MARINA PIGNATELLI*

Ethnic Conflicts and the Media

Resumo

A maior parte das guerras desde o fim da Cortina de Ferro têm ocorrido dentro dos estados e não tanto entre estados, e tais conflitos têm sido de natureza étnica. Este artigo procura examinar os papéis desempenhados pelos media no cunhar e forjar das identidades étnicas, no perpetuar de preconceitos bem como em compelir as pessoas ao conflito. A pesquisa é baseada na recolha de diversos estudos de casos comparáveis no sentido de encontrar regularidades e padrões que possam existir na relação complexa entre os conflitos étnicos. Mais especificamente, o estudo foca-se nos constrangimentos dos meios generalistas de *mainstream* relativos às representações étnicas e religiosas, relacionando tais constrangimentos às principais perspetivas teóricas ligadas à compreensão dos conflitos étnicos: primordialismo, instrumentalismo e construtivismo.

Palavras-chave: conflitos étnicos; media.

Abstract

Most of the wars since the fall of the Iron Curtain, have mainly been intra-state conflicts rather than between states, and such conflicts have predominantly been ethnic in nature. This paper intends to examine the roles that the media have played in coining and forging ethnic identities, in perpetuating prejudice as well as in compelling people to conflict. The research is based upon collating several comparable case studies in order to find out the regularities and patterns that exist in the complex relationship between the media and ethnic conflicts. More specifically, the study is focused on the generalistic mainstream media´s constraints concerning ethnic and religious representation, relating those constraints with the main theoretical perspectives regarding ethnic conflicts understanding: primordialism, instrumentalism and constructivism.

Keywords: *ethnic conflicts, media.*

∗ *Researcher at the CRIA – Centre of Research in Anthropology, collaborator at the Centre for Public Administration and Public Policies, and member of the Portuguese Anthropological Association board.*

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Introduction

This paper intends to focus upon the following questions regarding the media roles in Ethnic Conflicts: *a)* Is media production regardful of ethnic, racial or religious prejudice?; *b)* Are journalists free in using whatever justified means they can to attract and retain audiences?; and *c)* What are the limits of their accountability regarding the social effects of their profit policies?

In order to understand the research problem involving the questions presented above, the study relied on documental sources, including the related scientific literature production and press data, used to identify, select and analyse the information. The adopted methodological standpoint was a qualitative/interpretative/comparative view, aiming a more flexible, holistic, in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Such methods focus mainly on comparable human perceptions and mudivisions – a subjective knowledge and analysis using specific theoretical approaches to help the analysis of text or to explain the collected data, which must therefore be interpreted with due care. Also, the inexistence of more reliable studies on the subject inhibits the task of presenting a set of more robust conclusions. However, this paper seeks to identify and obtain information about the human intangible dimensions, such as contradictory values, positions and relations, specific social contexts and their complexity, concerning the proposed questions.

Considering that, after the Cold War period, conflicts persisted and became more frequent within states rather than between states, the conflict analysts and thinkers have, in recent decades, embarked upon a new field of research devoted to what has been referred to as ethnic conflicts. Their starting point was the assumption that ethnic identity would be the main cause of most contemporary antagonisms.

The notion of self-determination has helped the UN grow from 26 member states, in 1941 to 51, in 1945, to 156, in 1990 has risen to 193 at present. Since contemporary societies are increasingly pluralistic, the presence of ethnic conflicts is one of the unfortunate realities that government leaders, educators or managers of social institutions more often have to deal with, as our societies continue along their path towards internationalization and globalization.

Ethnic conflict refers to disputes between contending groups who identify themselves primarily on the basis of ethnic criteria and who make appeals as groups, based on their collective rights (Pignatelli, 2010). Such criteria may include ethnic perceptions of a shared culture, nationality, language, religion or race. They are, therefore, violent forms of ethnic mobilization, clashes between different ethnic groups (not necessarily both being minorities – because

in such case, they should be referred to as inter-ethnic conflicts). The truth is that it is difficult to determine when a conflict is considered an ethnic conflict, particularly when considering the diversity and the often ambiguity of the populations and the potential cases in hand. Sometimes only when the conflictive process is already well advanced, can it be classified as such. In fact, for example, inter-ethnic conflict shifts from the interaction of competing groups (which can occur in a classroom, a remote village, a neighbourhood), to other contexts that, in the most bellicose situations, culminate in a civil war, or wars between ethnically diverse states. Inter-ethnic civil wars include cases like the former Yugoslavia, Liberia or Sudan, while inter-ethnic wars between states are exemplified by the Palestinian war (1948, the Suez crisis (1956), the two Cashmere wars (1947 and 1956) and the Bangladesh war (1971), between India and Pakistan. The sensitivity and complexity of all possible situations require the origins and nature of underlying tensions to be accurately identified as well as how they can lead to open conflict.

