



From Borders to Intersections

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From borders to intersections

There was a time, both in the media and in social and political settings when borders were clear. It was forbidden for those of a certain religion, race, nationality or class to cross certain lines. We needed official documents to move from one country to the next. In the rarefied world of media production, we needed capital and credentials to shift from being an observer to a producer. All that has changed.

With the rapid pace of change in communication technology, the ever-increasing consolidation and power of multi-national corporations, and new social movements that cross lines of faith, class, culture and national origin, borders are not as clear as they once were. This can be unsettling as we seek to navigate our way through these new waters; but such a reality also offers opportunities as barriers that once kept us separate have become intersections that bring us together.

I am privileged to serve as director of Intersections International,[1] a new (since September 2007), permanent multi-faith initiative of the Collegiate Church of New York, the oldest corporation in North America dating back to 1628. Aptly named, Intersections' mandate is to bring people together who differ, honor the differences and forge common ground in efforts that advance justice, reconciliation and peace. And so the notion of borders transformed into places where individuals and whole communities can converge is central to our work. One of our collaborative colleagues, Arvind Vora is Chair for Interreligious Affairs of the Federation of Jain Associations of North America and a traffic engineer by profession. He reports that when two vehicles enter an intersection, there are sixteen possible safe interactions. How we engage the intersection is critical to the way we live our lives. Do we pause, yield, move straight through, allow someone to pass, proceed in unintended new directions?

At life's intersection we discover each other and find our commonality. When there are only borders, the one across the wall remains 'other', and opportunities for reconciliation and peace are limited, but when we meet at the intersection, new paradigms are possible.

Relating the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds

Nowhere is the need to replace boundaries with intersections more important than in the relationship between the Muslim and the non-Muslim worlds. Recently, in our midtown Manhattan office, we were privileged to hear from two extraordinary Nigerians, Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye, who told the compelling story of how they made the transformation from mortal enemies, intent on killing one another in the name of religion, to two brothers focused on reconciliation and peace.

In 1992, violent interreligious conflict broke out in their homeland. Christians and Muslims fought each other in the marketplace, destroying each other's crops and attacking one another's families. Both the Imam and the Pastor were drawn into the fighting, and each paid a

heavy price for their involvement – Imam Ashafa with the loss of two brothers and his teacher; Pastor James with the loss of his hand. For them, this [2] was not an ethereal war between Muslim and Christian – it was *this* man killed *my* brother; *this man's forces* cut off *my* hand. So, there they sat at our conference table as Imam Ashafa told of when they were first in the same room together, and how his heart raced as the man he had sworn to kill was sitting across from him. You could sense the emotion still in him. Then, he recounted how someone called a halt in the meeting to take a tea break. ‘A mutual friend took both of us by the hand and said: “The two of you can pull this nation together, or you can destroy it. Do something.”’

At that moment, something in Mohammed – or beyond him – broke open and a spirit of reconciliation filled his heart; making him, as he would later say, ‘hearty’. He reached out to his former enemy to work for reconciliation. The spirit took longer to fill James, and for three years, though he worked with Ashafa, he told us as we sat in awed stillness by his honesty that he secretly wished his new colleague death, even as they worked together.

But eventually, after three full years, he too, opened to the spirit of forgiveness and returned the love that Mohammed offered. They formed the Interfaith Mediation Center² and today, their organization has over 10,000 members, reaching into the militias to train the country’s youth – as well as women, religious figures, and tribal leaders – to become civic peace activists. Under their leadership, Muslim and Christian youth jointly rebuild the mosques and churches they once destroyed through war and violence. Yes, it is possible to change borders into intersections, even in the midst of war.[3]

Role of media

And so, this transformation process can occur in very traditional ways, one person at a time, taking the initiative to break open the borders that have historically divided us and creating points of convergence and cooperation. What is new to our day, however, is the central role that communications technology can play in this process.

First, I submit that any discussion about changes in social interactions must consider the role of the media. If we seek to build a world where honesty, integrity, full participation and human dignity form the basis of our social and political relationships, it is necessary to include the media in these equations.

As a prerequisite for such conversation, it is important to acknowledge the power of the media, perhaps best expressed in an old African proverb, ‘Until the lions can tell their own story, tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.’ Until the voiceless are granted voice, their hopes and expectations, triumphs and tragedies will never be articulated, leaving us *and them* to wonder if they really ever exist at all. My colleague Larry Hollon, General Secretary of the United Methodist Church has often stated that, ‘if you are not in the media, you don’t exist.’

