beliefs of delegitimizing the opponent.
6. Beliefs of patriotism.
7. Beliefs of unity.
8. Beliefs of peace as the ultimate desire of the society.

According to Bar-Tal it can be assumed, that these societal beliefs can be found in any society engaged in intractable conflict, especially those that successfully cope with it. These beliefs are far from being sufficient to win a conflict. Other conditions of military, political and economic nature must also be fulfilled. But these conditions are necessary for enduring the intractable conflict. Any warfaring nation, therefore, tries to produce, and maintain these beliefs by means of propaganda which aim at maximizing the citizens' willingness for war by means of persuasion, or, as Lasswell (1927) puts it:

> "Civilian unity is not achieved by the regimentation of muscles. It is achieved by a repetition of ideas rather than movements. The civilian mind is standardized by news not by drills. Propaganda is the method by which this process is aided and abetted."

### *1.2 Principles of propaganda*

In his book "The Ancient Foe", Luostarinen (1986) developed an analytical model of war propaganda, designed to analyse the content of propaganda and to compare propaganda in different wars. According to Luostarinen, both restrictive and supportive methods of information control are used to get people to strongly and personally identify themselves with the goals of war.

1. Restrictive methods try to minimize all information which could cause negative effects on the fighting spirit. This is handled by cencorship.
2. Supportive methods try to maximize all information with a positive effect. This is handled by fabrication, selection and exaggeration of information.

Though truth is only raw material for the propagandist (and if you have to lie, that is only a technical and operational question, not a moral one), it is better if no lies are needed. This can be achieved if the propagandist succeeds to manipulate the audience's entanglement into the topic of propaganda in order to influence its interpretations in a way that is apt to

reorganize its hierarchy of values so that winning the war is on the top, and all other values - for instance the truth, ethical considerations and individual rights - are only subservient to this goal.
In order to get people entangled in the conflict, war propaganda produces incentives for social identification with the own side's political elite, soldiers and victims of war. These incentives for identification also tell us how our community, group or society is created, what it stands for, how it differs from other groups and what its aim is in the future. In order to establish identification with the own side's belligerents, three levels of manipulative measures are put into action:

- On the level of the conflict context, propaganda tells us the roots of the conflict, why it was unavoidable, what we are defending and why the enemy did attack.
- The level of day-to-day events contains classical propaganda material like description of battles, expressions of support coming from other countries, heroic stories and stories of atrocity.
- The level of myths, finally, contains material about the logic of history, about the meaning of life, about the value of the individual life, etc.

Any successful propaganda is a coherent construction with tight links between the different levels. A typical pattern of war propaganda might be that single day to day stories are selected and written in a way that fits into the conflict context which supports the suggested identification and which enforces the myths. Myths, as we know, are told in the form of concrete stories, and the order of the elements in the story tells the myths.

### *1.3 Logic of conflict escalation*

Though still existent, traditional state propaganda as characteristic during the World Wars (cf. Lasswell, 1927; Knightly, 1975) has been partly delegated to professional PR-agencies in recent conflicts (cf. Kunczik, 1990; McArthur, 1993). But, even if no systematic propaganda takes place, the way media operate, reporting on war and violence, often makes them support those societal beliefs that maintain and escalate intractable conflicts, and thus serve as catalysts to unleash violence rather than to contribute to deescalation and to constructive, nonviolent conflict transformation (cf. Galtung, 1997).

1. In order to make news stories more thrilling and the conflict more easily to be understood by the audience, media tend to black and white painting and to portray the conflict as a zero-sum-game between "good and evil".
2. Journalists usually share the beliefs of the society they belong to, and - in particular - those societal beliefs which enable the society to cope with intractable conflict.

3. These beliefs are not just the outcome of propaganda, but result from psychological processes that take place whenever a conflict is conceptualized as a competitive (win-lose-model) rather than a cooperative (win-win-model) process (cf. Deutsch, 1976, Kempf, 1996a).

In every conflict (cf. Figure 2) there are own rights and intentions, and there are actions of an opponent that interfere with them and are experienced as threat. At the same time, as some of our actions interfere with his rights and intentions, the opponent experiences to be threatened as well. Still, there is some kind of common ground, there are common rights and intentions and a common benefit resulting from the relationship between the two parties, which may give reason for mutual trust.

So far, any conflict is open to be conceptualized either as a cooperative or as a competitive process. Yet systematic divergence of perspectives makes it difficult for the parties in a conflict to come to a complete view on the conflict (cf. Figure 3). The parties' perspectives focus on their own rights and intentions and the threat by the other's actions, which - at the same time - seem to threaten common rights and intentions and the common benefit as well.