Moreover, the role that the media play in such conflicts is not only crucial but also an unclear and complex one, considering the media are themselves linked to ethnic identity by being an effect or as a cause of it. The media occupy a key site and perform a dynamic role in the public representation of unequal social relations and the dynamic play of cultural power. It is both in and through representations, for example, that the media's audience members are variously challenged and invited to construct a sense of 'us' versus 'them' (Cottle, 2000, p.2). The spread of ethnic minority groups and the day to day encounters of diasporic communities in contemporary societies as well as the growing (tactical) uses they make of new and old interactive technologies of communication, present new communication opportunities for embattled and/or dispersed ethnic minorities. This occurs not least by helping to sustain subcultures and networks and keeping alive the memories and myths of homelands as well as the collective hopes for the future. Minority media organizations (the minority press, local cable TV stations, local radio, independent commercial television production companies and community-based film-sharing networks) steer a difficult course between universal appeal, market imperatives and systems of patronage on the one hand, and particularistic aims, community based expectations and felt obligations on the other. Taken together, they contribute an important, albeit under-researched, dimension to the communication environment of ethnic minorities and their struggles for 'authentic' and/or pluralistic representations (Cottle 1997; Dayan 1998). The mainstream media, though differentiated by medium, outlet, genre and subject interests, Cottle (2000, p.3) also says that "all too often produce shocking examples of xenophobic reporting and racist portrayal, while often publicly

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committing to the ideals and practices of an inclusive multi-ethnic, multicultural society". "The elite media sector, sometimes called the agenda-setting media because they are the ones with the big resources, they set the framework in which everyone else operates (…) it is just a reflection of obvious power structures and the major media are just part of that system", according to Chomski (1997). Their institutional setting follows the same pattern for "there are all sorts of filtering devices to get rid of people who are a pain in the neck and think independently" (Chomski 1997). So, following this structuralist view, one is adequately socialized and trained so that there are certain things that it is not proper to say or think. What appears and the way it is slanted will reflect the interest of the buyers and sellers, the institutions. Institutional settings of power structures do not allow critical analysis because there is no reason why they should allow that. It is not purposeful censorship. The procedure follows a doctrinal framework that considers the general population to be merely "spectators" and not "participants". In fact, "Traditional explanatory theories of communication, in particular the agenda-setting and news making hypothesis, include a statement that highlights the key role of the media and news organizations as an essential factor that allows the construction of a baseline and organization in the face of which the public itself is placed in the news plan" as stated by Espírito Santo (2012, p.136). Mainstream news making, according to anti-globalization theorists like Chomski and Herman (1988), is considered to be accurate because it is based on international forces such as globalizing market trends, technological developments and relies on official information sources (eg. official statistics, state data), seldom paying attention to alternative voices of contestation. Cultural and other minorities' concerns in larger societies are under-estimated in such a representation, unless they are mainstream ruling minorities. News making is therefore a social construct of reality that often represents certain ethnic minorities, highlighting their negative aspects. Although this phenomenon is not intentional, it ends up having a negative effect by perpetuating prejudice in relation to cultural differences. Key factors and constraints identified in empirical work include, inter alia, limited finances, resources and training opportunities, systems of patronage and corporate gatekeepers, institutional conservatism and organizational hierarchy, producers' attitudes and cultural capital, source dependencies and source inhibitions, professional norms of balance and objectivity, professional status claims, cultural obligations and the 'burden of representation', audience expectations, temporal production cycles, and the conventions and aesthetics of media forms (Cottle, 2000, p.17). According to Devroe (2004:5), "among ethnic communities in Europe there is a predominant feeling of exclusion and non (or mis)representation". They also

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hold the belief that what is portrayed by the media has an important influence on prejudices and negative attitudes towards them. Devroe (ibidem) also says that "having the feeling of being treated fairly in news and the media, or at least having the feeling of being represented, helps to create a sense of belonging, or what Tufte (2001) calls 'locality', i.e. feeling at home somewhere".

Some notes on Ethnic Conflicts

The presence of ethnicity as a variable, suggests that its centrality is a cause of conflict between groups. However, since virtually every intergroup conflict involves people with different cultural traits and backgrounds, then, all conflicts between groups, including interstate wars, are in essence, ethnic conflicts. Hence it may be regarded as a redundant classification. In fact, we may ask ourselves why the conflict in Rwanda was only triggered in 1994? Or why Jews and Arabs merely began to clash after 1920 (when they had coexisted since the Age of Isaac and Ishmael)? or why did the war between China and Vietnam, who had lived 1,000 years of enmity, only commence in 1949 ? Often the image of ethnic groups in conflict is an ideological construction of nationalist politicians and historians. Thus, the shape of an ethnic conflict depends upon the political goals of the ethnic group, the political opportunity structures of the state where the mobilization occurs, the regulation systems, the integration levels, the competitive processes in societies and the extent of international involvement in the dispute.

It is important, however, to understand how relevant issues arise in these conflicts and the way societies are mobilizing around ethnic identity. A good example is the cry of the Italian nationalist D'Azeglio: "We have made Italy. Now we have to make Italians". Italy by the way has a much greater ethnic diversity than the Balkans, in this matter. Jalali and Lipset (1997, p.77) have set three levels of Ethnic Conflicts: a) low intensity and no violence (eg. Belgium: Walloons versus Flemings; Quebec; Czechs and Slovaks); b) low intensity but violent (Northern Ireland and the Basque provinces); and c) high-intensity and violent conflicts (Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Balkans).

