

The Vienna Forum to fight Human Trafficking  
13-15 February 2008, Austria Center Vienna  
Background Paper

## **012 Workshop: The Role of the Media in Building Images**

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**THE VIENNA FORUM TO FIGHT HUMAN TRAFFICKING  
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**Vienna, Austria**

**BACKGROUND PAPER**

**WORKSHOP 012  
THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA**

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## **I. WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES**

The workshop “The Role of the Media” is organized by the Advocacy Section of UNODC. The workshop will take a closer look at the representation of human trafficking and its victims in the media. It will strive to generate a deeper understanding of the factors that have an impact on journalists’ decisions when covering the topic, and to discuss the importance of fair and balanced media coverage of the issue, particularly its victims, in order to avoid them being re-victimized and suffer any undue hardship arising from media interventions in the future. The discussion will also showcase best media practices.

## **II. CONTEXT**

The media is an important vehicle through which information can be obtained and exchanged. Indeed nowadays public knowledge about foreign events, including war and international crises, relies heavily on mass media. As the so-called ‘fourth estate’, the media is also a powerful tool in influencing public opinion and raising awareness about an issue. With such power, however, comes also the responsibility to provide accurate information to the public on a given issue and at the same time to ensure the protection of individual sources from any harm as a result of information disclosure.

The media often creates or reinforces stereotypical and negative images about people. In the context of human trafficking, moreover, when journalists wish to tell a story and put a face to a victim, they run the danger – albeit often inadvertently – of victimizing them further. Victims are often depicted as naïve, and socio-economic problems are reduced to portrayals of personal traumas. Furthermore, victims might be presented in an overly compassionate manner, confusing sympathy (pity) with real empathy (understanding) for the context and reality of their experiences.

Media content is generated through process in which a variety of factors play a role. From the practical considerations of getting to difficult to reach sources and returning stories to editors on time, to pressures of writing stories that conform to editorial guidelines and professional norms and values. How do all these factors impact on decisions made by journalists about the discovery, selection, and reporting of stories, particularly in the context of human trafficking? What challenges do journalists face when interviewing victims, writing and illustrating the topic?

In the field of human trafficking, sensationalism, stereotypes and assumptions on the profile of victims and circumstances of their exploitation unfortunately often prevail over in-depth investigative journalism. Journalists and editors often cannot tell the difference between illegal migration, prostitution and trafficking in women and are often not too concerned about accurate definitions. The linkages between issues such as globalization, migration policies, marginalization, discrimination as well as economic inequality and exploitation are rarely explored.

Materials that rely on stereotypes for impact can mislead and distort perceptions. Each trafficked person's story is different. Most writers focus on trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation, whereas few cover other forms of exploitative labour. For example, children are forced into begging and agricultural work and men into construction and factory work.

There are inherent alarmist or sensationalizing tendencies in the media. Commercial pressures to sell stories often help reinforce these tendencies (based on the principle of 'if it bleeds, it leads'). Alarmist media coverage of human trafficking, however, does little in the way of raising real understanding and awareness of this complex problem.

### **III. UNCOVERING HUMAN TRAFFICKING STORIES**

Undoubtedly, uncovering and exposing criminal activities such as human trafficking is of great value to society. Investigative – often undercover – journalism could help shed light on how traffickers work and how the often-involved business networks operate, thus generating an understanding that is crucial to mounting more effective law enforcement response. Effective reporting can also detect loopholes in legal systems – nationally or internationally - that could prevent and inhibit efforts to halt this crime.

Investigative pieces can also be effective in raising awareness of human trafficking, which, in turn, helps to prevent it. By exposing a victim's story, moreover, other victims may feel more confident to speak up about their travails. The workshop will present accounts of journalists who have investigated a story, and participants will hear practical tips on how to address constraints when investigating the issue.