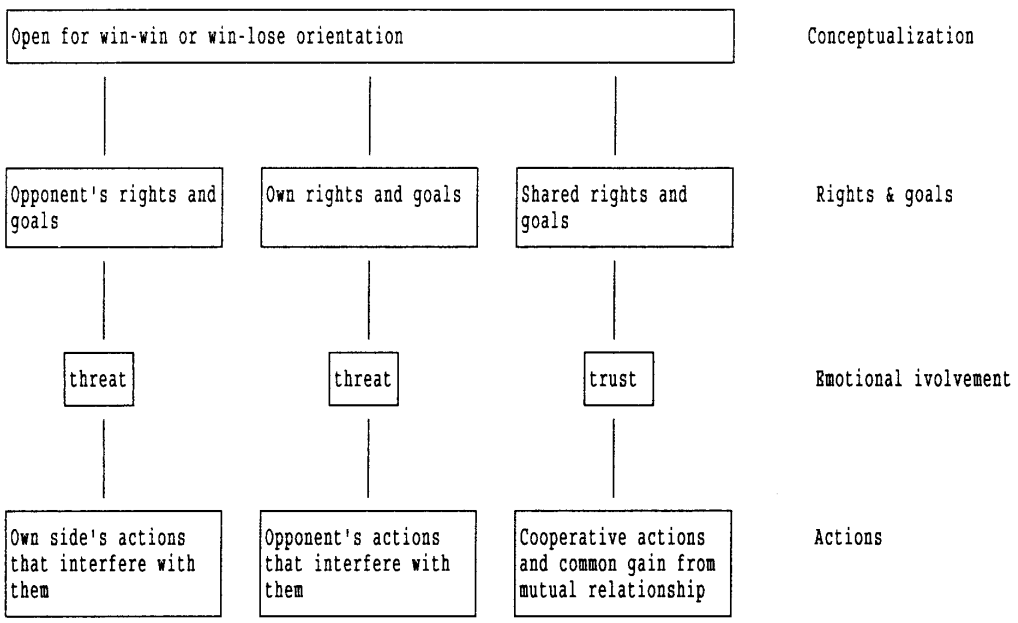


Figure 2: Conflict

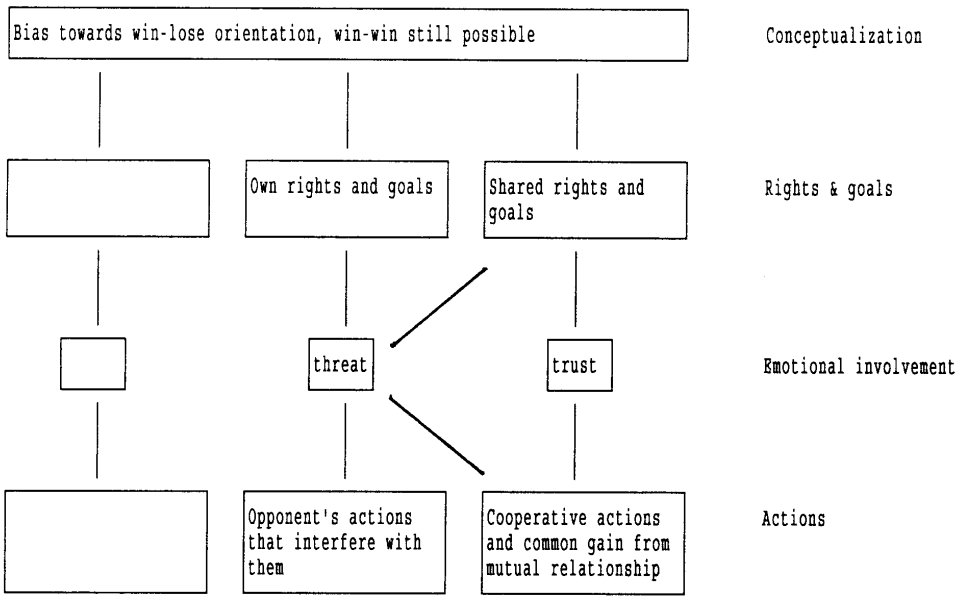


Figure 3: Divergence of perspectives

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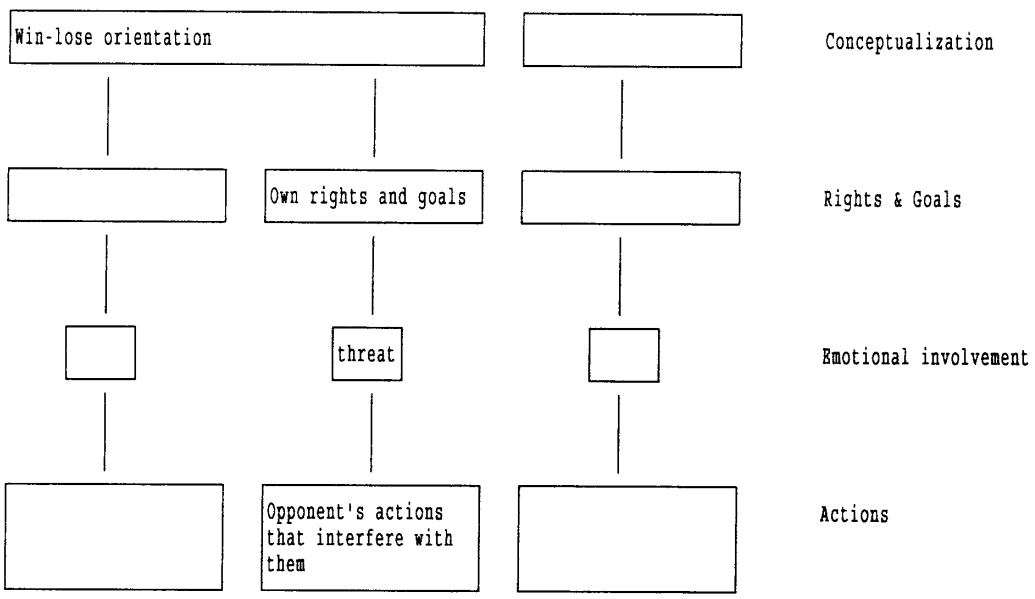


