Conflict Sensitive Journalism:
Moving Towards a Holistic Framework
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"The military…is an institution and goes on forever. Wars are studied, lessons are learnt, systems are devised, tested and polished. The British Ministry of Defence has a manual, updated after every war, which serves to guide the way it will handle its relationship with the media in wartime. What newspaper or television company does anything similar?"

Phillip Knightley, "The First Casualty"

1. Media Development and Conflict Sensitive Journalism

Media development and media assistance strategies gained increased prominence during the late 1980s and 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. To some extent, civil society and development workers attributed communism's end to the introduction of dissident voices on radio stations such as Radio Free Europe and the underground production and distribution of restricted publications.[1] Since that time, media development activities have expanded both in area and scope and today include such specialized sub-fields as conflict sensitive journalism.

While the mainstream media development templates emerged out of the political and economic transitions of the former states of the Soviet Union since the early 1990s at the same time Western donors and multilateral institutions were keen to speed up the transition from centralized, state-led economic and political organizations to market capitalism and democratization and turned to media support in this transition process.[2]

At that time, however, the focus was not on conflict-stressed states. As a result, the media development sector did not seriously begin to consider or even address the issue of media in conflict or post-conflict situations until the mid and late 1990s in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide and the war in the Balkans. Indeed, the legacy of hate media (as well as propaganda) forced many

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[1] Amelia Arsenault and Shawn Powers, "The Media Map Project: Review of Literature," http://mediamapresource.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/literature-review-the-media-map-project.pdf Accessed 17 January 2011.

[2] James Putzel and Joost van der Zwan, "Why Templates for Media Development do not work in Crisis States," Crisis States Research Center, London School of Economics, 2005, p. 5. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/837/1/MEDIA.REPORT.pdf Accessed 23 January 2011.

practitioners to seriously question how it could get so bad and more attention was paid to the role of the media in conflict and even in conflict resolution and peace building.

While Philip Knightley's quote at the beginning of this paper suggests that most news organizations do not have a "how-to" manual regarding war coverage, this has begun to change and journalists, researchers and media development practitioners have begun to reflect on precisely this question which has been lacking. The development of conflict-sensitive journalism (CSJ) was perhaps one of the first attempts at addressing this issue for inclusion in the media development toolbox.

Almost ten years have passed, however, and it has become clear that there has been a need for context specific guides. Indeed, perhaps it has been the publishing of these country-specific guides that has led some to begin to ask whether the ideas and practice of CSJ must be re-examined. For if, at the very least, context can play a role in how CSJ is practiced then it is likely that other factors play a role as well. It is, therefore, important to look at such factors and to ask how they might be affecting the practice of CSJ and if and how they might be incorporated into the practice and teaching of CSJ.

Indeed, for any tool to maintain currency and utility it is crucial to review it, to examine it for strengths and weaknesses, to diagnose and to put forth prescriptions or possible ways forward or suggestions on how to tweak the tool and to improve it. CSJ is precisely such a tool that after nearly ten years should be re-examined, discussed and reviewed.

As such, it is the aim of this paper to propose one practitioner's thoughts as to how CSJ might be developing and in what direction it is moving. From there, it is hoped that additional questions might be asked leading to, or worthy of, further reflection. It is hoped that this paper will provide at least some fodder to the discussion at the CSJ experts' forum in Nairobi in early 2011.

2. The Evolution of Conflict Sensitive Journalism

It has generally been acknowledged that conflict coverage, whether by international news agencies or local reporters, produces its own significant impacts on conflict. As such, "more and more local and international groups, media trainers, media institutions and others have developed methodologies for interventions aimed at countering the dangerous effects of poor or deliberately manipulated conflict coverage or for media interventions designed to reduce conflict through a change in the way the media work. These and other approaches have already been translated into numerous seminars, training sessions, booklets, handbooks and other products for journalists, editors and publishers across the globe".[3]

2.1 Peace Journalism

In light of the conflicts of the 1990s, journalists, academics and conflict researchers began to consider the role of media in conflict more seriously. As such, there were largely two schools of thought which emerged: peace journalism, advocated by Johan Galtung and Jake Lynch, and conflict sensitive journalism presented by, for example, Ross Howard.

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[3] IMS, "How to Improve Conflict Reporting: A Report on the International Roundtable on New Approaches to Conflict Reporting," October 2003, p. 3. http://i-m-s.dk/files/publications/IMS%20Final%20Round%20table%20Report%20Dec%202003.pdf Accessed 23 January 2011.

