

## The contribution of the media to mediation processes

### Introduction

- The way in which mediation processes are covered by the media, and the way in which the media play their part in these processes, largely determine the chances that mediation will take place, lead to peace agreements, and have lasting effects.
- However, the quality of the information provided by the media to local populations — who are the most directly concerned — is often undermined by the increasingly rapid and pervasive circulation of rumours and misinformation, by media fragility and polarization, and by the lack of exchange between the media and the parties supporting these processes.
- Moreover, the importance of secrecy and/or confidentiality during certain phases or regarding certain aspects of the mediation work is essential for the players involved in the process to be able to move it forward, and this constrains or slows down the sharing of information with the general public. Likewise, the different natures of peace processes (from cease-fire to accords for a new social contract) have an impact on the role media can play.
- The aim of this concept note is to list the issues, challenges and constraints encountered by the various players in mediation processes, and to develop recommendations for improving communication within and around peace processes, being local or global.

This note is structured as follows:

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**Definition of Mediation:** we are applying here a “broad” definition that comprises different types of mediation, following the example of the European Union (EU) and its concept on mediation<sup>i</sup> (December 2020), including both third-party assistance in negotiation between two conflicting parties, facilitation, or dialogue for a new social contract. We are also applying the “multi-track”, or “track VI” approach developed by Interpeace, i.e. the link between the different levels of negotiations for greater inclusivity, including via civil society and the general public.

**Peace and mediation processes:** by this we mean national and/or local processes that aim to put an end to armed or violent conflict between one or more parties, and which involve not only the parties to the conflict, but also the communities from which they

derive and/or which are affected by the conflict. We are mindful of the fact that very often, in local and so-called “informal” processes, women play a crucial and under-acknowledged role, and are all too often absent from national and official processes.

**Media:** In the digital age, the term “media” is sometimes used indiscriminately to refer to all information and communication technologies (ICTs - for example, cell phones and social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube). However, in this document, the term “media” should not be confused with communication channels. The term is used here to refer to both online media and traditional media companies, such as print, radio, websites and TV stations, but more specifically to those media which must scrupulously respect journalistic ethics, as well as other professional standards, and which therefore have specific public service and public interest roles to play.

**Definition of “disinformation/misinformation/malinformation”:**

- Disinformation is information that is false, and which the person producing or distributing it knows to be false.
- Misinformation is information that is false, but that has not been created or shared with the intention of misleading, and which the person distributing it believes to be true.
- Malinformation is information based on reality, but used to harm a person, an organisation, or a country.

### **Background: Access to information and inclusion in peace and mediation processes**

Traditional media have long been indispensable intermediaries between individuals and the rest of society. They help to shape the very nature of society, acting as an interface between citizens and current events, as well as social, economic, cultural, and political institutions. The media also function as channels through which these institutions can interact with citizens. However, there is an increasing distrust between the media and parts of their audience, which complicates the media’s efforts in peace processes and mediation.

Moreover, with the rise of digital and mobile technologies, communication from all parties to a conflict, including non-state actors, has become more immediate and no longer necessarily passes through the “filter” of professional media and journalists.

More than ever, the field of communication is becoming an extension of the area of conflict and its resolution.<sup>ii</sup> In this respect, digital technologies present both:

- **opportunities** in terms of analysing the tension factors and increasing interaction between mediation players, decision-makers and affected populations, as well as the ability to reach a large, albeit geographically and culturally dispersed, audience; and



- **challenges**, particularly as regards the tools for manipulating information and amplifying partisan discourse become more sophisticated and effective with each passing day. The result is increasing confusion and polarization in the public sphere<sup>1</sup>.

However, disinformation is not solely the result of processes coordinated by the parties to a conflict in an intentional, controlled, or top-down manner. Disinformation is also amplified from the bottom up, especially when it fills a void resulting from a lack of reliable information made accessible to the greatest number of people.<sup>iii</sup>

Hence, in every context where rumour, misunderstanding and the clash of partisan narratives hamper mediation processes, one of the priorities should be to ensure that the affected populations have access to verified and balanced information, in compliance with the protocols and codes of conduct set out in the mediation process. This is not only to ensure top-down communication on the mediation process, but also to facilitate feedback on the different expectations of the populations affected by this process (including marginalized groups, such as women and young people).

Whatever the scale of a peace or mediation process, the participation of affected populations in the transition is crucial to its success. Although this premise is widely shared by the international players who support these processes, ensuring such inclusion remains a major challenge.

Uniting a society which, by definition, is polarized, around a project of common reconciliation presupposes not only agreement (at least tacitly) on the objective of this project, but also an understanding of its complexity, of the different points of view and expectations that need to be reconciled, of the different stages of the process, of its timing, of its pitfalls, etc. Independent, high-quality, accessible, and sometimes critical information is therefore essential if citizens are to understand what is at stake and be involved in the processes that will (re)define their future and their place in society.

