

EDITORIAL

Indebtedness to the ancient Romans in the field of communication does not end with the Latin root “*communicare*.” Going far beyond interpersonal communication, the Romans devised what might be described as the first communication system in order to centralize control by gathering and giving knowledge about events in its many widespread provinces.

Communication is a process of exchanging information, usually in accordance with a mutual set of standards. In situations of armed conflict and collective violence, these standards are often distorted and the exchange of information becomes an information war. The so-called “war of words” does not follow normal rules for the exchange of information, and the reception and interpretation of messages, as well as the responses to them, are influenced by the contentious environment. The sender’s own message is presented as information and that of the opponent as propaganda. Events are manipulated and opinions are influenced through access to or control of instruments of communication. This is compounded by the war of images and symbols, often more decisive than words or even victories on the military battlefield. Indeed, war — at the communication front, too — can be fought at different levels and can take different forms. In most of the present asymmetrical wars, the patterns followed by the organization, means and methods of communication are just as unequal, although they pursue the same old goal, namely to influence opinion and behaviour. The audiences include members both of the ingroup and the outgroup, to use the terminology of social psychology, and mass communication is just as important to generate hate as to forge solidarity. Governments, warring parties and humanitarian players have found countless ways to use communication in wartime.

As technology has evolved, the communication protocol has also had to evolve and even the view people take toward communication is changing. Jungle drums and smoke signals have been replaced by print, film, radio, television and analog and digital telecommunications, even though the poor countries and the rich countries are still separated by a digital rift. These developments often make war into a media spectacle, and the way political and military authorities go about making propaganda has changed to take account of pressure on the media and media globalization. The publication of photographs or even caricatures has repeatedly shown the power of the media to trigger unrest or even armed conflicts, or to alter the course of war. During the Boer War, Winston Churchill

wrote for the British Morning Post while serving as a Lieutenant in the South African Light Horse Regiment. Even then, over a century ago, his revelations of British mismanagement helped to end the conflict. The quality of war reporting, the conditions under which it takes place, the information policies of the warring parties and their effects highlight information control strategies and the continuing need to set standards of reporting in and on war. The access of non-State organizations, including terrorist organizations, and even individuals to communication networks raises new questions as to the conduct of the media and the connection between communication and armed conflict. But wars are never only a media drama: they are real, they kill, injure, maim, terrorize, and their victims include many journalists who have paid the heavy price for casting light upon darkness.

Humanitarian organizations are also playing an important role in present-day armed conflicts and they, too, influence the situation on the battlefield and public opinion. Their public communication strategies vary according to their mandate and the principles they follow. Those emphasizing impartial help to victims of armed conflicts communicate differently from those who place the stress on solidarity with a particular group or are closely linked to their constituencies. This entails a wide diversity of humanitarian standpoints and affects interaction with donors and the military, as well as the security situation on the ground.

The ICRC tries to make communication an integral part of its decision-making process, both at headquarters and in each context in the field. It is obviously guided by its mandate, mission and operational principles and policy, which differ from those of most other humanitarian organizations. In a constantly changing environment, the ICRC seeks support that will allow it to gain access to victims, carry out its work, generate the diplomatic and financial backing needed for that work and ensure the safety of its delegates. The primary aim of communication is not merely to pass on messages from the organization effectively. It is just as necessary to understand the issues concerning the various audiences, and how they perceive those issues, as it is to inform them. The ICRC draws on a wide array of communication strategies and resources, depending on their complementarity and their potential impact, ranging from meetings with local armed groups to the use of mass communication tools. The restriction thereby is that the sole purpose of those communication efforts must be to improve the fate of present and future victims of armed conflict and violence, to act as an entrepreneur of solidarity, as one of the authors put it. It can also require abstention from communicating, if the victims' interests so demand, to ensure that the ICRC can play its role in armed conflict — a role far different from that of journalists.

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