Peace journalism advocates that journalists take a more active role in finding solutions to conflict. As Galtung argues:journalism "inherently or intentionally emphasizes and encourages violent conflict by its treatment of the issues."[4] Galtung and others such as Jake Lynch, advocated for a new practice of journalism that essentially argued that the media should play a more active role in bringing about peace.[5]

Such a role, however, meant that journalists would rather become advocates for peace suggesting a much more active and subjective role rather than borrowing from the traditional journalistic values of accuracy, impartiality and responsibility, something that did not sit well with a wide circle of both practitioners and academics. Instead, they said, the problem with covering conflict is that journalists were simply not covering them responsibly, in large part because they did not understand conflict. And so, "conflict sensitive journalism" came about.

2.2 CSJ

In his recent publication, "Conflict-Sensitive Reporting: State of the Art", Ross Howard writes that "as early as 2003, it was evident that the debate about journalists' relationship to conflict resolution, while healthy, was not going to be resolved easily. A number of media development NGOs and analysts began exploring how to define media practice that contributes to a community's conflict resolution while adhering to the media's core role of providing accurate unbiased information."[6]

Part of this exploration was a roundtable organized by IMS in 2003, the goal of which was to examine conflict reporting and look at ways in which such reporting might be improved. However, "in the field of conflict reporting, no sign of consensus on 'the right approach' has yet emerged amongst either the professionals who deal consistently with the issue, or the wider media community."[7]

Earlier in 2003, the "Conflict Sensitive Journalism" handbook written by Ross Howard was published by IMS and the now-defunct Canadian NGO Institute for Media, Peace and Civil Society (IMPACS). The handbook has served as a useful tool in numerous countries where CSJ training has been undertaken including Sudan, Nepal, Burundi, Kenya and Afghanistan.

The goal of the handbook was to contribute to the "theoretical refinement and practical realization of conflict conscious journalism as a tool for usage by media practitioners in conflict-affected areas".[8] The argument for such a tool was simple: providing "reliable information to the public in a time of violent conflict requires additional journalism skills. Reporters need to understand more about what causes conflict, and how conflict develops and ends. Reporters need to know where to look for these causes and solutions. By providing this information, journalism makes the public far more well-informed about the conflict beneath the violence, and can assist in resolving it."[9]

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[4] Ross Howard, "Conflict-Sensitive Reporting: State of the Art: A Course for Journalists and Journalism Educators," UNESCO, 2009, p. 9.

[5] For a further discussion of peace journalism see: Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick, "Peace Journalism," Hawthorne Press. 2005; William Kempf, "Peace Journalism: a tightrope walk between advocacy journalism and constructive conflict coverage", in Conflict and Communications Online, Vol. 6 No. 2, 2007.

[6] Howard, "State of the Art," 2009, p. 4.

[7] IMS, "How to Improve Conflict Reporting," October 2003, p. 3.

[8] Ross Howard, "Conflict Sensitive Journalism: A Handbook", preface.

[9] Howard, p.5.

The early work done on conflict sensitive journalism was largely a discussion that focused on the idea of conflict – its definition, the role of journalism in conflict and an examination of how journalists should cover conflict. What was lacking was a more in-depth discussion or examination of the context in which the conflict takes place. The 2003 IMS roundtable concluded that: "there was general agreement around the table that the ability of the individual journalist to conduct good – or bad – reporting is not an isolated matter. Even if journalists received extensive training, this was often not enough. Independent and professional journalism needs a structural framework within which to function. Most important for this is the protection of freedom of expression."[10]

At that time, the main issues brought up at the roundtable included: press freedom, donor money (follow the money), media pluralism and diversity. At that same meeting, Kwame Karikari, executive director of the Media Foundation for West Africa, pointed out the different aspects needed in order to improve conflict reporting in Ivory Coast. "Training in ethics for journalists is very critical. A more independent ownership of the press, away from politics. People with money must use them to set up non-partisan newspapers. Transformation of the state owned radio and television into public service broadcasting. Strengthen the self-regulatory bodies. Encourage media legislation reform."[11]

So, while media development as a whole has begun to adopt a more holistic framework to address these issues, the field of CSJ has largely been treated as a tool largely on its own with little or no consideration of its place in media development in conflict situations as a whole.