Journalists face numerous practical and ethical constraints when investigating human trafficking stories. Approaching traffickers and victims and its associated risks are the most obvious ones. Journalists are guided by occupational norms and values, such as objectivity, impartiality, accuracy and truthfulness, which serve to assist and even guarantee their autonomy in investigating and processing a news story. In the context of human trafficking – a crime where reliable information is difficult to access, sources are dubious and even dangerous to approach, and where victims have personal stories of a very sensitive nature – upholding ethical standards might prove to be a challenge. Furthermore, the pressure to get 'media exclusives' and to sell stories might tempt journalists to use stories that moral considerations might have persuaded them otherwise. In this context, peer and editorial pressure, as well as professional competition and the drive to sell, play important roles and impact on outcomes.

One of the ethical dilemmas faced by many journalists is the necessity of having to pose as a customer/client or victim in order to get to traffickers. Reporting the truth is said to be at the heart of journalism. However, only by posing, by pretending to be what they are not, do journalists succeed in penetrating secretive powerful organizations and in securing the evidence they need to expose a crime. Though this may seem hypocritical when set against the backdrop of reporting the 'truth', it seems

in some instances justifiable. As Jennifer Jackson points out, "...lying in order to detect and expose lies is not necessarily hypocritical; sometimes it may be morally necessary or permissible for a journalist to lie, and then the journalist's lie will (when revealed) appear justified .... (Jackson, 1992: 110) Some minimal ethical guidelines, however, need to be followed in order to ensure that the story conforms to journalistic standards. The workshop aims to discuss how some journalists addressed this issue.

Another problematic area when hearing brutal trafficking accounts and heartbreaking testimonials from victims is to uphold the detachment required to conduct proper journalism. Can the journalist – and should he/she – remain a detached observer when hearing such stories? A journalist should aim to remain neutral and detached, as the professional norms require. However, the human dimension should not be ignored and can, in fact, be reconciled with detachment. As a journalist himself put it, "... during such interviews, a person can react first and foremost as a human being, and only then as a journalist... It is much more important to think and act as a journalist after the actual conversation, while writing the story and editing the contribution, because that is when we must think of the way to protect the interlocutor..." (Misa Stojiljkovic, Radio B92, quoted in ASTRA, 2003: 97)

#### **IV. TOWARDS A MORE BALANCED AND FAIR REPRESENTATION OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

Human trafficking has become more visible in the media in recent years. However, the issue has tended to be covered from primarily one angle, the trafficking in women for sexual exploitation. Though there are many forms of trafficking for many different purposes, the media has tended to focus on stereotypical messages about the 'sex trade', failing to present different forms of exploitation and the diversity of human trafficking, such as trafficking in men and children for domestic servitude or forced labour in agriculture, textiles and construction.

But even when addressing trafficking in women, the media has tended to be one-sided and focused on certain clichés. The ASTRA Manual for Journalists, for instance, gives examples of some of the common prejudices and misconceptions presented in the media when reporting on the trafficking in women which can in some cases also be applied to other trafficking forms (ASTRA, 2003: 28):

*"Girls become victims of trafficking out of naiveté."*

Traffickers are often persons whom the victims trust. A study conducted in 2005 by UNICRI in the trafficking in women from Romania to Germany, for example, found that in many cases, the first contact person between the victims and the recruiter was an individual from a close circle of family and friends of the victim. (UNODC, Global Patterns Report, 2006: 61)

*"Trafficking in women and prostitution are one and the same."*

Trafficking in women does not take place solely for the purpose of forced prostitution; it can take many other forms, such as domestic labour, forced marriage and/or forced

participation in another criminal activity. Prostitution, moreover, may be a voluntary choice of a woman if she has the autonomy to decide the conditions of her work. However, for a human trafficking victim forced into prostitution, neither is true.

*"Trafficking in women is white slave trade."*

Women victims of human trafficking cannot be called 'white slaves' because trafficking does not affect only women of a particular race, ethnic or national affiliation. It is a racist term that does not reflect reality. The term 'slave' is also problematic because it stigmatizes a person as someone whose destiny is sealed and nothing can be done to change it.