Two questions must then be posed, according to Henderson (1999): 1 – What leads groups to mobilize on the basis of ethnicity? And 2 – To what extent and under what conditions are ethnic groups willing to fight rather than cooperate? Trying to answer these questions among the predominant theoretical approaches on ethnic conflict analysis, we find three predominant perspectives: primordialism, instrumentalism and constructivism.

Primordialism is an analytical view of inter-ethnic conflict that advocates a natural division of human families prone to conflict, as if each one of them is "naturally programmed", immutable and acting in an irrational way. Eth-

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nic conflicts are thus seen as being the result of inherent differences between ethnic groups that naturally feel sympathy and friendship for those belonging to their own group and who feel dislike for those who are outsiders. It argues that the aggression that rises within the group towards the outside groups is based upon a fundamental need to link identity with certain given characteristics, often ethnicity and / or race – Tufte´s (2001) "localities" or the "primary loyalties" that C. Geertz (1963) talked about. So, ethnicity (or ethnic identity) emerges naturally. The primordialists assume that intra-group relations are more peaceful and orderly while relations with "others" are conflicting, anarchic and destructive, states Henderson (1999, p.751). They think that the similarities generate ethnic cooperation and ethnic differences lead to inter-ethnic conflict. According to sociobiologists, the followers of E. O. Wilson´s (1975) theory postulate that genes are the only sufficient determinants of human behaviour, because they are solid and reliable (this being the more radical position), while culture is contingent and uncertain, since it continuously and constantly changes. The more moderate primordialists admit a mix of biology and culture, and accept that social behaviour is subject to change due to the cultural adaptive capabilities of humankind that are shaped according to the environment by non-biological means. Primordialists´ explanations are based on the grounds of accumulated historical hatreds between nations dating back even to the earliest forefathers (including even animals on a primatological timescale).

For them, that explains, in fact, much of the so-called intolerant and xenophobic behaviour, refuting that individuals might have multiple identities. However, many ethnic groups do not appeal to primordial arguments and do not follow parochial values of exclusion that isolate groups and often lead them to extremism, increasing the possibility of violence.

The instrumentalist view is a dominant perspective in political science and it argues that inter-ethnic conflict is the result of elite manipulation and of community appeals to achieve their own goals rather then a kind of tendency for different ethnic groups to enter into conflict. Instrumentalists suggest that ethnicity is socially and instrumentally constructed, and is not derived from any natural division of mankind into groups or nations. They argue that the differences do not need confirmation. Those differences between humans just make it easier for elites to mobilize their societies for hostility. They believe that ethnicity is malleable like clay and that its boundaries and characteristics can change with socialization pressures induced by elites and communitarian guidelines towards a dominant lifestyle: a certain language, religion, clothing or garments, food habits or any other common traits. That is, culture as a plastic-shaped instrument used in competing for economic, social and po-

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litical goals, creating a sense of group loyalty and hostility to outsiders. Alternatively, groups can cooperate with other groups or collaborate with state authorities. This goes against the cosmopolitan trends, since the elites, rather than promoting ethnic consensus between groups, are often seen as the very instigators of conflict.

In order to mobilize a group for social action, it is necessary to politicize it beforehand. And that is generally and often cynically orchestrated by political activists, since cultural differences alone, as we have seen, do not necessarily lead to conflict. Ethnicity, once it is politicized, becomes an additional way of associating, indistinguishable from other shadowy forms of affiliations by interest groups (ideological or material). It becomes a label based upon a set of symbolic links used by elites to obtain certain political advantages, but is always conditioned by the kind of appeals (the beliefs and values upheld) that might be carried out on its behalf. It is known that ethnic and political elites may want to manipulate ethnicity. But this can only be achieved if it actually matches the will of the people. As much as ethnicity may be considered as being constructed, without any sustained cultural basis, if it does not meet the perceived real aspirations of individuals and groups, mobilization will not succeed. Such was the case, for instance, in the failed attempt to promote "Occitania" in France in the 60´s, based on a linguistic unit, or the case of Padania, in northern Italy, where a secessionist wave led by Umberto Rossi, arose in the 90´s. Cautioning against a prevention against prejudice, Filip Reyntjens (1993, p.583) when talking about the Rwandan situation before the genocide, warned: "Ethnicity does not necessarily have to give rise to violence, but one can easily manipulate ethnicity to throw people against one another."