2.3 Context Specific CSJ
After a number of years it became evident that there was a need for context-specific CSJ handbooks as conflicts vary from country to country and region to region. Is it, for example, a crisis state and conflict (Rwanda, Sri Lanka) or is it invasion and reconstruction such as Afghanistan, Iraq? In an effort to address these vagaries, IMS began to develop with their local partners context-specific CSJ handbooks.

The first of these came out in 2008 as a response to the post-election violence in Kenya. Soon thereafter came the Rwandan handbook and today there exist handbooks specifically for Thailand as well as two for Afghanistan – one in Dari and one in Pashtu.

This was the first development – but likely not the last. Indeed, each context is different and neither conflicts, nor media coverage of conflicts, exist in a vacuum. Rather there are a host of factors which impact both the conflict itself as well as coverage of the conflict. When the CSJ handbook was written, the field of media development was still in its first decade and the belief was that journalists could cover a conflict by being responsible, understanding the role of media in conflict, understanding conflict and plying good, reliable, independent, fair and balanced reporting. What is lacking in this discussion, however, is the context surrounding the conflict, the journalist and the media coverage. This context includes a host of elements outlined below.

3. Towards a Holistic Framework for Conflict-Sensitive Journalism
While it is clear that the media can serve as an agent of change, they usually cannot do so without a host of other factors. Conflict sensitive journalism faces the same constraints – while it is a good start and directly addresses capacity building of journalists, it is not clear how much can be achieved

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[10] IMS 2003 report, p. 12.
[11] IMS 2003 report, p. 12.

without consideration of other factors. Just like media development as a whole has begun to adopt a more holistic model, perhaps it is time too for CSJ to evolve into a more holistic framework.

There are a myriad of factors which will impact not only the conflict but also how the journalist is able to operate in such a conflict. This paper hopes to elucidate some of these factors which are crucial in the discussion of CSJ as they all inform how a journalist constructs his/her narrative or, in some cases, whether there is a narrative at all.

3.1 The Political Process and the Conflict Cycle

An estimated one-quarter to one-third of UN member states are conflict-stressed or emerging democracies. All of these are multi-ethnic states with racial and/or ethnic divisions and will ultimately need to go through a peace building process.

Considering this, it would then seem rather crucial to examine not just the conflict itself but also to understand the conflict cycle as well as overall political processes and the implications of both of these components. For example, in most case conflict does not simply happen out of the blue. There are usually signs of impending conflict and as such we as practitioners should consider the early warning aspect of the media, such as media monitoring, and thereby examine how this might play into conflict sensitive journalism.

There is also the peace process part of the cycle which is made up of its own cycle including peace negotiations, signing of treaties and agreements and monitoring and prevention of lapsing into renewed conflict. Indeed, negotiations and agreements, be they formal or informal, are key milestones in peace processes and while they are essential they are not the totality of a peace process. As such, it is crucial as well that these milestones are understood as they may relate to CSJ and somehow included in the CSJ methodology or framework.

Another crucial phase in the political process or the conflict cycle is that of elections and all the moments that constitute an electoral process including the campaign, the poll, results and what often, of late, have become a violent post-electoral period and one that can readily fall into conflict as has been seen most recently in Cote d'Ivoire and Kenya. Again, it is not only the early warning and reporting role that is important for conflict sensitive journalism, it is also crucial to monitor transparency and accountability in the electoral process which may in fact help to prevent conflict.

3.2 Technology

The role of technology is also crucial largely because it continues to change and evolve so rapidly and also because it has implications on the users themselves; in this day and age almost anyone can be a citizen reporter as long as they have a mobile phone. This in turn will have an effect on how conflict is reported and thereby on conflict sensitive journalism. The role of mobile phones and the internet, for example, is much more important in 2011 than it was in 2002 or even 2005. This also has implications for the recent onset of citizen reporters

This was highlighted in a recent BBC World Service Trust report on media in fragile states. "The pace of change in the media and communication sector is as rapid, perhaps more rapid, than any other: media is exploding and flourishing in some countries, and is in economic or political crisis in others, with changes happening often very rapidly; new technologies, and particularly mobile

telephony, are rapidly transforming information and communication opportunities, including for the poorest with poorly understood consequences. This presents special research challenges."[12]

New web technologies are taking on increasingly relevant roles including providing real-time information about events during crisis and violence. One recent example was the online mapping of violence and human rights abuses during the Kenya post-election violence in late 2007 and early 2008 which was done through SMS and web technology in which Kenya's digital community responded with *Ushahidi* (www.ushahidi.com), a website that collected reports of violence.

Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have also played important roles in events in a host of countries including Egypt and Tunisia most recently.[13] However, it is important to recognize the difference in social and professional responsibility between professional journalists and citizen reporters. Professional journalists are, in theory, bound by a set of professional norms and practices while citizen reporters are not. Yet, while media development organizations have begun to include citizen reporting activities in their programs, to date there has been no specific CSJ citizen reporting initiative.

3.3 Safety of Media Workers
Increasingly, journalists across the globe face increased risks as they cover conflict. Journalists in Afghanistan and their families, for example, face intimidation and death threats not just from Taliban militants, but also from warlords, drug barons, and even corrupt government officials and police who do not want the media spotlight on their activities. As such, some practitioners have noted a clear linkage between CSJ and the issue of safety and feel that it is crucial to train journalists how to stay safe while covering a conflict.

In the case of Afghanistan, for example, IMS felt it was important to ensure better working conditions for journalists and therefore set up a safety and protection mechanism for media workers in Afghanistan which includes training journalists in both basic safety skills and CSJ techniques.

Afghanistan was the first country in which IMS combined CSJ and safety training; however, such training has since been conducted in Sudan and Pakistan as well.

3.4 Structural Environment
For many, CSJ simply emphasizes the importance of social and professional responsibility. However, it is clear that in many cases this may be difficult to do for a myriad of reasons. There are structural constraints which can make the working environment for journalists extremely challenging as well. In the case of conflict situations, not only are journalists working in a highly charged, politicized and violent environment, but they must continue to answer to their editors, managers and media owners who may have their own stakes in the conflict and/or its outcome.

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[12] Institute of Development Studies and BBC WST, "The Role of Media in Fragile Situations: A Research Dialogue Across Disciplines," 2009, p. 7. http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/pdf/media_fragile_states.pdf Accessed 23 January 2011.

[13] See for example: David Kirkpatrick, "Tunisia's Inner Workings emerge on Twitter." January 22, 2011 in New York Times. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/23/world/africa/23tunis.html?_r=2 Accessed 23 January 2011; and Sherif Mansour, "Egypt's Facebook Showdown." June 2, 2008 in Los Angeles Times. http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jun/02/opinion/oe-mansour2 Accessed 23 January 2011.

In addition, media are not homogenous. The ownership of a particular media outlet will often have significant implications for how a journalist covers a story. It is important, therefore to consider, for example, different types of media be they print, broadcast or online as well as state, independent or private media and community media for there is immense variation and complexity within as well as between different media sectors thereby having implications for CSJ practitioners.

Additional structural constraints may be posed by such issues as media sustainability, a lack of resources (including transport) as well as access (or lack thereof) to information and sources.

If a media outlet does not have the means to provide transport so that a journalist can travel to cover a story this will clearly have an impact on how the story is covered. Likewise, if media outlets face difficulties in simply getting by financially day to day (as is often the case in many conflict countries) then this too will impact how, or if, a journalist will cover the conflict.

Another significant barrier that can influence conflict-sensitive journalism is the lack of access to information. If journalists do not have access to either information or official sources their reporting, even if abiding by other conflict sensitive journalistic standards, will be lacking the crucial balance that is necessary to provide a fair and impartial report.

Finally, the regulatory and legislative environment can also have significant impact on conflict sensitive reporting. Regulatory bodies, for example, are often aligned or connected in some way with the state. As such, they too can have undue influence on working journalists and may restrict movement, reports going to air or being published or even shut down media outlets.

Additionally, freedom of information legislation is often lacking in most conflict or post-conflict countries and as such there are few, if any, guarantees for journalists on securing information that they may need in order to file reports. Indeed, often in conflict scenarios, access to information is one of the first things to disappear under national security legislation.

3.5 The People Factor
The factors above, while mentioned in a rather cursory form, are also subject to the whims of what could be termed "the people factor" – that is, the unpredictability of people or the role of people in the practice of journalism. For this too cannot be discounted when considering the state of CSJ and how it is performed. At the end of the day, no matter which way we slice it, people are at the heart of any story – they are the story, they produce the story, they consume the story and react to the story.

Editors, managers, reporters, media owners, photographers all have some impact on any particular story. And then, of course we have the trend of audience as producers which also will have an impact on the content they produce.