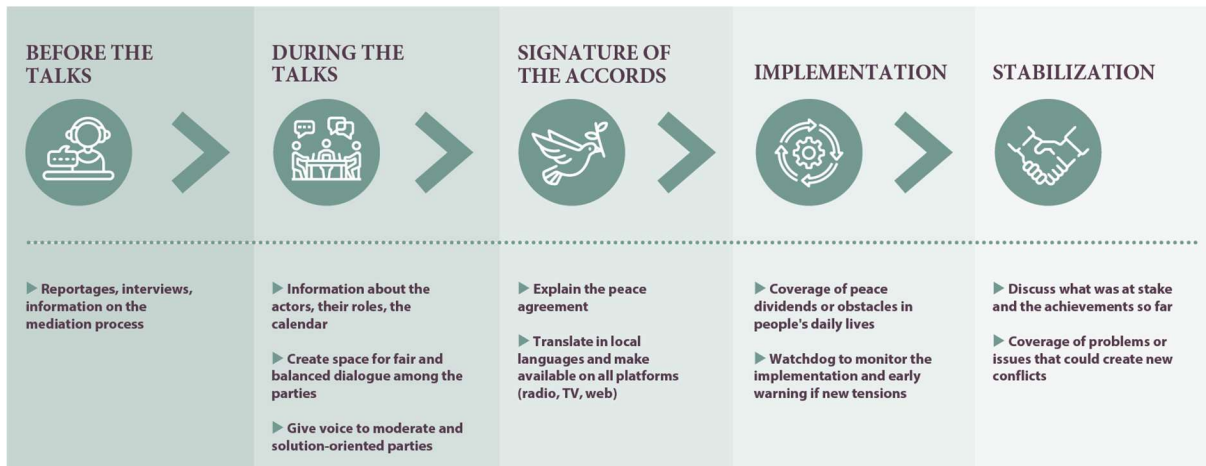
Moreover, without specific training in understanding media landscapes, those involved in mediation run the risk of underestimating the role of the media in their analysis of conflicts, or of incorporating a biased image of them. The weakness of the media landscape may in fact present significant biases in terms of geography (urban/rural), gender or age (women and young people and the relaying of their concerns in the information space), culture (certain social groups having privileged access to resources, particularly economic), etc. Additionally, in many of the contexts in which mediation processes take place, the independence of the media is often undermined by their proximity (real or alleged) to one of the parties to the conflict, their institutional and journalistic weakness, the low quality of analysis due to the complexity of the processes under way (such as transitional justice), and the limited capacity of journalists who are themselves affected by the conflict and related

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<sup>1</sup> <https://principlesforpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/P4P-Digital-Space-and-Peace-Processes-v2.pdf>

traumas. In some cases, the media are party to the conflict and play a negative role in spreading rumours and denigrating mediation efforts.

## **MEDIA AND PEACE PROCESSES :** **The on-going role of media at the different steps of the process**



### **Media as actors and contributors to mediation**

Reliable, diverse, and independent news media can play a vital role in mediation and peace processes, especially as:

- Intermediaries for the issues and concerns of the various segments of society, including the most marginalized, to
  - mediators
  - the parties in conflict
  - other segments of society
- Sources of information on the type of ongoing mediation process (track 1 or other tracks), its history and participants, its goals and limits;
- Sources of information on the complexity of the process, its ongoing evolution, provided over a long period of time, in local languages and made accessible to as many people as possible;
- Facilitators and moderators of public debates on the process and its implementation. Inclusive and balanced media can create and foster spaces for dialogue where different points of view meet. In doing so, they can show the public that dialogue is possible, and that there are alternatives to the use of force to confront and negotiate opposing interests. These spaces for dialogue can sometimes lead to the identification of common interests and non-violent solutions to conflicts. If they have a wide audience, the media can help build a critical mass in favour of these solutions and of peace;
- Debate initiators: the media are not just neutral facilitators; through their editorial choices, they also help to establish the topics and terms of debate (*agenda setting and framing effect*). They can prioritize issues of social cohesion and restore the



balance of power in communication by giving a voice to those who are deprived of one;

- “Watchdogs” of peace agreements and their implementation, ensuring a degree of accountability to stakeholders;
- Witnesses to the impact of these processes on individuals through reports and testimonials, giving a tangible and concrete dimension to political decisions, including on specific individuals such as victims or the most marginalized populations (especially young people and women);
- Long-term recorders of social and political developments, strengthening social cohesion over the long term (including the memorial dimension in particular), and contributing to the sharing of learning, including beyond the society concerned;
- Stress relief facilitators: entertainment programs (music, culture, etc.) also provide emotional outlets and sources of comfort and reassurance. Specific programs can be designed with mental health professionals and disseminated to contribute to wider psycho-social support.