*"Only foreign women are victims of trafficking."*

Reported victims – at least in wealthy countries - are mostly foreigners. One of the reasons is that often, the main source of information is the police and the indicator is the lack of identification documents. Human trafficking, however, can occur within the border of a single country. Insisting on a person's nationality or origin further detracts from the fact that these are victims of exploitation and violence, which is what needs to be addressed. Stressing victims' background also reduce them to 'naïve and poor people' from abroad whose pursuit of work in 'developed' countries is a 'lifelong dream come true'. Another consequence is the creation of prejudice among the public.

What can be done to help generate a full understanding and fair reporting of the issue in the media? Journalists should ask themselves which aspects of this topic are least exposed or understood by the general public. Trafficking in human beings is a complex issue that can be treated from various angles: social, economic, political, women's rights, human rights, legal, safety and security, and organized crime, are some examples. As the UNODC 2006 *Trafficking in Persons - Global Patterns* report has shown, all countries are affected in some way by human trafficking, therefore no country is immune.

Trafficking in human beings as part of organized crime is never isolated in a single country and is often connected to other illegal businesses, such as the smuggling of drugs. Recent unpublished UNODC research on organized crime in Afghanistan, for example, reveals the multiple links that can exist between human trafficking and organized crime, showing that the organized illicit economy in Afghanistan has chilling connections to the exploitation of children and young adults. This includes the payment of debts by exchanging women and girls into marriage and the involvement of children in dangerous cross-border trafficking activities in exchange for payment, for example. (UNODC, 2006: 71) Trafficking in human beings, along with trafficking in drugs and arms, is also one of the most profitable forms of organized crime. For journalists eager to cover this crime from a fresh angle, the business or profit aspects seldom receive attention.

## **V. SENSITIVITY AND RESPONSIBILITY WHEN INTERVIEWING VICTIMS**

For the media, victims are usually the most interesting part of the story – they bring the human interest so key to connect with audiences – so it is understandable that journalists want to have their stories. In doing so, however, journalists sometimes disregard that victims of trafficking are vulnerable and unprotected, and that they never cease to be so – even when they manage to escape the grasp of traffickers or be rescued. Regardless of their age, origin, education and background, all these men, women and children, one must understand first and foremost that they are victims. They are victims even if they decided on their own free will to engage in an activity such as prostitution. A person who is already frustrated, humiliated and harmed – particularly women, who are often in disadvantageous positions – can be additionally victimized by irresponsible publicity about their situation.

How can journalists ensure that victims and the full circumstance of their situation are truly understood? Are there ways to make a human trafficking story more empowering to its victims? And how does a responsible journalist deal with video and photographic material featuring victims? These are some of the issues the workshop hopes to illustrate and address by sharing examples from different media practitioners.

Journalists and editors must ensure that they protect the source by all means, especially when the source is exposed to the risk of physical and/or mental suffering. In the world of organized crime, information tends to travel fast. Journalists must be aware of this risk and inform the victims accordingly, reiterating that speaking in public, especially in front of cameras, might endanger them. Another important aspect is to try to protect the victim from further traumatization. Re-telling the story of physical and mental torture means re-living these traumas and reviving the source of suffering for victims, therefore it is advisable to offer victims the support they need (for example, by having experts on victim assistance involved in the process). It is very important to explain to the victim the possible drawbacks of publication and offer him/her professional legal and psychological referrals.

Victims of human trafficking, however, need to first and foremost be understood, not pitied. The journalist should try to understand what has happened to victims rather than approaching them with pity, trying to comfort them or making promises that cannot be kept. Victims' motives to speak to journalists about their trauma and publicizing it may vary, but these could include assisting other victims, exposing a crime, revenge and/or despair. Devoting enough care and attention to getting the story right – by listening attentively to what the victim is saying and not to what the journalist wants to hear – is key to ensure fairness and real understanding of this problem.

Finally, if a story could endanger and compromise a victim in any way, a journalist should be prepared to do what is most difficult for a journalist to do: to give up a story. As journalist Saša Leković notes, "it takes much more courage, wisdom and professionalism to decide not to tackle a topic you cannot responsibly and professionally deal with". (Astra, 2003: 81).

## **Photographs and video material:**

Journalists and editors, particularly in broadcasting, also struggle with issues of 'taste and decency', or how much they can show in their news and features without either insulting or alienating their audiences. Members of the sensationalist press, furthermore, sometimes deliberately exaggerate to sell stories. In the context of human trafficking, the overall aim should be to avoid stereotypes of any kind and/or deliberate exaggeration. Viewers often have preconceived ideas about the topic of human trafficking, which tend to correspond to common-place stereotypes about a phenomenon that is perceived as 'inhuman' and very distant from their daily lives (e.g., "human trafficking happens to prostitutes and to children in Africa"). Journalists are tempted to play up these preconceived ideas in order to gain viewers' attention, however, by doing so they may end up indirectly harming the victim further and reinforcing a skewed perception among viewers. Images that indulge in exaggerated horror, moreover, may alienate viewers who tend to perceive the depicted reality as belonging to "a world that is not theirs". In these cases, only superficial sympathy is triggered by the images, but not real empathy – or full understanding – and helps create distance from the subject.

Another area that deserves caution is the random use of archive photographs and video images to illustrate a story. Images accompanying human trafficking news often demonstrate a lack of sensibility to the victims and reduce them to stereotypes. When dealing with trafficking in women, for example, photos of naked or half-naked girls dancing do little to elucidate the issue and its complexity and simply causes the reader to equate human trafficking with prostitution, which are different issues.

When interviewing victims for broadcasting or aiming to use photographs of victims, it is important to exercise caution. Victims should view and agree to the material before its broadcasting. The victim's identity should not be revealed by any means. His/her voice should be electronically manipulated, and the victim (especially their head) shot from behind or electronically distorted to be unrecognizable in both photograph and video. The background imagery in the shot should also not be recognizable under any circumstances so as not to disclose any – albeit unintentional – information about country, location, place of residence or other personal details. Journalists often use footage from sources such as the police, for example, and therefore, increasing awareness of these issues among the police - and not only journalists - may be an activity to consider in the future.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

One should promote the media as a useful vehicle to spread awareness and understanding of human trafficking while at the same time advocating for a socially responsible journalism. The media is critical in shaping public opinion and generating deeper insight into human trafficking. Responsible journalism provides accurate information on a given issue to the public and ensures the protection of individuals from harm as a result of information disclosure. Journalists should be educated as



comprehensively as possible about the nature and complexity of human trafficking before setting off to investigate and report on a story with a simplistic angle such as the 'sex-slave trade', for example. There are many facets to this crime – both causes and effects – which need to be understood and reflected in media coverage.

Partnership with journalists with a view to improving their knowledge and understanding of the issue is therefore key. Regular contact with the media contributes to improving media coverage of human trafficking. As suggested in the Annual Report of the OSCE Special Representative and Coordinator in Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, it may also help in addressing aspects which are often overlooked, such as by focusing on a story of traffickers and what happens in courts instead of portraying only poor helpless victims; by exploring and denouncing the various coercive and abusive forms of exploitation of women, men, and children in various economic sectors; or by telling the story from the perspective and knowledge of psychologists, social workers, police and other service providers working with victims. (OSCE, 2007: 28)

Journalists ought to also understand that trafficking is not a single issue, but a composite of many serious crimes and denials of rights. Moreover, human trafficking is linked to migration, labour, gender and health issues, human rights and criminal justice. It follows complex supply and demand rules and affects men, women and children worldwide. They must also ensure that their investigations do no harm. Negative reporting could have a direct impact on how victims are treated. Trafficking in human beings is a compelling issue, and what journalists write will shape the way in which the public, the police and policy-makers view it.

## **VII. SOURCES**

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This paper has been prepared to provide some broad background material for the workshop. Please note that fuller materials, including speaker summaries and workshop conclusions, will be included in the official report of the Vienna Forum.

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