

UNTV Today and Tomorrow: How to Evaluate its Current and Future Benefits?

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The limits of liberal peacebuilding and processes related to it – such as reconciliation, transitional justice and conflict resolution – are now well known to scholars and practitioners alike. Familiar tropes include prescriptive top-down processes; a dominance of institutional actors and international organisations from the West; and paternalistic assumptions driving efforts. In response to this, many have long argued that in order to foster meaningful change, these areas of research and policy ought to be more firmly anchored locally in communities that are most deeply affected by violence¹. Ideally, these efforts need to be linked to a future-oriented transformative agenda, but what such responses might look like remains difficult to specify. I argue that United Nations Television (UNTV) provides an excellent example of one such response.

UNTV is an example of how media can be used to provide locally anchored and transformative responses to violence. UNTV focused on the impact the conflict had on ordinary people and effectively connected to the everyday level of society. Segments often focused on local events and thus provided a context-specific response to violence. They showed the diverse and nuanced ways that conflict was experienced across Bosnia-Herzegovina. This also imbued it with transformative potential, since it could show individuals what the perceived 'Other' was experiencing and it could help develop some sort of sympathy across conflict lines². Although the distribution and reach of UNTV was limited (with notable exceptions, such as the co-operation of RTV BiH, Macedonian state TV, and local stations) and it was never widely viewed in the region, the project stands as an example of an antidote to much criticised top-down efforts.

That is not to say that UNTV did not exhibit some of the typical shortcomings of liberal peacebuilding. It did, after all, operate within the framework of the United Nations. As

¹ Paul Gready and Simon Robins, 'From Transitional to Transformative Justice: A New Agenda for Practice', *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 8 (2014), 339-36.

² Joanna R. Quinn, *Thin Sympathy: A Strategy to Thicken Transitional Justice* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

Catherine Baker argues, it showed some of the same structural inequalities and paternalistic assumptions behind international peacebuilding³. In the Yugoslav context, it still contributed in part to a reductive view of conflict resolution that focused far too much on the politics between three ethnic groups, with no space left for minority voices or alternative political identities and visions. This made it difficult to speak about the conflict outside of this ethnic structure. However, UNTV did much more than this and in doing so showed the heterogeneity of peacebuilding efforts⁴.

UNTV's transformative potential goes unnoticed because we lack an appropriate framework of evaluation for UNTV and similar projects. We struggle to conceptualise and define their use in the post-conflict context, especially in terms of peacebuilding, reconciliation, transitional justice and transforming understandings of conflict. This paper asks, what is the use of UNTV in peacebuilding? And how can we evaluate UNTV's current and future benefits? The key argument I make is that if we draw on the newest research into art and conflict, we can show how UNTV's pluralistic, locally driven narratives are imbued with transformative potential because they are empathetic and enable a shared emotional response that can bring people together.

A better developed understanding of how to appropriately evaluate UNTV is important for two reasons. First, it will help better appreciate how UNTV, as a media resource that is currently not well known to the public, can contribute to the public's understanding of the conflict today and in the future. The media continue to stoke tensions in the region and UNTV provides a different narrative to it today, just as it meant to do in the past. Second, it will help us judge the potential for this type of resource in the future and to evaluate similar media resources. Perhaps the biggest shame would be if UNTV was not only forgotten, but never repeated.

³ Catherine Baker, 'Peace on the Small Screen: UNPROFOR's Television Unit in 1994–5 and the 'Media War' in Former Yugoslavia', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, 42 (2021), 1-28.

⁴ Baker, p. 1.; Kimberley Coles, *Democratic Designs: International Intervention and Electoral Practices in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 39.

Frameworks of Evaluation from Art and Post-conflict Reconciliation

I draw on frameworks of evaluation developed for the analysis of art in the context of post-conflict peacebuilding and reconciliation to analyse the benefits of UNTV. Frameworks of evaluation for art are useful because they deal with some of the same issues as UNTV did. Artistic responses can counter programmatic thinking from the top and question oversimplified models of conflict. Art and media therefore can be transformative in similar ways.