Figure 4: Competition

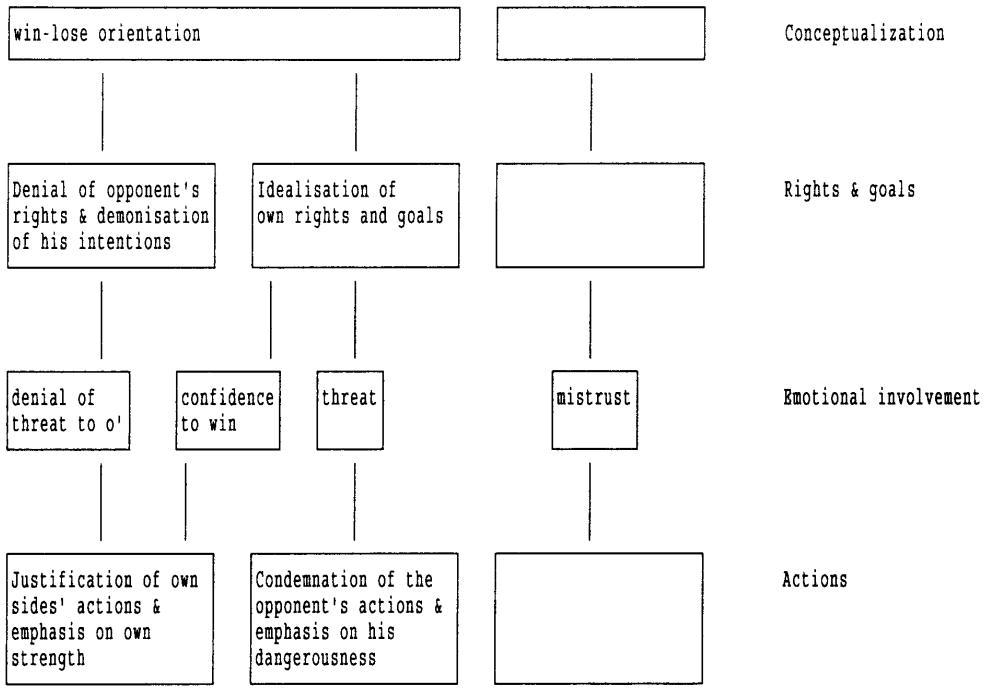


Figure 5: Struggle

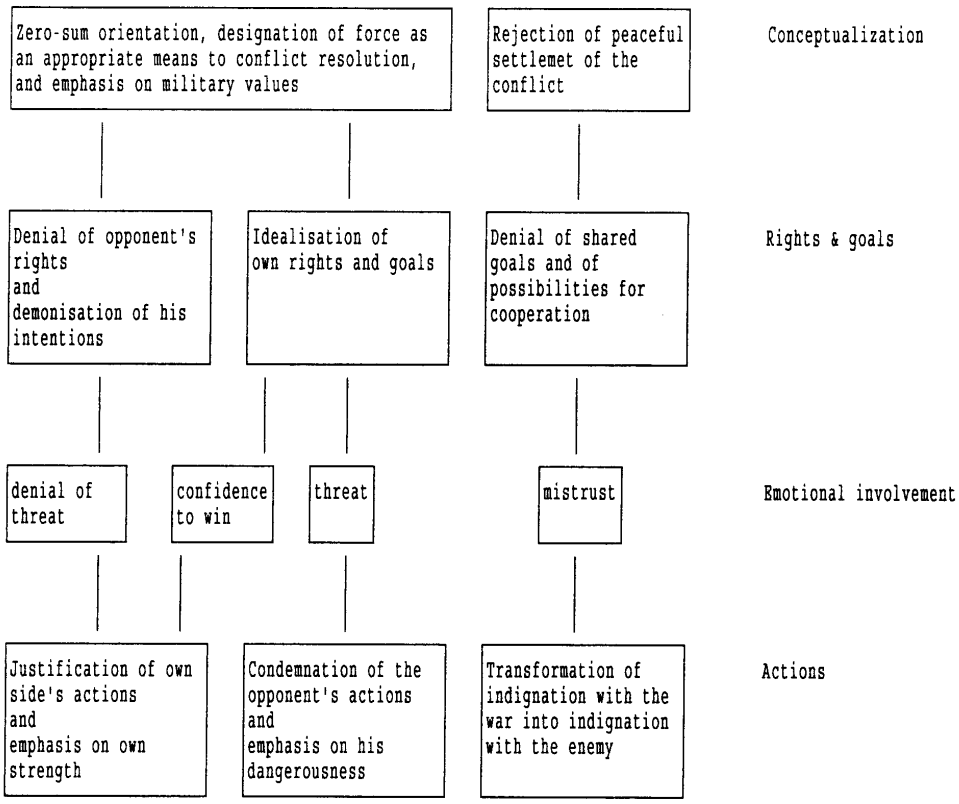


Figure 6: Warfare

The next step of escalation will result if the conflict is interpreted as a competitive process (cf. Figure 4). In this case, common rights and intentions as well as the common benefit that stems from the parties' mutual relationship tend to get out of sight. Mutual trust gets lost. Perception of the conflict is reduced to perception of one's own rights and intentions and their being threatened by the opponent.
In case of further escalation from competition to struggle (cf. Figure 5), the opponent's rights are denied and his intentions are demonized. Own actions that interfere with the opponent's rights and intentions are justified, and one's own strength is emphasized. As a counterpart to the perceived threat by the opponent, confidence in one's own victory and in the prevailing of one's own rights and intentions emerges. At the same time, these own rights and intentions tend to be idealized. Actions by the opponent, that interfere with them, are condemned, and his dangerousness is underlined. The threat imposed to the opponent is denied. The opponent's attacks appear as unjustified and bring about mistrust against him.

Finally, further escalation to warfare reduces the perception of the conflict to military logic (cf. Figure 6): Peaceful alternatives are refuted, mistrust against the enemy is stimulated. Common interests that might be the basis for nonviolent, constructive conflict resolution are denied, and so are possibilities of cooperation with the enemy. (Justified) indignation with the war is conversed into (self-righteous) indignation with the enemy: the common suffering that the war brings about, as well as the common benefit that a peaceful conflict resolution could entail, cannot be seen any more.

### *1.4 The role of the media*

From social psychology, we also know that escalated conflicts affect the rank order within a group or society. Those, who are outstanding for their fighting spirit, gain influence. Willingness to compromise and attempts at mediation are regarded as betrayal (Deutsch, 1976). This process of social commitment to antagonism affects the journalists' work in serveral ways:

1. Since journalists are members of the society themselves, they are under pressure to adopt an antagonistic view of the conflict in order to maintain their own social status and influence, and
2. since journalism has a strong bias towards elites, both, as sources of information and as subjects of coverage (cf. Galtung, 1998), a good deal of the information on which journalistic work is based, is not mere facts, but facts which are already interpreted in an antagonistic way - and most of the newsstories are stories about those who are on the forefront of antagonism.

Accordingly, it is no surprise if the media coverage is victim to the same systematic distortions of conflict perception as the rest of the society.

As comparative studies of the Gulf War coverage (cf. Kempf, 1996b, 1997, 1998; Elfner, 1998; Kempf, Reimann & Luostarinen, 1998; Kempf & Reimann, in preparation) and the coverage of the Bosnia conflict (Kempf, in preparation) in American and European media have shown, it is not only the warfaring nations, whose media are susceptible to such distortions. The more a society is involved in the conflict itself and the closer it is to the conflict region (on historical, political, economical or ideological terms), however, the more escalation-oriented will its media cover the conflict.

## 2. Media contribution to peace building

Once a ceasefire or peace treaty is settled, this antagonistic bias of the media becomes counterproductive. Unfortunately, however, even the most powerful political leaders cannot just switch to a cooperative strategy without taking the risk to loose power (or even their lives). The societal beliefs which

helped the society to endure intractible conflict still prevail and the transition from war culture to peace culture calls for a gradual process of strengthening the civil society, and demolishing stereotypes and prejudice.
This cannot be achieved by simply spreading a new ideology which is determined by harmony and cooperative ideals, however. As the survival of ethnic antagonism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union shows, not even totalitarian regimes have the power to do so. If stereotypes and prejudice are suppressed only, they will prevail under cover and return to the surface of social life as soon as they are given the slightest chance.