Finally, the most recent and predominant model on ethnicities is the constructionist perspective. It reports on the development of the phenomena in relation to social contexts, as a purely sociological approach. Theorists who follow this current seek to explain human behaviour from a perspective in which both subject and object interact in a process that results in the construction and reconstruction of cognitive frameworks. Since the 80s, after the B. Anderson (1983) concept of "imagined communities" and the Hobsbawm and Ranger´s (1983) notion of "invention of traditions", the idea that ethnic identities are constructions started to predominate debate among academics not as elastic and situationally manipulated or used and discarded by the elite, according to their own interests, but as the result of much more complex social interactions. In this constructionist line, according to Erikson (1976), identity not only depends on the demarcation between "us" versus "them" but it is conditioned by a set of numerous other variables such as the meaning and value attributed to that membership. Therefore, this paradigm combines the

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two previous approaches, viewing ethnicity as defined by culture and ethnic identity at the same time while being continuously constructed by processes of inclusion-exclusion and negotiations between the centre (intra-communal relations) and the periphery (relations with the public sphere), as argued by J. Nagel (1994). It is therefore important to study how individuals and groups develop and the process that is executed within a wider and deeper historical and cultural set of relationships, that is: how these ethnic identities are formed, how they become conceived, imagined and continually shaped and redefined in societies.

The model of conflict analysis becomes interesting when analysts understand that the parties may gradually build mutual understandings and subjective connections, when they develop conflictual interaction through processes of cognitive assimilation and accommodation. For constructionists, conflicts are not "naturally" associated with ethnicity but rather caused by problems within social systems, which individuals do not control. Hence it follows that identities should not be taken for granted or seen as immutable as they are beyond ones choice. Only the socially constructed divisions are considered. They are not interested in generalizations about conflicts motivated by class interests or other materialistic, political or economic aims. In this they differ from the instrumentalists.

More or less passionate, more structural, strategic or calculating (malleable like clay) more rational, or rather, more culturally primal, emotional or absolutely artificial, or even primordially as hard as rock, all analysis requires an open understanding of ethnic identities. Reasons for ethnic conflict often operate in isolation, sometimes they are associated or correlated. A wide-angled lens is advisable in these matters.

Donald L. Horowitz in his work Ethnic Groups in Conflict (1998, p.5-11) divides ethnic conflicts between the symmetric and asymmetric (according to the degree of ethnical division in a given society and to the state´s power to impose rule). According to B. Crawford (1998), the mobilization of the population using identity rhetoric is closely linked to inherited institutional legacies. These mobilizations are often caused by the bandwagon effect, or "follow the leader effect", that is, some are dragged onto their own ethnic wagon, and others do the same simply as a reaction. Then, the ethnic divide will be in the spotlight of the society (through the media´s attention). In such cases it is important to consider the timings. The first to enter the wagon are usually the extremists - those most likely to start acts of "civil disobedience", initially small and sporadic or taking place faster and more systematically when a group is oppressed or stretched by a state (eg. the Sikhs in India). That is how extremists gain visibility and by entering the political arena they control

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power and negotiations become much more difficult because it then involves cultural identity which is fixed.

Anthony Smith (1986) has precisely pointed out the power of the emotional load carried by ethnic groups in conflict. But political institutions can encourage or inhibit these bandwagoning effects – or formation of ethnic identities, as Crawford (1998) also says. The attacks by skinheads on immigrants in Germany, for example, were not punished, either by the authorities or by the local public. That encouraged other gangs to move forward with their own attacks, looking for prestige. Yet, the absence of political institutions may also have the same result (as seen by the vacuum created after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in the former East Germany). So, Crawford concludes that when institutions are weakened or fall to the ground, they fail to respond to the needs of culturally defined groups, non-violent means may be seen as ineffective, creating the feeling of "nothing to lose", as in the case of Punjab and Kashmir.

Theorization does not explain, however, the conflicts where there is no security dilemma. In democratic logic it is the individual who is the focus of political participation and who becomes protected. Some argue that conflicts are caused by the excessively fast democratizations of political institutions and the rapid constructions of liberal economies. The only way to achieve a peaceful resolution to ethnic conflict is by calling for national tolerance and civil unity, along with federalism, consocionalism or other forms of decentralization, and by responding to individual and local appeals. States therefore may comply with cultural differences or not and may control levels of violence or not. When there is a privileged discrimination policy and uneven economic distribution, cultural groups tend to harden and transform into political identities.

We know how most of the colonies were composed of many distinct ethnic groups. We also know that there was a deliberate partition of colonized territories, among Europeans, in order to "dissect" those ethnic groups geographically. A different form of the "divide and rule" concept that created inter-ethnic tensions, in order to prevent the formation of united blocks and opposition from the colonized, causing the so-called "Ethnic Soldiering" phenomenon: should they be considered "Liberators" or "Terrorists"?

The roles of the media in ethnic conflicts

As stated by Eller (2002, p.84) "newspapers and cultural journals are major loci of ethnic discourse and therefore of ethnic integration and mobilization". Thus all processes of production in the media may be anchored from the primordialist, instrumentalist or constructionist perspective, depending upon

the focus, relevance and in-depth look professionals tend to have of ethnic rifts.

In a pluralistic society, one ought to be careful about what one says since, quoting Ira Rifkin (1988), "When you talk about racial, ethnic or religious conflicts, you´re talking about the stuff that riots, wars and deep-seated prejudices are made of". The media are part of social dynamics and instrumental in maintaining both the *status quo* and change. Since cultures and ethnic identities are constantly changing, cultural diversity becomes a threat to social order, in the sense that "uncontrolled changes become revolutions" (Shoemaker and Vos, 2011, p.153). As previously mentioned, minorities are often negatively represented, if represented at all. Mainstream news continuously exaggerates certain ethnic groups namely as perpetrators of problems, crime and conflict, in a heavily biased manner. Also, a simplistic explanation of ethnic conflict may foreclose analysis of the political, social and economic factors involved and therefore preclude the audience from gaining any real understanding of the situation.

But as Konstanty Gebert (2009) has put it "The media are always ethnic, in the sense that, being produced in the language of a given ethnic group, they unavoidably strengthen the audience´s / reader's identification with that group". Since the 19th century in Europe, we can positively establish that the press has developed hand in hand with the Emancipation movement. And so it is possible to state, according to Gebert (2009) that it:

1. Solidified existing nationalisms (as in the case of the French and German press after the war of 1870 and in the run-up to WWI);

2. Facilitated the survival of those people threatened in nations deprived of their own state (as observed in the Polish-language press in partitioned Poland), and especially;

3. Made easier the development of new national identities (like Lithuanians or Czechs).

This rule holds true as well for borderline cases (as the Paris correspondent for Neue Freie Presse, Theodor Herzl who witnessed mass rallies in Paris following the Dreyfus trial where many chanted "Death to the Jews!" Herzl came to reject his early ideas regarding Jewish emancipation and assimilation, and started to believe that Jews must remove themselves from Europe and create their own state); It also holds true in the Zionist press in early 20th century Europe, that helped in transforming Jewish self-identity from religious to national; or, as Gebert explained as well (2009) "in contemporary Romany and Kurdish media which stimulated a sense of nationhood in nations afflicted

by a lack of a unifying language"; or "in the Rwandan Radio Mille Collines, in 1994, broadcasting in the Kinyarwanda, common both to Tutsis and Hutus, and which articulated a programme of Hutu genocide over the Tutsi". It remains true even in many contemporary democratic multi-ethnic societies (witness the role of Quebec's French media in provoking separatism, despite the official bi-lingualism promoted by a multi-culturalistic policy). Primordialist views tend to predominate among those first-hand witnesses/reporters of ethnic clashes embedded with a "chronomentality" as defined by Schudson (1986), i.e. those working under time constraints and for an agenda-setting medium, as in the above mentioned case of the Rwanda genocide and this only takes into account the side´s particularistic aims. Historical (genetic) mutual hatred serves as an easy explanation for an apparently inexplicable high level of violence between ethnically diverse individuals and groups. Such over-simplified rationale fails to consider other confusing (to the general public) subjective and objective variables like power-struggles, economics, status, land, values, perceptions, resources (eg. water, oil, gas, rain-forests), etc. In the latter case of Rwanda, Reyntjens´s (1993) the instrumentalist view may be considered a more realistic approach. Along with other minorities such as the Twa (pygmees) the Tutsi and Hutu people have lived together for over a thousand years in the same territory. In Burundi the same ethnic groups have been living for centuries as peaceful neighbours. Yet, to "Cut the tall trees" was the motto used by the elites via Radio Milles Collines to instigate "Hutu Power" and the extermination of what they called "those cockroaches" . Desire Habiyambire, a Hutu moderate who fled Rwanda with his three children after his name was circulated on a hit list, said : "I am caught in the middle (…) Extremism is my enemy. If I meet a Hutu extremist, he will kill me. If I meet a Tutsi extremist, he too will kill me." Like many refugees, Habiyambire thinks hard-line Hutus are trying to consolidate power by enlisting Hutu civilians in the fight not just against the rebel front but against all Tutsi. "They are trying to confuse people for their own political ends, and they have succeeded." And radio broadcasts, created a climate of fear by repeatedly reporting that the RPF was attacking unarmed civilians and wanted to wipe out the Hutu of Rwanda in a campaign of 'ethnic purification'.

Yet on the other hand, according to some authors like Gebert (2009) the aspiration of the media is also to be universal, in the sense that all newsrooms containing an "International" section and editor want to "cover not only the world of the ethnic group in whose language they produce, but simply, cover the world" (Gebert, 2009). Since a universal non-ethnic language (with the failed exception of Esperanto) does not exist, "producing coverage in a certain language is not a matter of choice", says also Gebert (2009) also states.

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Furthermore, "although covering the entire world is, for obvious reasons, an unrealistic ideal", some members of the media do not willingly abandon their universalistic aspirations of locking themselves up in an ethnic ghetto. "The editor of a Hungarian daily in the ethnically mixed Romanian town of Timisoara", told Gebert (2009) in the early Nineties: "Of course we do not cover Romanian issues. If a reader wants to find out about those, he can buy himself a bloody Romanian paper".

After the Cold War (Washington versus Moscow), the media became confused over which contexts to cover. This reverts back to the need of considering the amount of coverage allocated to "us versus "them" or "the rest". Also with the international news agenda controlled by the world's major media giants, it has become crucial to develop and strengthen the media at a local level to maintain a diversity of opinion. Since reporting starts at home, most journalists consciously, or often not, write in their own language and through their own cultural lenses reinforcing ethnic connections and "localities" (Tufte, 2001). Their writings have an unavoidable if not necessarily intended impact. Actually, the objectivity dilemma rarely holds when the journalist and his or her media describe a bloody clash while not being expected not to make value judgments, especially when he/she is working to a deadline. Worse still: it becomes completely untenable "when the ethnic group for whom the media write or broadcast for is party to that conflict" (Gebert, 2009). So, the author concludes that "paradoxes of ethnicity in the media are highlighted in cases when the media either cover an ethnic conflict, or even more so when they themselves are part of it". In such cases, primordialist views tend to prevail. On the other hand, Gebert (2009) also explains that "the media in such circumstances are seldom innocent observers, unwillingly caught up in the maelstrom. More often than not, the media themselves are one of the precipitating factors". Also, as Usha S. Harris (2004, p.2) has stated, journalists have often been targeted on the basis of their ethnicity. One Solomon island journalist reported that the situation was made so untenable for him and his family that he had to seek exile in Australia. In fact, how well journalists deal with sensitive issues of race, religion or ethnic identity depends on one´s perspective (O´Sullivan, 2001). The experience of propaganda during World War I so convinced journalists that the world they were reporting about was a world which interested parties had constructed for them to report about and from then on, the idea that human beings construct the reality they deal with has held a central position in social thought and has encouraged a more sophisticated ideal of "objectivity" among journalists.

While covering ethnic conflicts, the news media have also inadvertently undermined and destabilized the process of resolution instead of contribut-

ing to public education. Their goal ends up being entertainment and not information. The media influences the public, which in turn will (in complex ways) influence policy makers, operating like an echo chamber. But the media needs the four "C"s: controversy, conflict, confrontation and certainty, for "If it bleeds it leads!" as is said in journalistic jargon. But to fully understand an ethnic conflict one needs to be aware of the context, its nuances, subjectivities, ambiguities and these are complicating matters that are either filtered out or avoided altogether. Thus, the best ethnic conflicts for journalists are those unresolved "ancient ethnic conflicts" that reinforce stereotypes and are reduced to historical (primordialistic) oversimplification, says O´Sullivan (2001). In addition, they feed into internal public opinion the legitimacy for external military intervention, as in the US. So they are instrumentalized (in order to sell advertising) and at the same time they are also instruments of political and social mobilization. As Katz and Liebes (2007, p.157-166) have put it: "If ceremonial events may be characterized as "coproductions" of broadcasters and establishments, then disruptive events may be characterized as "co-productions" of broadcasters and anti-establishment agencies, i.e. the perpetrators of disruption."

So, the relationship between journalistic obligations, individual conscience and group solidarity needs to be deeply reconsidered (Gebert, 2009). Irving Levine, national affairs director for the American Jewish Committee in New York said in the 60s that "through a baptism of fire" journalists had come to realize both how easily distorted public perceptions of sensitive issues were and how seriously manipulated their writings could be. Yet he also thinks that in recent decades journalists seem to have lost their memory and follow the "whatever you can get you can use" rule, dictated by sensationalism and newsroom competition. As long as you are "the first" and get "to the bottom line", you´ll sell your story. Due to the previously mentioned "chronomentality" and instanteism obligations, and also the micro-socialization in mainstream values, the comprehensive constructionist approach to cultural contextualization is disregarded in the production of news and the organizational routine of the news desk. So, gatekeepers tend to favour the integrationist model, and do not consider the personal choices of either journalists or the general public. It is not rare to hear the capitalist intentions of media owners also being criticized, together with the quality of analysts invited to comment upon such news (who sometimes create even greater confusion in the minds of the general public on the subjects). Exceptions seem to be US network reporting that has improved on a national scale (but not yet at a local level) and the weekend editions that are said to be more considerate than the weekday editions, in general. According to Eller (2002), in print but not only

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in print, for also in other mass media like radio and television, as well as in political activity (the formation of parties, the giving of speeches, the casting of votes, etc.) and many other practical behaviors, a disparate group can come to recognize or believe in commonalities with one another, whether or not those commonalities are old or even real.(p.84).

In fact, those commonalities are continuously constructed in every-day newsmaking. As an anthropologist of television, among other fields, Daniel Dayan (2009) also puts forward an interesting discussion on three major modalities of visibility such as «appearing», «witnessing» and finally «monstrating» : a notion that stresses the practices and «gazing acts» which structure visibility in the fields of journalism, television, and cinema. The most spectacular and impressive images and stories are still the prize-winners in reporting. Even those blanks or rather, those totally black screens shown by CNN during the Kuwait war, where only the sounds of bombardments and the reporter′s "off camera" voice could be heard, played out that spectacular «montrating» role very effectively. But stories of conflict however, are usually framed within the binary categories of good vs. evil, or one ethnic community against another, thus leading to an over simplification of issues anchored in primordialistic explanations. This style of reporting came into favor during the Cold War era when two giant hegemonic systems – capitalism and communism - were in ideological confrontation. It has become further entrenched since 9/11 and the 'War on Terror' speeches by American President George W. Bush, is also cited by Harris (2004).