It is also important to point out that much of the violent conflict is not the "traditional warfare between nations but now is violent strife among people within common or rough borders, often between communities and tribes".[14] This means that we must distinguish between reporters who are covering their own country's civil war (e.g. Sri Lanka) versus journalists coming from outside the

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[14] Ross Howard, "Conflict-Sensitive Reporting: State of the Art: A course for journalists and journalism educators," p.3.

country who cover the same conflict; it is highly likely that the story will not be reported in the same way. Some researchers, for example, draw a distinction between "insider-partials" and "outsider-neutrals" with the former often having a number of advantages over the latter.[15] However, it would also suggest that while they are likely to understand certain nuances of the conflict that outsiders do not, they may also simply be too close to the conflict to be impartial.

Most Western journalists come from countries that have not seen violent civil conflict. Indeed, those countries in which Western military forces are currently engaged, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, means that for Western media consumers these conflicts are played out far from their homes and often do not touch consumers directly.

Finally, what is the role of the people that journalists cover – those "regular" people affected by conflict? What is their story? For "the people who live and suffer through the consequences of violence ultimately deserve to be the architects of the changes required to improve their lives on the ground. Enhancing the capacities of local people in their struggle for peaceful social change is crucial. Thus, putting people at the heart of peace processes is a basic tenet for peace practitioners."[16]

3.6 Monitoring and Evaluation

Finally, media development practitioners must examine how CSJ can best and most effectively be monitored and evaluated. Although there are significant challenges to such an exercise, there needs to be some way to measure the effectiveness of such projects and to more accurately assess the role that media play in peace building.

What is the true impact of CSJ? What differences, if any, has it made in the contexts in which it has been used? To date there has been little, if any, examination of this impact. Indeed, media development practitioners continue to struggle with defining the most effective methods of monitoring and evaluation for their projects with CSJ being simply one facet of such projects.

So how can we best evaluate the impact of CSJ or do we need to go beyond measuring impact? Perhaps, as one researcher suggested at a December 2010 meeting examining methods of evaluating media interventions in conflict countries: "it is now time to move on to larger impact questions that provide multiple layers of data that can be used in planning and evaluating media programs" rather than continuing to focus on low level questions about the number of people trained, for example.[17] The researcher further suggests that implementers go beyond the collection of basic data such as the numbers of journalists trained in conflict sensitive journalism. Rather, "implementers need to develop organization-wide indicators and tools that can be quickly adapted for field use."[18]

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[15] Christopher Mitchell, "Conflict, Social Change and Conflict Resolution," http://www.berghof-handbook.net/documents/publications/dialogue5_mitchell_lead-1.pdf Accessed 17 January 2011.

[16] Ed Garcia, "Addressing Social Change in Situations of Violent Conflict: A Practitioner's Perspective," http://www.berghof-handbook.net/documents/publications/dialogue5_garcia_comm.pdf Accessed 17 January 2011.

[17] Maureen Taylor, "Methods of Evaluating Media Interventions in Conflict Countries," p.16. http://www.global.asc.upenn.edu/fileLibrary/PDFs/taylorcaux2.pdf Accessed 19 January 2011.

[18] Maureen Taylor, "Methods of Evaluating Media Interventions in Conflict Countries," p.16. http://www.global.asc.upenn.edu/fileLibrary/PDFs/taylorcaux2.pdf Accessed 19 January 2011.

4. Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to provide some overview of CSJ nearly ten years after the original CSJ handbook was published. This paper is meant as a departure point for further discussion, debate and dialogue to discern what may be more effective ways to have clear impact on conflict and to ensure journalists around the work are prepared the cover the conflicts many of them face on a daily basis, in a challenging and dangerous environment.

This has not, by any means, intended to be a comprehensive examination of CSJ but rather a suggestion that CSJ cannot and should not be considered as an isolated activity but rather that the tenets of CSJ are affected by the environment in which it is practiced on a daily basis around the world.

And if we consider the environment, composed of a myriad of factors, what implications then, if any, for the implementation and methodology of CSJ? Media practitioners cannot do it alone in environments where there may be political culture of intolerance, inadequate professional standards and censorship and self-censorship along with a myriad of other factors as discussed above.

It would seem that some attention must be paid to how CSJ is used, implemented and shared, not only regarding the context but also how the practice of CSJ may be affected by a variety of factors including technology, citizen reporting, the people factor and safety. How do we take these things into consideration when implementing CSJ activities or is this too ambitious?

It would seem that at the very least we as media development and CSJ practitioners, need to be cognizant of these factors. And while there may be no clear cut answers to many of the questions posed in this paper; it does seem clear that it is essential that as CSJ practitioners we at the very least consider adopting a holistic view of CSJ.