### *2.1 Deconstruction of the antagonism between good and evil*

The societal beliefs which help a society to cope with intractible conflict are not just an ideology which is imposed on society from outside or by its political leaders. They result from a long history of experience with concrete conflicts at a high level of escalation and

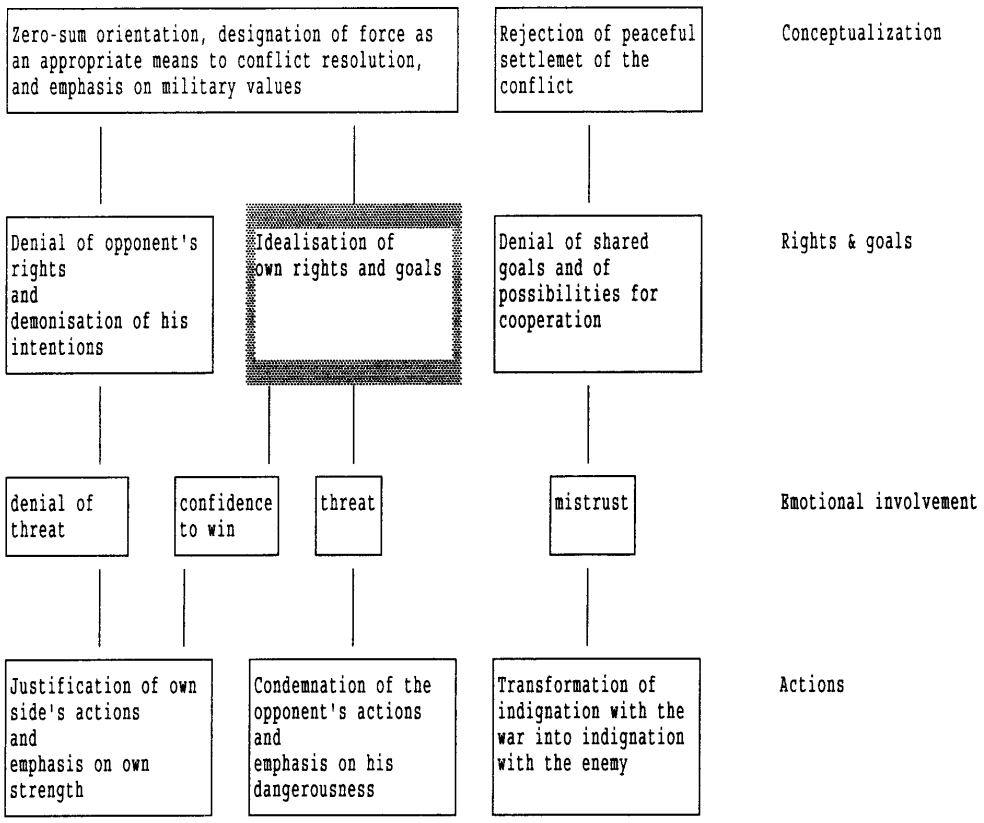


Figure 7: Beliefs about the justness of own goals

can be understood as a *generalized interpretation* of such conflicts. In particular, this is the case with those societal beliefs, which construct the conflict as intractible: beliefs about justness, security, positive self image, own victimization and delegitimation of the opponent.
The idealization of own rights and goals in a multitude of concrete conflicts gradually unfolds into a general rational of justification which sets the unconditional *justness of own goals* as an axiom and justifies their crucial importance (cf. Figure 7).

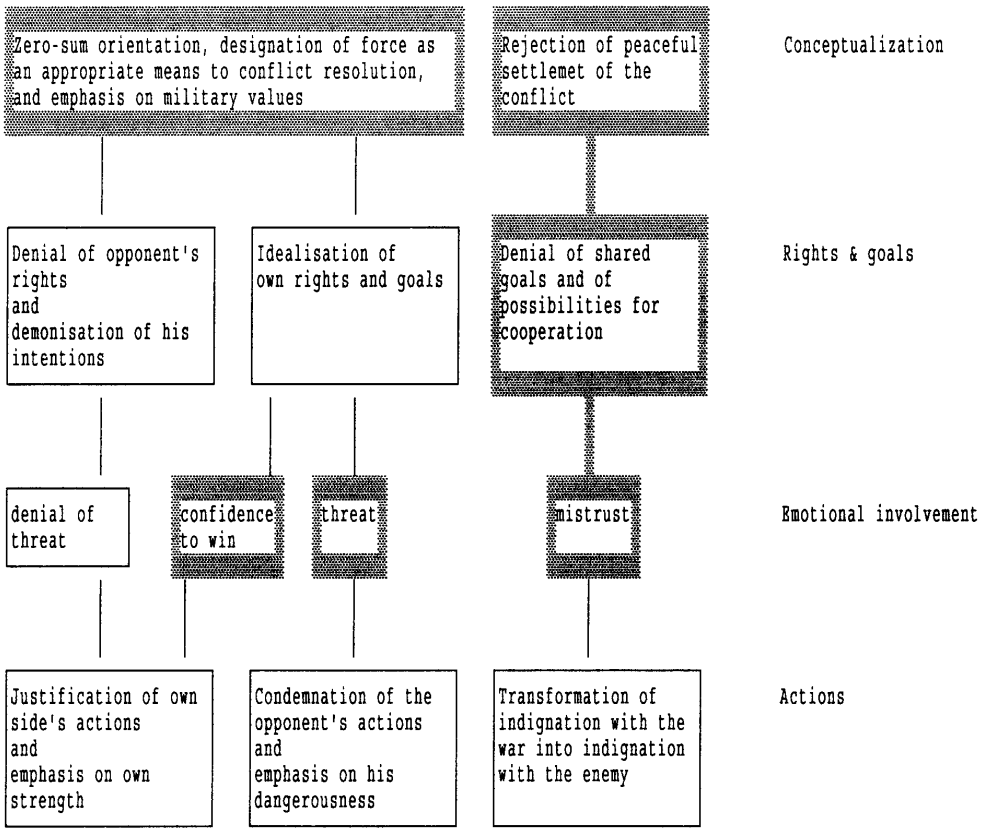


Figure 8: Beliefs about security

The repeated construction of conflicts as zero-sum games, the resulting experience of threat, the designation of force as an appropriate means to conflict resolution, the emphasis on military values and the confidence to win, as well as the mistrust against the enemy, refusal to admit mutual cooperation and rejection of peaceful alternatives link personal and national security together and outline the confrontative strategy as the only means how personal safety and national survival can be achieved (cf. Figure 8).