Yet, today, other sources of broadcasting are available in contemporary societies, namely those provided by the Internet (social networks, YouTube, Skype, etc.). Acknowledging the power of the imagination in ethnicity and national identity cannot be underestimated since imagination can create something where reality leaves only hints or blanks and it can also overlook as much as it grasps, according to Eller (2002). And the Internet is surely another (much faster and more and more widely accessed) loci for ethnic discourse, ethnic integration, mobilization, instrumentalistic use by ethnic elites or constructing ethnic narratives and also the flow of imagination.

Recently, in what has become known as the Arab Spring, some young people with basics skills in using electronic devices and the Internet have tried to feed the world with images in an attempt to call the international community′s attention to what was taking place in their societies. In Syria, for instance, the media sector has been characterized as state-controlled, although there were many attempts at reforming the sector, at allowing private investment and more independence in recent years. Articles issued under the state of emergency since the Baath Party came to power in 1963, have authorized the state

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to control newspapers, books, radio and television broadcasting, advertising, and the visual arts; and the state retains the right to confiscate and destroy any work that threatens the security of the state. The Syrian government ("the good") historically has not tolerated independent ("the bad") sources of information. The media are state-owned and controlled by the Baath Party through the office of the Ministry of Information. The government also screens and blocks access to Internet sites that are regarded as politically sensitive or pornographic. Human rights groups have documented cases of arrest, expulsion, mistreatment, harassment, and the assassination of prominent journalists.

Nevertheless, the government has not succeeded in maintaining total control. The public does have access to Western radio stations and satellite TV, and al Jazeera has become very popular in Syria. During the recent Syrian crackdown in Syria on opposition protests, communications has largely been cut off and there has been little information from the protesters' side about the unrest. People´s willingness to call for the international community´s support to change the regime, however, led them to look for alternative and imaginative solutions. This was done in order to transmit (by every means possible) live images of the Bashar al-Assad government retaliationship to the demonstrators, discontent with the oppression, which they thought had gone beyond its limits. The president belonging to the Alaouite minority, a Shi'ite sect (one of the two major Islamic sects) has ruled over a population mostly composed of Sunnis (the other major branch of Islam), totalling around 74% of the overall Syrian society, which also includes several other minorities, namely Kurds, Christians, Ismailis and Druze . Furthermore, since the popular uprisings against the Syrian regime have begun, president Assad has ordered tighter national media censorship and the prohibition of the foreign press entering the country. One must not forget that, according to the traditional Middle Eastern Wasta system, loyalty is due firstly to those from the same patrilineal lineage, then to those who belong to the same clan, then to the tribe and then, only finally, to national citizenship. Strong state repression is therefore, the only way president Assad has to guarantee his ruling power over around 21 million people, divided as they are in terms of religious and ethnic affiliations.

Since April 2011, the Syrian people have started to show their desire for the regime to fall against the will of a leader who is strongly defended by the military (controlled by Alaouite commanding officers). As reported by Walker (2013:191), "The unrest began in the southern city of Deraa, in March, when locals gathered to demand the release of about 14 school children who were arrested and reportedly tortured after writing the well-known slogan from the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt on a wall: "The people want the downfall of the regime" (Hegeman, 2012: 6) The protesters also called for

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democracy and greater freedom, though not for President Assad's resignation. Thus, young people like Malthe Amram, developed several pages on social networks where they started uploading images of events which were unfolding on the streets of Damascus. They began to feed Facebook, Twitter and Youtube with those images but soon the government blocked these networks, as well as starting to control people's access to *cybercafés*. People could only gain access by showing their identification cards. This led the government in taking measures for tighter control, namely by hiring hackers and computer specialists for their intelligence offices and totally block the use of such social networks in the country. Later, access to the entire Internet access began to be controlled, which was switched "on" and "off" in order to spy on protesters' plans. This came to be denounced on Facebook and was labelled: the "License to kill". A human rights group has denounced several deaths, as protesters went to the streets across the country under the slogan "Protocol of death, a license to kill," in reference to the protocol recently signed between Syria and the Arab League on sending observers to the country.

The young protesters, angered by the continuous deaths occurring on the streets at the hands of government agents, tried other alternatives to transmit those testimonies abroad and to alert the international community, hoping they could gain sympathy and help, by showing images of what was going on. With Facebook blocked and an intermittent Internet (Youtube was usually used for uploading information), protesters have been turning to alternative strategies for this purpose: they send photos via mobile phones. But these mobile networks have also been controlled. Still, they managed to go out onto the streets with digital cameras cunningly concealed inside their shirts, using one of the small buttonholes as a lens for their digital cameras. Others used different devices such as a Kleenex box with a camera hidden inside, for the same purpose. Others tried to shoot images using their own small laptop cameras, concealing themselves on the roofs of their houses, pointing their laptop cameras down to the streets and passing on those live images via Skype. President Assad's response to the call from the population for a free press was in fact the to create a Committee on Media Reform, after reviewing a report in July. By May 2011, there were already 1000 casualties in Syria and up until the present casualties are estimated to have reached 5 thousand. But it seems that most of the population are still apprehensive about expressing themselves for fear of reprisals from governmental troops. Actually, it was only when the youth in the city of Deraa decided to paint the walls of a school with words of protest against the Assad government, and were arrested and tortured, that the Syrian people became united in anger, shouting "release them" and started mobilizing for revolt and then spiralled out of the control of the local author-

