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THE MEDIA AND HUMAN RIGHTS
PROGRESS REPORT BY THE PROJECT'S LEAD RESEARCHER

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WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT “MEDIA AND HUMAN RIGHTS” TODAY?

1. The media are more receptive to human rights issues and the human rights organisations are more able to get their stories into the media. Although this sounds obvious, it is not. Several years of learning, by human rights organisations, as well as “sensitising” by news organisations, were needed to make this situation routine. A certain cultural-historical context also plays a part, namely the end of a bipolar world system in which ideology as well as traditional national interests compete.
2. However, material as well as political factors complicates this picture. New technologies, new economic realities, and, one might add, new demographic realities, influence the coverage of human rights. Examples:
 - *material factors*: the change in what we mean by media. There are journalists and students of media who argue that the new technologies have not made a basic change in the basic fact of information-transmission, which is what we mean here. Others, perhaps inspired by the late M. McLuhan, state that the continual media-technology revolution has a traumatic effect on society. In between, the conventional view is that undeniably, there is a lot more information, more rapidly transmitted, and this creates a lot of new problems for the verification of accuracy, which admittedly was always a problem. While we are eschewing epistemological issues in this report in favour of technical problems of news-coverage, it is impossible not to note at the outset that journalists frequently remark on the troubling consequences of some of the new technologies – troubling in the sense that they have had the effect of lowering standards of accuracy. Some disagree – they say that standards always vary greatly within any profession.
 - *political factors*: particularism (or parochialism) versus universalism. We should devote some attention to this issue. Whether or not human rights are universal, they have been given universal, or at least international, approbation by means of conventions and

treaties that have the force of law in many, if not all, signatory countries. This means that simply as a matter of reporting accurately on what is meant by human rights rules, their application should be covered – in China no less than in the United States of America. In fact, there is probably a greater effort to do this than is sometimes realised, notwithstanding the problem of uneven foreign coverage. Media lend themselves to the political use of human rights issues. That is to say, when it serves a country's purpose, it accuses its adversary of human rights abuses. The Israel-Palestine conflict is a case in point. Naturally – but this is one of our questions: should it be natural? – the media report this, and the coverage tends to be unbalanced at first, becoming more balanced if a conflict lasts a long time.

- *technology*: Internet, multi-channel television, facility of transportation are only some of the technological innovations of recent decades which change the way we understand “media,” indeed what we expect from media. While tremendously liberating, this has adverse consequences as well in terms of accuracy and quality.
 - *economics*: the privatisation of human rights changes what we understand by human rights – less absolute, less universal (despite the claims of organisations promoting human rights). Privatisation is not new. Abolition of slavery, in the United States, was a private cause until it became a national one. Yet there is a great proliferation today of private human rights organisations. This is viewed as an asset to civil society, along with many other institutions and organisations, concerned with a great variety of issues (the French refer to this as the *mouvement associatif*.) In terms of media, it certainly represents additional sources of information. Governments can and do say, “Whom do these groups represent? Who elected them?” Media organisations sometimes express what is functionally the same scepticism – “such groups often have a special agenda and therefore we must treat their information warily.”
 - *new demographics*: The possibilities for different groups to claim rights for themselves are enhanced by changing population patterns. Within established societies, people view themselves as distinct in new ways, and claim group rights accordingly. It is true of certain religious groups, e.g., extremist Jews who have more influence in Israel than their numbers would warrant. It is certainly true of regionalists – Basques, Corsicans, Scots, and so on. All these people claim *rights*. The rights they claim are discussed with reference to human rights, and are usually backed up by declarations, such as the Universal Declaration.
 - Media as well as human rights organisations must decide which human rights issues to “prioritise”; there are issues before the European court which would seem esoteric to people for whom human rights violations means violations of the right to live.
3. There are limits to how well the stories in question are covered. Are these limits functional; *i.e.*, is there something inherent to the information industry that limits the quality of coverage? In a sense, this question goes to the heart of this study.
 4. Put another way, there are omissions and weaknesses in the media coverage of human rights issues. This is expressed, by journalists and human rights professionals, variously.
 5. Some of the issues:
 - the problem of coverage as such – is there a human rights crisis when no one covers it?

