



BUDAPEST CENTRE
FOR THE INTERNATIONAL
PREVENTION OF GENOCIDE
AND MASS ATROCITIES

Prevention of Mass Atrocities in Practice

Roundtable

Pre-event of the VIII. Budapest Human Rights Forum

organized by the Budapest Centre for the International Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities and the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

„Role of Journalists in Prevention of Genocide and Countering Extremism”

Date: 11 November, 2015
Between 14.30 – 17.15

Venue: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade
H - 1016 Budapest, Bérc utca 13-15.

Panel presentation

Mark Barwick
Policy Adviser on Programmes for Dialogue
Budapest Centre for the International
Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities

Media freedoms are under attack in many countries today, including here in Europe. The free access to information, a cornerstone for building democratic societies, is increasingly threatened. The space in which journalists can do their job without restrictions, intimidation or state surveillance is also narrowing. This is disconcerting, not only for the state of democracy in these countries but also for the prevention of violence and mass atrocities.

New communication technologies have unleashed a potentiality for mass atrocities to occur that was unknown just a few years ago. One need only witness the masterful way in which Daesh/ ISIS has used these media to amass new recruits for its reign of terror to see that this is true.

In this respect, journalists have a particularly crucial role to play – and indeed a responsibility – in the prevention of mass atrocities. Journalists are in the business of transmitting knowledge, information and ideas. When information is transmitted in a free, balanced and accurate way, it can provide a critical counter-narrative to the hateful messaging that is propagated elsewhere.

This kind of reporting can be a dangerous affair. Over the past decade more than 700 journalists have been killed for reporting the news – and 90% of these crimes have gone unprosecuted. Clearly there is much to be done to protect journalists in these times as well as the free and independent space in which they can work.

The Genocide Cycle

The role of journalists in preventing mass atrocities can be viewed through the lens of what has been called the genocide cycle. There have been several schema proposed for describing the conditions which could lead to genocide. Perhaps the best known was established by Dr Gregory Stanton, who has elaborated ten stages that could set in motion this process in part or in whole.

Stanton believes that we enter into the cycle by classification and symbolisation of a targeted group.

Classification means that we note differences in terms of 'us and them', whether by ethnicity or race, religion or national origin: German or Jew, Hutu or Tutsi, those coming from predominantly Muslim cultures and those of so-called Christian cultures. We are we – and they are the other.

Symbolisation occurs when we start to catalogue those classifications. We name them or distinguish them by creating symbols that could potentially lead to the third and fourth stages, which are discrimination and dehumanisation.

It is in these first four stages of the genocide cycle that one can see the power of the media in transmitting ideas, symbols and images that could either help to prevent the commission of violent acts or in fact enable the hateful environment which makes violence on a massive scale possible. We are all familiar with the destructive power that was wielded by Radio Mille Collines leading up to the genocide in Rwanda. Tutsis were cockroaches to be crushed. Jews in pre-war Germany were conspiring to take over the world. Homosexuals are predators. 'Gypsies' steal little children. The list goes on.

It is critical for journalists to review regularly the way that they classify and symbolise groups of people in their reporting, especially when they report on minorities. Minorities

are almost by definition vulnerable groups. And when we use language and frame events in a particular way that could lead to discrimination and the dehumanisation of the other, we could be contributing to a process that might lead to the commission of mass atrocities.

Of course, I am not saying that every instance of classification or symbolisation will ultimately lead to genocide. In fact, all societies and cultures engage at some level in distinguishing the dominant group from minority groups. It is when the language of classification or symbolisation is linked to hatred or fear that the potential for violence is increased.

What's in a word?

Journalists use language and images all the time. Consider the recent debate in the media over the use of the term 'migrant' as opposed to the term 'refugee.' At a policy level, the difference between a migrant and a refugee is clear. A refugee, as defined under the 1951 Refugee Convention, is entitled to basic rights under international law; for instance, the right not to be immediately deported and sent back into a situation of armed conflict or persecution. By contrast, when someone is classified as a migrant, that person is processed according to the immigration laws of the country of reception.

Such are the legal definitions of these terms. However, the distinction became lost in the public discourse as resistance to the new arrivals ran high. The general perception on the ground was that massive numbers of migrants – 'swarms' was the word used by David Cameron – were taking advantage of the open door offered for whoever wanted to come to Europe and benefit from better job opportunities or whatever else they could find to improve their situation. It was not until major media houses began to consciously shift their language from 'migrant' – which is a neutral term, suggesting a wide range of possible reasons for their entry into European territory – to 'refugee,' a term which is imbued with a certain legitimacy, that some of the negative edge was removed from public perceptions of those entering Europe.

The classification of people can therefore be very potent. When the media started to use more widely the term 'refugee' and when stories began to circulate of real people desperately fleeing the carnage in the Middle East that popular sentiment could begin to change.

Whenever you talk about other people as if they are not really human (dehumanisation) you are much more capable of committing mass atrocities against them. You are much more likely to crush an insect than to do harm to another human being. If you can characterise the members of a particular group as animals, vermin, insects or diseases, then dehumanisation can subdue the normal human revulsion against killing another human.

Hate propaganda in print or on radio or passed along through social media is rightly prohibited by law. Conscientious journalists will also do well to take care how things are reported, monitor the vocabulary that is used and scrutinise the way an isolated incident is framed in the news. These may escape a country's legal censure, but the deeper question remains: Did their reporting contribute to the humanising or the dehumanising of those people or groups in focus?

This is not about giving a positive spin or being politically correct in one's reporting. It is about recognising the power of the media and the responsibility that we all have for

promoting the public good, especially those who are entrusted with sharing facts and information that could have particular social consequences.

Looking through the lens of mass atrocities prevention can be instructive for journalists, especially at the early stages of the genocide cycle. In fact, one could argue that mass atrocities cannot occur unless they are facilitated at some level by the media. Media implies a medium for the passing of information. Mass atrocities cannot be organised without the support of the media – whether it is print media, Twitter or messages passed by drums from one village to another. It is about passing along information.

Ordinary People

Sometimes I hear surprise expressed over the numbers of people who come from the middle layers of society to join right-wing and neo-Nazi groups. As if people of racist, anti-immigrant or anti-Roma feelings must be less educated or just that way by nature. However, historically those who supported the Nazis in Germany – those who voted for them and participated in Nazi party politics – came from the more literate sectors of society. They were not the poor. They were average and educated individuals that would normally see a positive future before them. But when they felt threatened by losing their place on the social ladder or felt humiliated by losing their job, even these plain and ordinary people found themselves taken up in the systematic genocidal anti-Semitism of the regime.

That is to say that ordinary church-going, newspaper-reading, middle-class citizens can also become perpetrators – or at least collaborators – of genocide. This should give us all pause to think and be cautious in times of social decline. Our fears can become translated into anger and rage directed toward individuals who pose no particular threat. And the messaging that is put out there in the form of journalistic reporting, news and analysis can have vital consequences, not only for vulnerable groups within society but also for the health of that society as a whole.