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ities. Such a show of dissent was, however, too much for the government and every time people marched though the cities, security forces opened fire upon them, killing civilians as tanks shelled residential areas and troops stormed homes, rounding up those believed to have attended demonstrations. The government claims that thousands of security personnel have died combating "armed gangs and terrorists". So, regaining security in the country can only be achieved by hitting the terrorists with an iron fist," the president added. Anwar Malek, a former member of the Arab League's observer mission to Syria has called it a "nonsense" and described the situation there as a humanitarian disaster. According to Malek (2012), "The mission was a farce and the observers have been fooled. The regime orchestrated it and fabricated most of what we saw to stop the Arab League from taking action against the regime". Meanwhile, several journalists have been killed or wounded in the city during this "electronic Intifada".

To summarize, as mentioned by Harris (2004, p.5) much of the news coverage is about the elite, be they government officials, the military or freedom fighters. Many of the atrocities are planned at the top level of government or the military, which in the Syrian case is the Alaouite minority against the Sunni majority and other under-represented ethnic-religious communities. It is ironic then that the former are the very same people that the international media turn to as a source of information. The need of the media to personify a conflict, so that an act of evil or good is attributed to one person, overlooks the consequences of violence perpetrated upon ordinary people. At a global level, the merger of media corporations has meant that the global flow of information is controlled by a smaller and smaller percentage of the media. In fact, one must go beyond the superficial media coverage of this crisis to illuminate the broad similarities between ethnic conflicts around the world and to engage the fundamental question underpinning them all, for some stories have a tremendous impact on both human belief and behaviour. According to Meder (2004), "Although journalists are supposed to check the facts and report the truth, such an assignment cannot fully be fulfilled", as has been referred to. Apart from the fact that there is no such thing as absolute truth, (the reproduction of facts can and usually is filtered or coloured), "we have to acknowledge that events and facts cannot always be checked" (Meder, 2004) immediately in full length and take into account all parties involved. "Like all other human beings, even the most scrupulous journalists can fall for a catchy story. Especially when the message of the story (for instance: ´those people are evil´) forms a perfect match with pre-existing prejudices and believed tales" (Meder, 2004) – legends that the author calls "meme – an independent block of cultural information that works as a contagious virus". It is transmitted by

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storytelling from one human mind to the other. "Anti-legends (making fun of the mind viruses) may serve as an antidote" (Meder, 2004). This last idea of Meder´s metaphor (why there is people´s immunity or willingness to believe the story) seldom inhabits the reporter´s consciousness. He goes on stating that "There is the belief that there are dangerous 'others' who are guilty and not to be trusted: hostile soldiers, right-wing extremists, and to an increasing extent immigrants and Muslims", that is, certain ethnic groups. "For ethnologists this is a cultural and historical fact, for the media this is a reason for caution and restraint, and for politics and society this is a cause for concern", Meder (2004) sums.

Conclusion

Ethnic conflicts as shown above have a close relationship with the media. This connection is not always obvious or simple to an untrained eye.

Answering to the introductory questions in this paper, it should be safe to state that the media´s production generally tends to dis-regard ethnic, racial or religious prejudice. Consciously or not, they are led (through cultural socialization) into producing and reproducing stories not according to their own free will and standards but according to a long list of constraints which include: limited finances, resources and training opportunities, systems of patronage and corporate gatekeepers, institutional conservatism and organizational hierarchy, producers' attitudes and cultural capital, source dependencies and source inhibitions, professional norms of balance and objectivity, professional status claims, cultural obligations and the 'burden of representation', audience expectations, temporal production cycles, and the conventions and aesthetics of media forms (Cottle, 2000, p.17). Concerning ethnic and religious representation, the general mainstream media continue to work under various kinds of pressure and therefore look for the fastest way to write their stories and follow agenda-settings: using the ruling "politically correct" voices as the sole source of information. In culturally pluralistic societies, that is clearly insufficient and also perpetuates prejudice. Such constraints require journalists to freely use whatever they can obtain to attract audiences, as long as they fulfil their role: keeping the general public informed within the limits of acceptable socio-political power balance and maintenance.

Since any critical analysis is strongly discouraged, ethnic conflicts are easily portrayed as primordial/biological hatreds between (bad or terrorist) individuals or groups that undermine that social equilibrium and world order or they are depicted as if they are being used (instrumentalized) by elites in order to fuel public action. Profit policies are positive for the media and this is mainly achieved by feeding prejudiced categorizations, in relation to certain

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ethnic groups, which is negative for the latter but positive for the maintaining the *status quo*. The media´s accountability regarding the social effects of their profit policies is, thus, stuck somewhere in the middle between the profits that they crave and a well-balanced and wise cultural sensitivity, which takes into account a more dynamic constructionist approach to ethnic identities. As initially suggested in this paper, further research is required in this field in order to safely attest the true in-depth relations between the media and ethnic conflicts.

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