- the problem of emotion versus analysis – is the “headline-grabbing” imperative of journalism invariably going to trump the explanation of the human rights issue(s) involved?
 - the problem of sheer understanding – is the scoop syndrome a fatality?
6. The problem of inadequate coverage to some degree could be addressed thanks to the advances in technology. For instance, if you cannot have a correspondent in a certain country, you can find a stringer and equip him or her with instruments that connect him directly to the home office. An example among many is the *Journalistes en Danger* organisation in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, which has maintained a steady stream of credible information on suppression of press freedom. Functionally, stringers are as old as journalism, and the problems of checking their reliability remain the same.
 7. However, within an abstract definition of “consistency,” there will always be a list of places and topics that do not receive enough coverage. Media organisations answer that, in addition to the problem of personnel, there is the question of space within the publication, or broadcast time. Here again, new technology offers some answers without resolving the basic issue. For instance, major publications now have online additions to what they offer in print or on the air.
 8. Be that as it may, it is also important to recognise that coverage is not necessarily faulty because it is tardy. In places where the media have been criticised for lack of coverage, there are sometimes excellent reports. Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, countries that recently faced human rights crises (of different scales) have been the subjects of good journalism.
 9. When is something newsworthy? This too is an ancient editorial problem that probably defies definitive answers. Is child labour in Pakistan or child prostitution in Thailand (both phenomena exist in many, if not most, other countries) newsworthy only when, for instance (as occurred recently in a French court) someone partaking of the exploitation of children is charged with a crime? If the situation is “merely” chronic, is an editor justified in never assigning it?
 10. A problematic area is the coverage of human rights law, or stated differently, the integration of the growing body of human rights law into human rights coverage. Do media organisations accurately and consistently explain whether human rights laws (including international conventions) are being violated?

The methodology for this study

The Media

11. The lead researcher has been interviewing editors and reporters in the American, French, and British media. A few journalists have been reached in Africa and the Middle East as well. Some interviews are conducted in person, some by telephone, and some by email or fax. What emerges technically from these interviews (which continue) is that you can never talk to too many people, and at the same time you cannot talk to more than a small number of people at any length. A few (provisional) generalisations follow.
12. Journalists usually do not feel there is a problem in their coverage of human rights issues. They may view their own organisation as falling short, but that will be in the context of what they consider a larger failure, e.g., inadequate foreign coverage. To the extent human rights issues are covered, however, journalists feel they are covered no worse or better than other subjects are. They do not feel they need expertise they cannot obtain while on the story – for example,

whereas a reporter or editor might concede you need a science background to cover the space program, he would not feel the same way about human rights.

13. Can this – should this – change? Journalists, at least in theory, can be made more aware of human rights laws, international conventions, and so on. In covering wars, they can educate themselves in rules of warfare. There is noticeably more effort in this regard than in the past. For instance, when Israeli forces are accused of war crimes (using excessive force, shooting to kill at unarmed demonstrators, and so on), in the current crisis in the Middle East, there is, at least in some media, an effort to determine just which war crimes are in question. Yet the news organisation is on the scene because there is a political and military crisis. Even the Kosovo intervention, the *casus belli* of which was explicitly stated to be human rights, became primarily a war story *and* a political crisis.
14. It is not entirely clear how, or even why, this should not be so. Take a historical example that illustrates this point: the *casus belli* of the American civil war was slavery (an egregious human rights violation), but as soon as the war began, the story (in the Northern media) was the war and the chronic political crisis into which it threw the Union, the Lincoln administration, and so forth. Slavery, and the post-slavery issues of civil rights and voting rights, came up *when the government made them issues*.
15. The point here is that in general the media report news as it breaks – that is its function. Chronic situations are not – and this project should help demonstrate this – breaking news. They are “events” that may or may not seem, to an editor, worthy of coverage, but they are likely to be pre-empted by other items.
16. As to whether, within a breaking story, human rights deserves more or less coverage, the ball tends to be in the reporter’s rather than the editor’s court. That is, both agree it is up to the journalist in the field to make the case to the one at the home base that there is a human rights story that deserves space; or to use a human rights angle on a topic that is being covered.
17. Local human rights stories *tend* not to be newsworthy unless they are in a larger context. The “tend” is emphasised because this generalisation like all others here is subject to exceptions. Local here means local-foreign. Domestic human rights stories often get considerable play – e.g., the problem of capital punishment in the U.S. Even without the presidential candidacy of Texas Governor George W. Bush, for example, the question of how the death penalty is applied in Texas has been a continuing story, with each pending execution serving as an adequate “hook” for any reporter or editor who feels this has to be covered. Another example is police-community relations within a context of suspected racism, a frequent story in the United Kingdom or in South Africa where such problems often recur. But chronic local-foreign human rights issues are not going to be covered as much as local-domestic human rights issues. The problem of capital punishment in China, or instance, gets much less coverage in the United States media than the comparable (not same) issue in Texas and other capital punishment states.
18. Although it probably is wise to give up any thought of reaching definitive general conclusions about the way the media work, it is observable that you are going to find less technical coverage the farther away you are from your local-domestic story. In France, there have been recently some fairly high-profile immigration-rights cases, due to the dramatic nature of the stories. In one case, a little girl was separated from her mother at the airport. In this case, the reporter can be expected to explain the relevant laws. The same kind of case ten thousand miles away might get a brief notice, but not with the same coverage of the relevant legal issues.

Human rights organisations

19. The lead researcher has been holding conversations with human rights professionals, some from well established organisations and some from comparatively small ones, to get a sense of what they think the problems are in the way the media cover their activities in particular and human rights issues in general.
20. Although human rights organisations have different agendas and different reactions to the sort of press they get, some (again, provisional) generalisations may be as follows:
 - the human rights community (for argument's sake, let's say there is such an entity) does not feel human rights issues get sufficient coverage;
 - moreover, this coverage is often lacking in depth;
 - still, it is better than it used to be;
 - part of the reason for this is that there are more human rights organisations, doing credible research.

Survey of American, British, and French media

21. To what extent do the media cover human rights stories *accurately and consistently*? The answer to this question depends very much on who is giving the answer and in what context. Without generalising, one can note that media feel they are as accurate in covering human rights stories as they are in covering most other kinds of stories. The human rights organisations often agree that accuracy is not the problem. The problems begin to occur rather with the matter of *consistency*.
22. Both sides (media and human rights) agree that coverage is *not consistent*. Will this ever change? That is one of the questions this project is seeking to answer.
23. To what extent are new trends affecting quality of human rights coverage? Here the answer, so far, must be ambivalent. There is widespread agreement that more news on human rights is available, thanks to new technological and political trends. There is also a sense that the "human rights message" is being diluted by these very same trends. I honestly do not want to answer this question yet, but my hunch as a journalist is that it is better to have more information than not, as is in fact the situation now.
24. How do other actors factor into the coverage (governments, public relations firms, etc)? Journalists will say, very little. However, this may be an example of over-confidence, even hubris.
25. Other factors influencing amount and quality of coverage? There are two schools of thought here: what a French editor called the "*kilometrage*" factor, i.e., how close to home an issue is. And, conversely, the power and influence of the foreign correspondent. But there is undoubtedly a big factor in the degree to which the "northern" country has been historically involved with the "southern" country in question. Historically, far more than economically and this is worthy of note.
26. What human rights stories are prioritised? Depending on who is talking – the print media accuse the broadcast media of favouring whatever offers the most drama; but to the extent one can generalise, the priority is given to "war situations," in all media.

27. No doubt the business environment of the media has changed. There are business reasons (to take two examples) for CNN to hold its punches with regard to the Fidel Castro government in Cuba, just as there are business reasons for the Fox News (Rupert Murdoch) organisation to hold its punches with regard to China. This surely affects coverage.
28. Who calls the shots, who decides “audience interest”? I have not talked to media executives yet, but on the editorial side, this is a fluid, vague question, which receives fluid, vague answers.
29. Differences between news and human rights organisations. Obviously, this is part of what this study is trying to assess, but the short answer is that news organisations do not consider human rights stories as such any more important than any others, whereas human rights organisations do.