### **Challenges and constraints**

The media’s capacity to perform the roles described above is being undermined by a series of major factors on a global scale: a geopolitical and democratic crisis (increasingly polarised societies and the ascendance of autocratic regimes); a crisis of confidence in institutions (including the media); a technological race to the top (and growing informational chaos and difficulty in distinguishing truth from falsehood, exacerbated by the potential of artificial intelligence); and, finally, an economic crisis that is jeopardizing the viability of public-interest media.<sup>iv</sup>

Against this backdrop of global weakening of the media, their hijacking by partisan interests is made easier. In an increasingly competitive attention economy and faced with the capture of online advertising revenues by GAFAM<sup>v</sup> and other tech giants, many media outlets are seeing their resources and ability to work independently and professionally diminish.

In mediation processes, the following challenges relating to information and access to it are of especial importance:

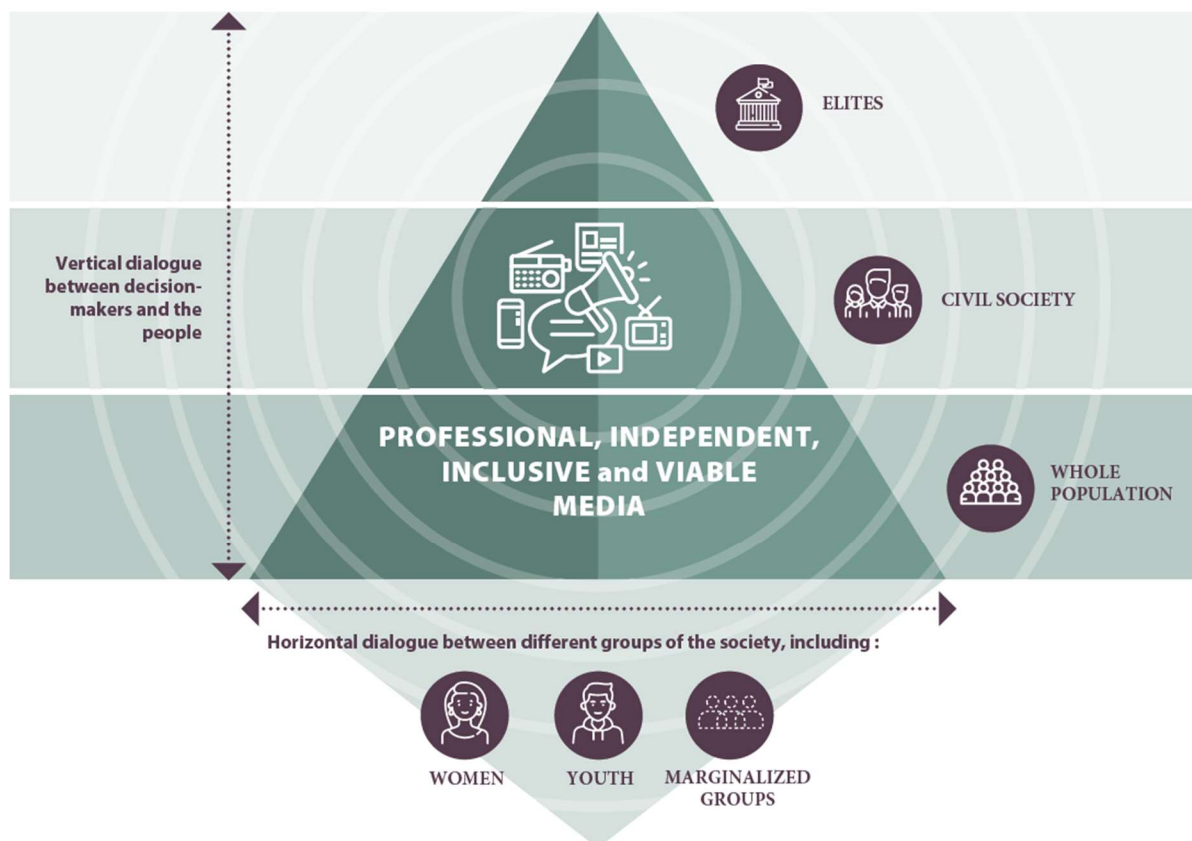
- For affected populations (at home and in the diaspora)
  - Obtaining reliable and balanced information on the challenges, the different points of view and the progress of the mediation and peace process, through content made accessible by appropriate dissemination technologies and language.
  - Distinguishing between disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation, which is all the more viral when it fills a gap in reliable information.
  - Making their voices/frustrations heard, and bear witness, especially for the most marginalized groups (for example, families of combatants).
  - Finding examples that enable them to believe in the possibility of dialogue and becoming players in this dialogue within their social and civic spheres.
- For mediators