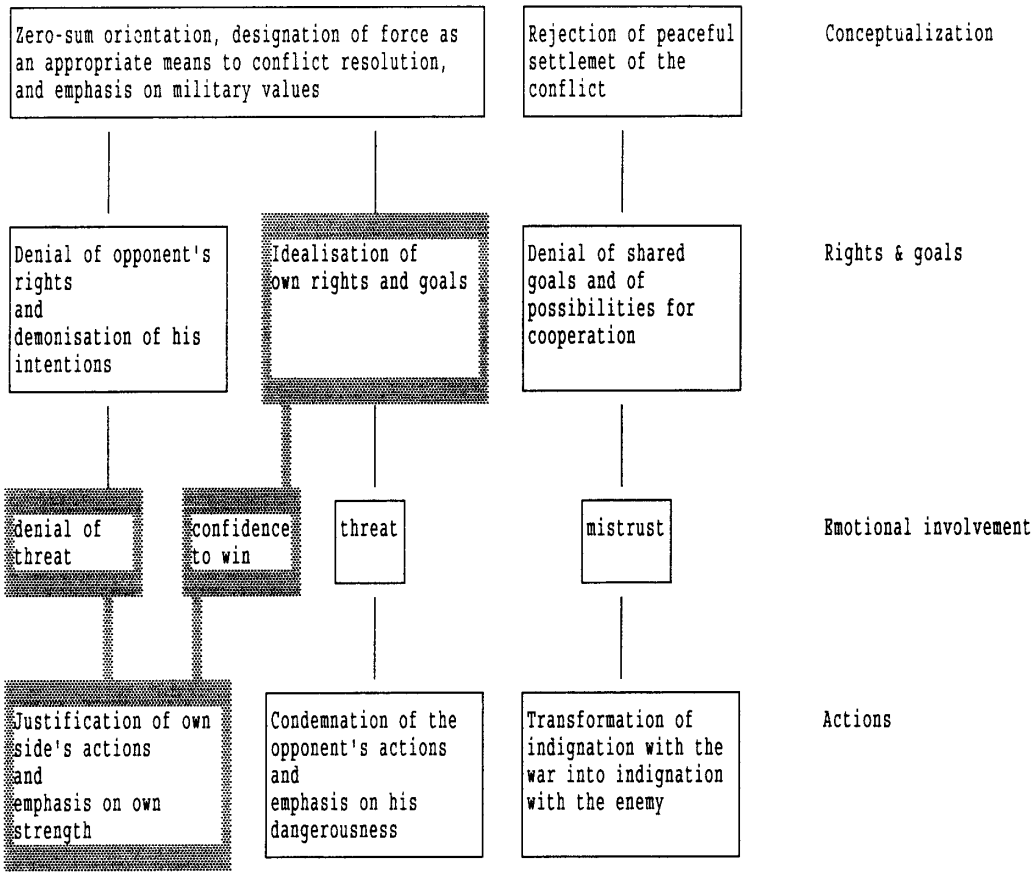


Figure 9: Beliefs of positive self image

Idealization of own rights and goals, justification of own side's actions and underlining the own correctness, as well as emphasis on own strength in a multitude of concrete conflicts provide the concrete "facts" on which a *positive self image* can build, attributing positive traits, values and behavior to the own society (cf. Figure 9).

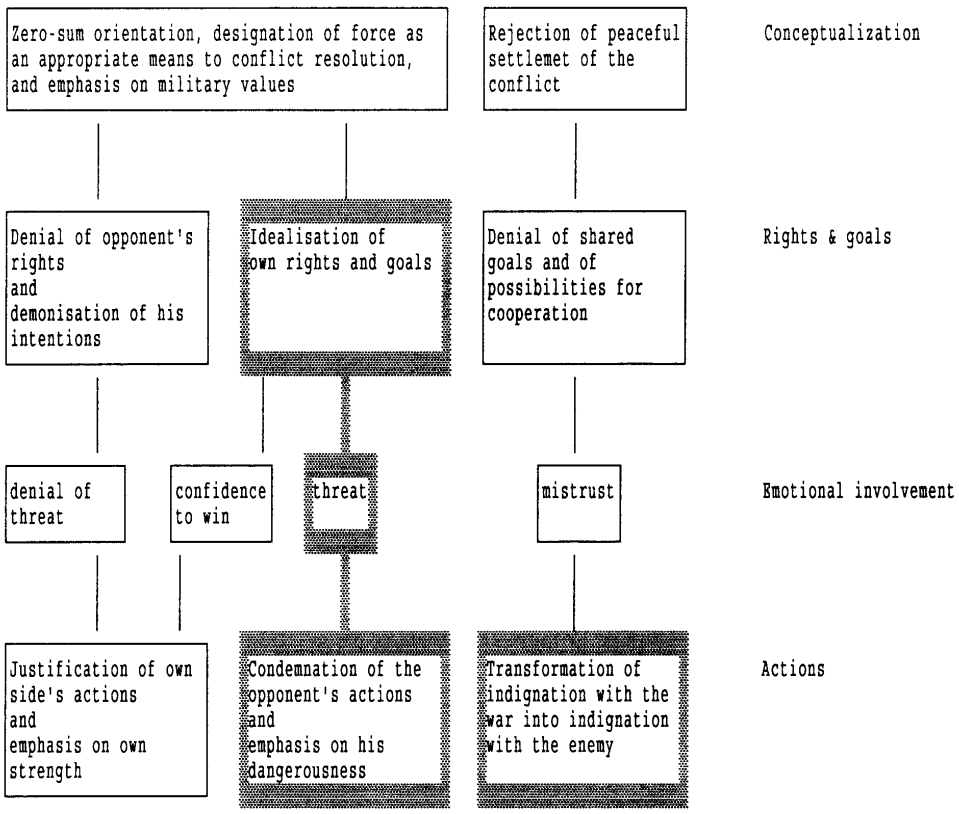


Figure 10: Beliefs of own victimization

Repeated condemnation of the opponent's actions that violate our rights and goals, emphasis on his dangerousness and the transformation of indignation with the war into indignation with the enemy are condensed into a syndrome of own victimization, which provides the moral incentive to seek justice and to oppose the enemy, and which allows to mobilize moral, political and material support of the international community (cf. Figure 10).

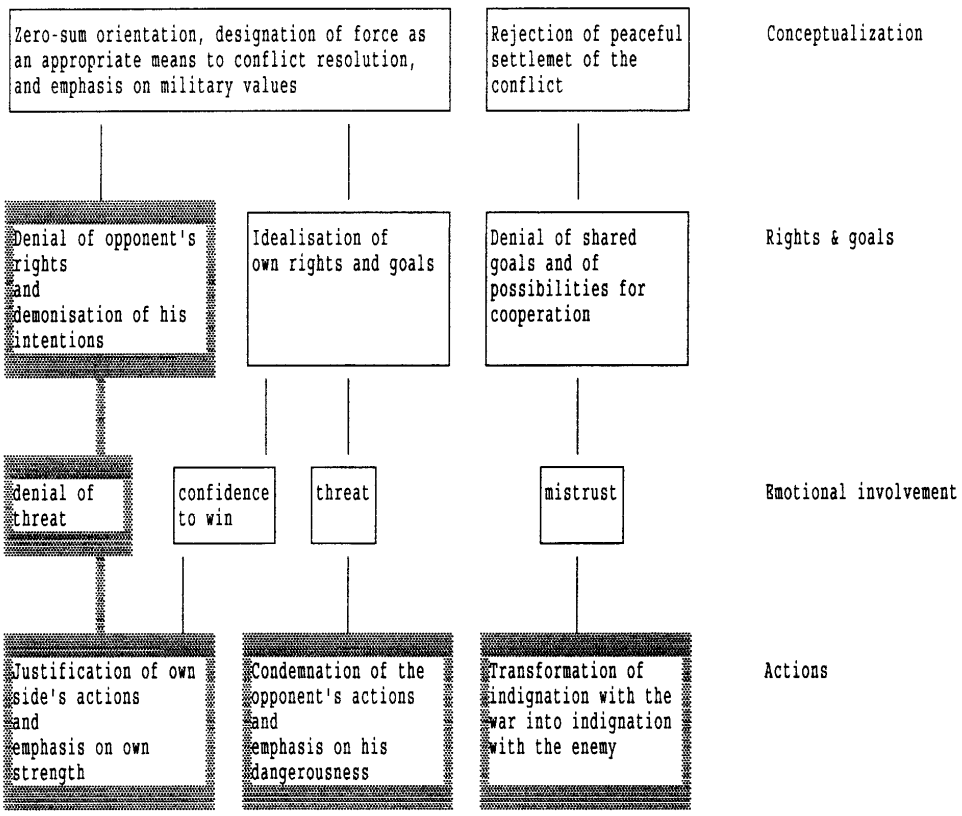


Figure 11: Beliefs of deligitimizing the opponent

The denial of the opponent's rights, demonisation of his intentions, condemnation of his actions and emphasis on his dangerousness in a multitude of concrete conflicts unfold into a general rational of *deligitimizing the opponent*, which explains the causes of the conflict's outbreak, its continuation and the violence of the opponent, as well as it justifies own hostile acts by dehumanization of the enemy and categorizing him "into extreme negative social categories which are excluded from human groups that are considered as acting within limits of acceptable norms and/or values" (Bar-Tal, 1989, p.170) (cf. Figure 11).
Once, these beliefs have emerged in a society, they provide a framework that interprets literally every interaction with the opponent as another scene in the big drama of antagonism

between good and evil. And once an event has been interpreted in this way, it seemingly gives proof to the stereotypes and prejudice that created this interpretation. There is no way out of this vicious circle, but if we learn to *accept facts before they are interpreted* (Martin-Baró, 1991).
If we accomplish this, even conflicts that prevail after a peace treaty or that arise during the peace process can provide experiences that gradually demolish prejudices and transform war culture into a more constructive social contract between the former enemies.
The first rule for journalism which tries to facilitate such a process of social learning will be to *mistrust the plausible* on each of the four levels of

1. Conceptualization of the conflict,
2. Evaluation of the conflict parties' rights and intentions,
3. Evaluation of their actions, and
4. Emotional involvement in the conflict (cf. Figure 12).

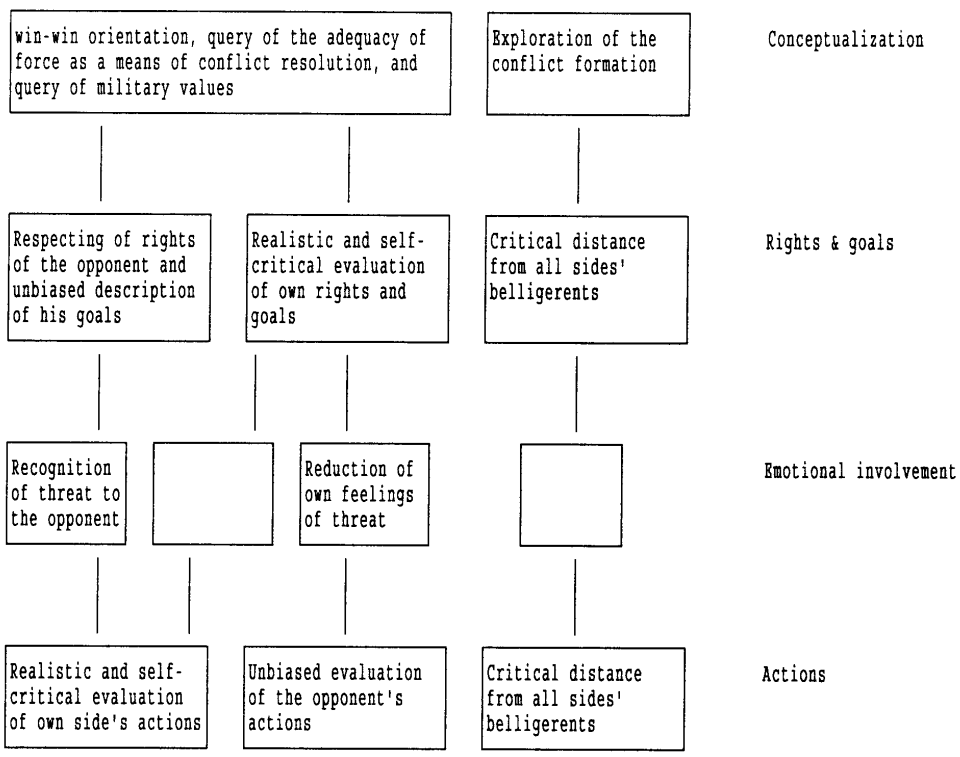


Figure 12: Deescalation oriented conflict coverage

The second rule will be to *investigate the facts behind the plausible*:

1. War culture tends to reduce the conflict to two parties, fighting for one goal (which is to win) and has a general sero-sum orientation that excludes constructive transformation of the conflict.
   The real conflict, usually, is not this simple: there are several parties involved, several goals and a multitude of issues, and there is always the possibility of an outcome that might serve the interests of all parties.
   Deescalation oriented conflict coverage thus has to explore the conflict formation, and to investigate causes and possible outcomes of the conflict, that might be found anywhere, and not just in the closed space of the conflict arena (cf. Galtung, 1998).
2. In order to come to a realistic evaluation of the conflict parties' rights, their intentions and actions, deescalation oriented coverage of conflicts must give voice to all parties and apply empathy and understanding regardless of any distinction between "us" and "them".
   At the same time it has to expose untruth on all sides and not just "their" cover-ups and "their" propaganda-lies.
3. On the level of emotional involvement, this will be a first step towards reducing own feelings of threat and thus decrease the level of stress that the society is exposed to. And, as we learn that it is not only "us" whose goals, rights and values are threatened, it is also a first step towards seeing "us" and "them" on a more equal basis.

Deescalation oriented conflict coverage - as described in Figure 12 - will not yet release the society from the burden of war culture, nor will it transform the conflict into a cooperative process. But it is a first step away from seing "them" as the problem and from focusing on the question who prevails in war. And, if the media manage to implement such a less biased perception of the conflict, the maintainance of the societal beliefs about *justness of own goals, positive self image, own victimization* and *deligitimizing the enemy* will become less urgent for the society in order to cope with the conflict. As the exploration of the conflict formation draws a more complex picture of the conflict it does not yet release the society from being confronted with a seemingly unsolvable problem, but it might give rise to the idea that the simple solution that is offered by war and military logic is no solution at all.

### *2.2 Counterbalancing war and military logic*

As the societal beliefs about *security* are put to the test, journalism must take care that their deconstruction will not leave a vacuum. Transformation of war culture into peace culture requires an active search for peaceful alternatives which is orthogonal to the antagonism between "us" and "them".

In order to accomplish this, solution oriented conflict coverage (cf. Figure 13), must replace the antagonistic understanding of peace as *victory* + *cease-fire* by a cooperative concept of peace as *nonviolence* + *creativity*. As a consequence, journalism has to change its focus in two aspects (cf. Galtung, 1998):

- Traditional jounalism is more or less reactive, it heads to the conflict arena after violence has broken out and reports about those, who act in the conflict arena, mainly political and military élites.
- Solution oriented journalism must report about conflicts before violence occurs and report about all segments of the society whose creativity might contribute to a peaceful transformation of the conflict.

Accross to the distinction between "us" and "them", solution oriented coverage of conflicts will focus on shared interests of the war parties and on the benefit, that all sides could gain from ending war or violence. It will make the price visible, that all sides have to pay for war - even in case of victory.

Giving voice to the voiceless, it will focus on suffering all over and also on the invisible effects of violence: trauma and glory, damage to structure and culture.

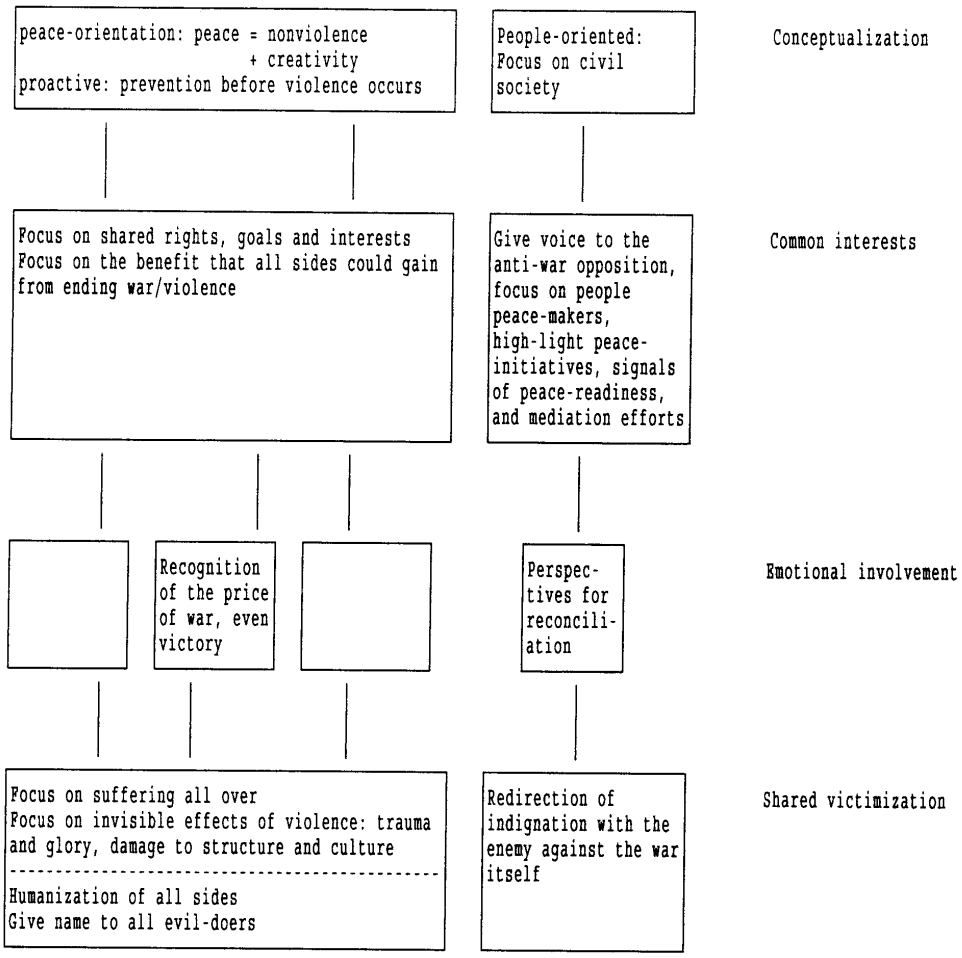


Figure 13: Solution oriented conflict coverage

It will humanize all sides, but also give name to all evil-doers. And it will redirect the indignation with the enemy against war and violence itself.
Giving voice to the anti-war opposition, focusing not only on élite-mediators, but on peace-makers on the grassroot level also, high-lighting peace initiatives and signals of peace readiness, it will open perspectives for reconciliation.

## *2.3 Coverage of reconstruction and reconciliation*

As journalism follows these guidelines, the conflict formation will become even more complex, but the society will gradually accumulate experience with alternatives to violence also. The importance of own goals and values will become less crucial and shared interests will come to the fore. The links between security and force will loosen, and open up a path on which's end

- our positive self image will be based on more cooperative values,
- victimization will no more draw a dividing line that seperates the parties, but a common memory that unifies them, and
- yesterdays' deligitimized enemy will be seen as our own mirror image with comparable experiences of trauma and suffering.

But the road to peace culture is long and stony. And in order to get there, there is a need that the processes of reconstruction and reconciliation are accompanied by the media as well.

Maybe, this is one of the most crucial deficits of modern journalism: wherever violence breaks out, crowds of journalists head to the conflict arena, but us soon as violence is over, they lose interest and leave for another war, returning only if the old one flares up again.

Stories of violence are regarded as "thrilling" while reconstruction and reconciliation are simply "no news".

In this regard, journalists have to learn a lot, and once more it includes to redirect their attention from élites to ordinary people.

- Do doubt, it is boring to read about political leaders shaking hands, signing contracts, or giving endless speeches filled with phrases of cooperation and mutual respect that nobody beliefs as long as war culture is still virolent.
- But there is nothing more thrilling than to learn, how ordinary people, having suffered the atrocities of war, can manage to jump over their own shadow and try a new start.

To the same degree that war culture still prevails, projects of reconstruction and iniciatives of reconciliation that really bring people together, are not acting in a space of harmony.

- There is still the fears and uncertainties of those who are involved in the projects, and
- to the same degree as war-culture still prevails, cooperation with the former enemy, might be regarded as betrayal and lack of patriotism by those who stay behind.

At an early stage of the peace process the societal beliefs of *patriotism*, which generate attachment to the society or nation by propagating loyalty, love, care and sacrifice are likely to become an issue of conflicts within the society itself.

If the media manage to cover these conflicts, following the same guidelines of orientation towards deescalation and resolution of conflicts as described before, they might

contribute to a public discourse, however, which gradually changes the beliefs of patriotism:

- not in the direction of unloyality, or lack of love, care or sacrifice,
- but towards a more constructive interpretation of national identity, which is not so much dominated by demarcation from others but by being included as equal partners within the international community.

As the media give attention to these internal conflicts, they directly counteract the societal beliefs of *unity*, which refer to the importance of ignoring internal conflicts and disagreements in order to unite the forces in the face of the external threat. They reconstruct society as more pluralistic and thus add to the insight according to which societal life needs to be guided by democratic principles rather than camp mentality.

## *2.4 Resolving double-bind*

The societal beliefs that must be deconstructed in order to manage the transition from war culture to peace culture include fundamental contradictions.
First of all, the contradiction between
- beliefs about security to be achieved by enduring *antagonism* and confronting the enemy, and
- beliefs about *peace* as the ultimate desire of society.

Second, the immanent contradiction on which enduring antagonism is based itself, and which
- stimulates the society members' fighting spirit by portraying the enemy *as dangerous and inhuman as possible*, and
- at the same time describes him *as undangerous and human as necessary* so that the members of society do not lose courage, are certain of victory, and do not get scared by the perspective of possible defeat.

A prominent example of these immanent contradictions is the Cold War logic that legitimated the stationing of medium-range missiles and cruise missiles in Western Germany during the early eightees. Stressing the need to deter the "inhumanitarian Sovjet Union" from war, it simultaneously referred to the good-will of the Sovjet Union (which was supposed to be interested in protecting Europe from destruction) as the only security guarantee which would prevent the nuclear armament race from resulting in the destruction of Central Europe (cf. Kempf, 1986).
Contradictions like this are typical of war culture and interveave propaganda and traditional war reporting on all levels from the explanation of the logic of history (cf. Kempf, Reimann & Luostarinen, 1998) via the explanation of the conflict sources (cf. Elfner, 1998) and the evaluation of alternatives to violence (cf. Reimann, 1997a; Kempf & Reimann, in preparation) down to the coverage of day to day atrocities (cf. Kempf, Reimann & Luostarinen, 1996).
War culture thus places the members of the society into a permanent double-bind situation, where they have to cope with contradictory messages and lack the chance either to react to both of the messages, or to withdraw from the situation.
As a result of emotional involvement with both contradictory messages it becomes extremely difficult to query either of them. If society members have no access to independent information, they have no other chance than to believe the conclusions they are told by their political leaders or to withdraw into selective inattendance, prejudice or evasive sceptizism etc. - all of which are consequences that serve the goals of psychological warfare by paralysing the capacity for resistance against the war (cf. Kempf, 1992).
Resolving this double bind situation by making the contradictions transparent that war culture produces is one of the most urgent tasks that journalism has to fulfil. It is one of the most difficult tasks also and can only be accomplished

by independent journalism which is not attached to either side in the conflict but only to peace and creativity.
The local journalist, who reports from within a society that is involved in intractible conflict will not be able to do so without an analysis of

- the societal beliefs that constitute war culture, and
- the contradictions it generates.

To make such an analysis available would be an important task for the international media, if only they could give up their habit of

- either showing no interest in a the conflict at all,
- or putting the question who are the "good" and who the "bad guys"

and then to take sides and head for international intervention.

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