Peace and reconciliation are implicit, rather than explicit, outcomes of the arts⁵. Artistic responses create a structure and space that people can be invited into and through which positive outcomes can emerge organically, if individuals are interested and engaged. They do not feel imposed. Especially in communities where the narratives of peace and reconciliation are distrusted and seen as imposed, an explicit agenda around these topics only serves to alienate people and undermine the potential impact of such efforts⁶. Peacebuilding and reconciliation are thus by-products of the arts, not a given or definitive outcome but a distinct possibility. Art can be transformative under these conditions if they take seriously the lived experience of local communities and their inevitable need to survive, to locate individual and collective voices and to make and negotiate meaning in contexts of violence⁷.

I draw inspiration from the work of Tiffany Fairey and Rachel Kerr to show how UNTV can be transformative in post-conflict contexts⁸. They identify five ways in which art, and I argue also UNTV, can contribute to post-conflict situations⁹. First, they can show a personal dimension of the conflict, allowing for individual responses to complex issues. Second, they remember and pay testimony to the past. Third, they pay attention to things that might otherwise go

⁵ Tiffany Fairey, 'Participatory Arts and Peace-building: Embodying and Challenging Reconciliation' in *Participatory Arts for Invisible Communities: PAIC*, ed. by Irena Sertić (Omnimedia, 2018), pp. 204-14.

⁶ Valerie Rosoux, 'Is Reconciliation Negotiable?', *International Negotiation*, 18 (2013), 471-493 (p.471).

⁷ John Paul Lederach and Angela Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out: Journeys Through the Soundscape of Healing and Reconciliation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁸ Tiffany Fairey and Rachel Kerr, 'What Works? Creative Approaches to Transitional Justice in Bosnia and Herzegovina', *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 14 (2020), 142-64 (p.14).

⁹ Fairey and Kerr, 149-150.

unnoticed and unseen. Fourth, they have a transformative potential in terms of material objects but also perceptions. Fifth, because of all of the above, they can be empathetic and can enable a shared emotional response that can bring people together. If we evaluate UNTV along these dimensions, we notice that it does much of this.

The Transformative Potential of UNTV

UNTV seemed to aspire to do much of this at the outset of its work. As Catherine Baker notes, UNTV sought to show films about the conflict's impact on ordinary people¹⁰. In particular, UNTV wanted conflicting narratives of the conflict to be heard. They wanted to show the variety of individual responses to the complex ongoing situation. These can foster an emotional response across ethnic lines. The producers behind UNTV seemed to understand the importance of narratives in conflicts. They often focused on the unseen and unheard, by examining political and social situation in localities, thus showing layers of conflict that often go unnoticed. They exhibited an awareness of the nuances and specificities of local culture. For example, they attempted to connect their work with popular music and local sociocultural associations, such as 1980s new wave rock. All of this was most apparent in the videos that UNTV produced. They were rife with examples of the five ways in which UNTV can contribute to post-conflict situations.

The video letters that UNTV produced portrayed nuanced personal dimensions of the conflict and individual responses to it. An excellent example of this was a video letter by Gile, singer from rock band *Električni Orgazam* (Electric Orgasm) in Belgrade¹¹. Gile's video letter was about the band's attempt to bring together rock bands from across conflict lines. At the end of the video, Gile specifically defines his personal friends as those who are willing to play music in Zagreb, Croatia. The implication is that he defines his friends as individuals who share his interests, wherever they might be in the region and regardless of ethnicity. This is an excellent example of a personal response to violence, but it also shows how a subset in the local culture reacts to the context of ethnic conflict. It shows UNTV's awareness of local

¹⁰ Baker, p. 1.

¹¹ UNTV 459A, Film Collection, Imperial War Museum.

nuances and of personal dimensions of the conflict. It also touches on numerous concepts important to post-conflict processes such cooperative activities, culture and so on, which are imbued with transformative potential¹².