- Understanding the variety of viewpoints and aspirations within the media landscape, identify the dynamics, main vectors, and points of convergence.
- Understanding the media landscape in which the mediation process takes place and its interactions with the mediation actors, and creating the necessary links with local media.
- Preserving the confidentiality necessary for negotiations, whilst sharing the information that needs to be known about the mediation process, its objectives, and difficulties, and encouraging the social dynamics that reinforce it.
- Finding reliable media outlets capable of processing the relevant information and disseminating it to the various populations and stakeholders concerned.
- Preserving their image of impartiality vis-à-vis the parties to the conflict.
- For parties in conflict
  - Making their voices and demands heard.
  - Hearing the voices, interests, and arguments of other parties.
  - Hearing the voice of the different segments of the population affected by the conflict(s) and the mediation process (for example, the regional dimension).
- For journalists
  - Obtaining access to information without prejudicing the process in progress or putting oneself at risk.
  - Understanding the type and specific nature of the mediation work in progress, the issues at stake, the problems at the root of conflicts, their historical background, the players involved and their representativeness, the unfolding of complex negotiation processes, so as to be able to explain them to local populations (and international players).
  - Getting to know mediators and other mediation professionals, understanding their role and build a relationship of respect and trust with them.
  - Making this information accessible and digestible to as many people as possible, without giving in to the temptation of the “scoop”, or sensationalism.
  - Finding the space to cover these mediation issues in contexts of media censorship and shrinking civil liberties.
  - Identifying the actors and ensure that a variety of viewpoints are heard in a balanced manner.
  - Not amplifying tensions and extremes, allowing constructive voices to be heard and using appropriate vocabulary (*do no harm*).
  - Distinguishing and resisting attempts at manipulation and dealing with threats and attacks.
  - Being trained not to get personally involved in debates, being aware of their own biases and protect themselves psychologically.
  - Keeping audiences focused on the key issues, despite distractions, over the long term.
- For international donors and actors



- Understanding the information environment/context and monitoring its evolution, identifying reliable, professional and non-partisan media partners.
- Being able to explain their role and added value in supporting the mediation process.
- Preventing increasingly viral disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation.
- Promoting local ownership.
- Contributing to long-term efficiency.
- Identifying and sharing the successes and lessons learned from the process across borders.

## MEDIA AND PEACE PROCESSES



### **Recommendations** to enable the media to work during mediation processes:

- Reinforce the inclusivity and access of all affected populations to information relating to the mediation process, in their local language(s) and through adapted technologies (considering the digital divide and the *leave no one behind* principle).
- Encourage the establishment of partnerships between mediators and the media, upstream of the process, in order to foster contacts and a relationship of trust.

- Support the media so that they can provide in-depth, ongoing coverage of these processes, and not just at the height of a crisis.
- Strengthen media capacities, well upstream of mediation processes and through a holistic approach including, in particular,
  - Training for journalists, particularly on mediation/peace process issues (for example, recognizing the various types of mediation contexts, the “do no harm” approach, differentiated understanding of actors, their approaches, and needs, questioning one’s impartiality and independence, etc.).
  - Journalists’ access to information on mediation processes, including the origins of the process (players, background, etc.).
  - Financial, technical, and security support for local, professional, and long-term journalism.
- Respect media independence and strengthen pluralism within the media landscape to better reflect the diversity of viewpoints on peace processes.
- Strengthen psychosocial support for mediators and journalists involved in mediation processes and covering the atrocities of conflict.
- Train mediators (institutional and/or local *insider mediators*) in media-related issues (*advanced media literacy*), how to assess a media landscape, how to respond to an interview, how to write a press release, etc.).
- Reinforce media and information education (MIE) for the general population on the role and limits of the media in mediation processes, and on the risks of disinformation.

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<sup>i</sup> EU mediation concept (2020), <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/st13951.en20.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. for example, Monroe E. Price, *Free Expression, Globalism and the New Strategic Communication*, 2015; Ingrid A. Lehman, *Managing public information in mediation process*, 2009

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. for example, Guichaoua, Yvan and Bouhlef, Ferdaous (2023) *Interactions between civilians and jihadists in Mali and Niger*. University of Kent; Marie-Soleil Frère & Anke Fiedler (2018) “Balancing Plausible Lies and False Truths, Perception and evaluation of the local and Global News Coverage of Conflicts in the DRC. “

<sup>iv</sup> See Forum on Information & Democracy. (2021). *A New Deal for Journalism*. <https://informationdemocracy.org/working-groups/sustainability-of-journalism/>

<sup>v</sup> Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft