

The Role of Media in Cross-Cultural Communication

Sharaf N. Rehman

Northern State University

Abstract

This short, position paper starts out by examining the need for global understanding. The author explains what may happen if the need for such an understanding was ignored. Several ways and means of increasing international understanding are presented. The author also describes some of the work that is being undertaken at various universities in the United States of America. The potential of mass media as vehicle for global understanding is briefly discussed. This is followed by some warnings about the over-reliance on mass media. The paper concludes with some suggestions for action by media professionals, teachers and artists.

I. Why strive for global understanding

Permit me to begin by posing an absurd question: Why should we strive for global understanding? I'm convinced that I have unanimous agreement that it is indeed an absurd and a foolish question. If we didn't think it foolish, we wouldn't be present at the 4th International Conference on Cross-Cultural Communication today.

However, our task, the task of the participants here, is two-fold. First, we need to generate a list of reasons as to why global understanding is essential, and two, find ways to present these reasons to those who seem unaware or uncertain of the need for such an understanding.

I have a short list with only two items on it. Political Conflict and International Trade.

Political Conflict. At the expenses of oversimplification, one may say that political conflicts have stemmed from philosophical differences or economic necessities. Nations have engaged in battle either due to religious differences or due to ideological differences. Followers of Christ went to war against non-believers; followers of Mohammed went to war against non-Muslims. From ideological perspective, leaders of the masses have stood against their kings and monarchs, and the Communist nations have fought the Capitalist nations.

Mankind has been slow in learning, but is beginning to realize that wars do not eradicate conflict. Religious and philosophical differences can not be eliminated, nor is there such a need. What is needed is understanding. When two intelligent people with opposing ideologies agree to a dialogue, they usually arrive at some understanding that enables them to exist side by side. Such understandings are not attained overnight. They require patience, persistence, and a willingness to give and take.

The arms reduction agreements between the USA and the ex-Soviet Union, the creation of the European Community Market, and the peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians are proof that conflicts can only be controlled through mutual understanding.

International Trade. There were times when it was possible for stronger nations to take over the smaller or weaker nations. Colonialism emerged as a mechanism for increasing the economic resources. However, the days of Colonialism are over. In present times, if and when a country tries to solve her economic problems through invading other countries, the invader pays dearly. The Soviet involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq's attempt to control Kuwait were political mistakes and, in both instances, created further economic problems for Russia and Iraq.

The solution for the economic problem is no longer in capturing territories and invading other countries. The solution lies in creating new markets and global trade. International trade calls for an understanding of other people, their needs, their languages, their customs, and their cultures.

II. How to increase global understanding

Understanding another culture requires more than rudimentary knowledge of a foreign language or an awareness of a few of the differences in nonverbal communication. These are essential but these are only some of the essentials. Developing a meaningful understanding of another culture is a two-part process: analysis and action.

Analysis calls for identifying the major similarities and differences between the two given cultures. Once the similarities and the differences are identified, one moves to the action stage. There are two dimensions of action. First, one needs to work towards emphasizing and increasing the similarities, and second, we must develop a systematic plan to decrease the cultural differences.

Creating new similarities is accomplished through developing new "cultural universals." A cultural universal is a mode of behavior that exists in all cultures.

A quarter of a century ago, there were very few cultural universals. However, the developments in world travel, communication technology, and mass media communication are creating new cultural universals. Cultural tolerance is also on the rise. For instance, American consumers are becoming more accepting of ideas and products such as Socialized medicine, the Russian ballet and the German classical music. The youths in the new communist nations and far away places such as India and Pakistan are dancing to the imported Rock 'n' Roll, wearing blue jeans, and indulging in fast foods. These are encouraging signs. Encouraging for intercultural exchange and understanding. These signs suggest that more and more intellectual political and business leaders around the world are harboring constructive attitudes, and thinking with open minds. Yes, these signs point toward a conflict free world, but there is a great deal of work that needs to be done to broaden "the common ground." One of the things that needs immediate attention is to become aware of our geocentrism and ethnocentrism.