UNTV videos remembered and paid attention to the past, such as for example the mundane, but hard, everyday struggles of life during conflict. They not only provided insight into life on the frontline or under siege, but also into life throughout the region. For example, a video report about life in Tuzla for refugees from Srebrenica was almost ethnographic in its approach¹³. It attempted to give viewers a notion of the lived experience of individuals as they went about their day-to-day life under extreme circumstances. Another video report showed life in Belgrade under the trade embargo, where ordinary people struggled to access groceries and were left cut off from the rest of the region¹⁴. Both reports would have been informative to people cut off from districts or areas they were no longer able to visit. Today, they are a valuable historical resource for publics to understand what life was like throughout the region. It allows the conflict to be interpreted outside of the framework of one's own ethnic narrative and to see the lived experiences, and suffering, across the region.

In this way and many others, UNTV videos paid attention to things that might otherwise have gone unnoticed and unseen. Watching the video report on Belgrade, I realised that, as a Croatian scholar of post-conflict studies with an area focus on the Balkans, I had never given much thought to what life was like in Belgrade during the 1990s. Not only did it not feature in my own national narrative of the conflict, which fixated more on Croatian victimhood, but my research had never resulted in any reflections on life under the embargo. The videos held this exceptional educational potential. They also highlighted the work that goes on during a conflict but that is often ignored or falls outside of the purview of large institutional actors. The video of Ferid from Handicap International in Zenica, exemplified this¹⁵. It showed the important work of a small organisation that does not form part of the institutional actors and international organisations that are not regularly associated with liberal peacebuilding.

¹² Ivor Sokolić, 'Reconciliation Rising: The Roles of the Everyday and the Informal in Successful Post-conflict Reconciliation', *Ethnopolitics*, 19 (2018), 162-67 (p. 162).

¹³ UNTV 763A, Film Collection, Imperial War Museum

¹⁴ UNTV 566A, Film Collection, Imperial War Museum.

¹⁵ UNTV 389A, Film Collection, Imperial War Museum.

The videos hold the potential to transform perceptions. Perhaps the most striking of all the videos (at least for myself), was that of two friends in Mostar, from two different ethnicities¹⁶. They were divided by the conflict, which forced one of the friends to flee the neighbourhood. The video begins with a discussion of how these boys were friends before the war and how they were separated, only to then follow them as they briefly reunite. The video was mundane, the boys talk about typical teenage issues, but this makes it powerful and transformative. It breaks down perceived barriers between ethnicities and shows these individuals' shared humanity. This exact set-up is later recreated by Edo Maajka, the music artist, in his show *Perspektiva*, for which he brought youths from across the ethnic divide into dialogue with each other. It is the episode on Mostar that resonated most with young people in Bosnia-Herzegovina today. This reflects the transformative potential for UNTV and similar projects.

Finally, UNTV videos are empathetic and they can enable a shared emotional response that can bring people together. All the videos above demonstrated this, but there were many more that showed the universal suffering of war. For example, the video letter of a mother of one of the missing persons from Vukovar enables a shared emotional response of a mother worrying about her child.¹⁷ This transcends conflict lines and helps individuals understand what happened to others and what their lived experience of conflict was like¹⁸.

Conclusion

UNTV's reach was ultimately limited and only a small part of the public ever watched it. However, UNTV may be an example of an antidote to the often-criticised top-down interventions in peacebuilding. My argument is not that top-down efforts are not necessary, but that they would benefit from a plurality of approaches and voices that, for example, UNTV can provide. Such projects can foster meaningful change since they are more firmly anchored locally in the communities most deeply affected by violence and they can be linked to a

¹⁶ UNTV 633A, Film Collection, Imperial War Museum.

¹⁷ UNTV 515A, Film Collection, Imperial War Museum. But also videos 507A and 514A.

¹⁸ Quinn, p. 1.

future-oriented transformative agenda¹⁹. In the realities of modern day, often donor-driven peacebuilding, in order to see more of these projects implemented, we need to be able to show their value. This makes evaluation key.

What I present in this paper are some tentative thoughts on the benefits of UNTV and how these benefits can be evaluated, by drawing on novel research into the evaluation of art and conflict. Such evaluation frameworks are qualitative and flexible. When developed appropriately, as we are starting to see in the arts, such frameworks can effectively take into account the complexity and context-specific nature of these types of projects. They can encourage further development of these efforts, which can play a key role in post-conflict peacebuilding.

¹⁹ Gready and Robins, p.339.