III. What is being done?

It is refreshing to note that more and more people in the "first-world" are shifting away from geocentrism and ethnocentrism. In other words, the developed nations are beginning to accept that they are not the center of the universe and that there are other cultures that are equally important. A number of American universities are starting to incorporate multicultural dimensions to their curricula. For instance, George Washington University requires their students to read books by minority authors. The State University of New York College at Plattsburgh and the University of Maryland at College Park are seeking new ways to blend multiculturalism into teacher training programs. The University of South Dakota is requiring that all teachers should take a course examining race relations and prejudices (Nicklin, 1991).

For the last ten years, while teaching radio and television production courses in the United States of America, I have encouraged my students to attempt radio drama and television projects based on short stories, poems, and plays by authors from other countries. Consequently, my students have worked with materials by writers such as Tagore, Moravia, Pirandello, and Gibran.

IV. What are the mass media doing?

Mass media (I include seven media: newspapers, magazines, books, radio, TV, movies, music) and the modern communication technologies have reduced the distance between four corners of the world. Events taking place in any remote location can be instantly reported all over the world. Issues and problems from South Africa to Northern Ireland, from Bosnia to mainland China, seem as they are the events in our own backyard. As if these are our own problems. And in many ways, they are. We are rapidly becoming one large family.

The mass media are playing a dual role in global understanding. In some ways, the media are making a very constructive contribution by presenting sympathetic and accurate portrayals and images of distant places and people. Everybody in attendance here can claim that they know a great deal about the places they have never visited or cultures that they have never encountered. We have certain ideas about the North Pole and Arctic Circle, we have certain preconceptions about life in the desert, we have some knowledge of the safari experience in Africa. We acquire these bits of knowledge through the mass media. Mass media messages, when created by responsible people, hold a tremendous potential for international harmony and global understanding. On the other hand, when the same mass media engage in stereotyping and presenting one-sided information they can also add fuel to mistrust, suspicion, and misunderstanding.

Mass media, especially the news media such as television, news magazines, and radio are accused of slanted reporting (Rehman & Reilly 1991). For instance, the American news media have been accused of biased news reporting by the media professionals as well as by other social scientists. My purpose here is not to defend the news media or to attack it. I only want to point out that the news media in the advertising driven countries, such as the United States, operate under financial, technical, and political constraints (Rehman, 1989).

There is little that an average viewer can do about these constraining factors, however, one can become aware of them and learn to view the news

with a more critical eye. What we read in a newspaper or a magazine, of what we see on television may or may not be true. Even if something were true, one can be certain the one did not get the whole picture. Some things are left out. An educated consumer of the news media should learn to ask: Why were these facts and images presented to me? What might have been the reason for the selection? What was left out? Why was something not included? Unless we constantly ask these questions, we are likely to commit the allness fallacy, i. e., deciding on the shape of an elephant by touching only one part of the animal (Vik, Wilkinson, & Wilkinson, 1990).

V. Some recommendations

It is very easy to describe what is wrong. It is also very easy to complain about things that are not right. I think that we have reached a stage where we know what is wrong, we know the symptoms, we know what some of the causes are. I suggest that we turn our attention towards solving the problem. Let us work towards developing a plan of action with concrete, observable, measurable, and attainable goals. I suggest that our next conference should devote a special session where people would present ideas and plans of action for increasing global understanding. For my own part, I would like to suggest that we the teachers, the artists, the critics, and the practitioners of mass media make serious efforts to move away from geocentrism and ethnocentrism. I would also like to add that we should all embrace ideas, philosophies, and wisdom of other cultures into our own professional and creative endeavors.

* *This paper was presented at the 4th International Conference on Cross-Cultural Communication in San Antonio, Texas, March 24-28, 1993.*

References

Nicklin, Julie

1991 Teacher education programs face pressure to provide multicultural training. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. November 27, 1991. 1, A16.

Rehman, Sharaf

1989 Who writes the international news? A phenomenological analysis of international news. 9th International Jean Gebser Conference, Radford University, Radford, VA.

Rehman, Sharaf and Reilly, Susan

1991 International news is perceived differently by U. S. and international students. *International Journal of Instructional Media* Vol 17, No 4.

Vik, G. N., C. W. Wilkinson & D. C. Wilkinson

1990 *Writing and speaking in business*. (10th Ed.). Boston: Irwin.