A recent personal experience illustrates the point: For a decade, I had been working behind the scenes producing the image magnification component for the United Church of Christ’s large

biennial General Synod meetings. This took untold hours of preparation and implementation but, since I was behind the scenes, only a few knew of my role. However, at the meeting this past June, I was considered an ‘honoured guest’ and – since I was still working behind the scenes and could not join my other colleagues onstage – a *five second* clip was shown in appreciation of my work.

As I walked the convention center at break time, I received countless comments from conference attendees about this five second clip – far more than I had ever received for my *ten years* of work backstage! [3] Personal experience aside, the tragedy about this principle is that there is such a select few gatekeepers controlling what we see and hear in traditional media (print, radio, television), that it is increasingly difficult to experience diverse viewpoints on the airwaves. In the US, for example, less than five percent of the television outlets are owned by women or people of colour. Media access is critical.

Towards the end of his life, Pope John Paul II stated in his *Apostolic Letter to those Responsible for Communication*, ‘I would like to recall our attention to the subject of media access, and of *co-responsible participation* in their administration. If the communications media are a good destined for all humanity, then ever-new means must be found – including recourse to opportune legislative measures – to make possible a true participation in their management by all. The culture of co-responsibility must be nurtured.’[4]

Unless we are intentional about diversity of expression in the media, we risk bland homogeneity on the one hand or strident extremism on the other, so any ethic we might develop that nurtures movement from borders to intersections must find a way that makes room for diverse voices to be heard.

Dr. Robert Hackett, Professor of Communication at Canada’s Simon Fraser University, addressing the National Council of Churches Communication Commission in September 2007, noted that ‘media concentrate society’s symbolic power’, focusing attention by priming and framing. I recall seeing a study undertaken by mediamatters.org⁵ that dramatically and tragically demonstrates the power of framing.

One of their studies showed that in the USA, of the 393 interviews on the nightly news of ABC, CBS, NBC and PBS in the run up to the War in Iraq – *three* were by peace activists. A result of such framing was a high degree of support for the war – a position later lamented by most responsible US journalists.

From mass media to participatory media

But media are changing, and it is in this change that the transition from borders to intersections has accelerated. This revolution is unlike anything since 1448, when Gutenberg invented movable type. Communication technology has moved us from the era of mass media to the age of participatory media. The line between content consumer and content provider has blurred. Distribution has shifted from one-to-many to one-to-one. Another border is crumbling.

Examples of this abound, and the statistics, while startling, are changing so rapidly as to be outdated from one month to the next.[6] Research shows: that 57% of American teenagers create content for the internet. Thirty-one billion e-mails are sent each day (although some studies indicate that twitter and text messaging is replacing e-mail as the medium of choice, especially for younger audiences. In 2009, Boston College stopped giving e-mail addresses to incoming freshmen.)[7]

A new blog is created every second of every day, and the 'blogosphere' is doubling in size every five months. There have been 133 Million blogs since 2002.

YouTube has passed 150 million monthly visitors, with more than 100 million videos viewed every day. Close to two billion video streams have been initiated on YouTube. There are two *billion* Google searches each day. Wikipedia has 2,700,000 articles in English, and ten million altogether in 260 languages. There are 75,000 active contributors, and in 2008, Wikipedia had 684 million visitors.

With more than 250 million active users, if Facebook were a country, it would be the world's fourth largest, between the US and Indonesia.[8] Almost half visit the site every day and people spend an average of 20 minutes on the site. More than one billion [4] photos are uploaded each month and more than one billion pieces of information are shared each week. And as of October 1, 2009, Twitter reported more than four billion tweets.[9]

Last year, there were more computer transistors produced, and for less cost, than grains of rice.[10] These changes in technology have real-life implications – in the way we build community among our friends, but also in the ways conflicts are resolved within and among nations. Two recent examples illustrate how new technology has impacted how world events unfold and are perceived – across borders.

The first is the War in Gaza during the winter of 2009. Both sides used emerging technologies to advance their causes. On the web site *Mediashift*, Jaron Gilinsky offers examples of viral media used by both Israelis and Palestinians. Gilinsky states:

'Both sides deployed dangerous new media weapons during this latest round of fighting in Gaza. Armed with Facebook profiles, Twitter accounts, and Lavazza espresso, warriors fearlessly and tirelessly scoured the cyber battlefield searching for enemy (blog) outposts. Outfitted with high-tech ammunition like HD videocameras, firewire 800s, and white phosphorescent keyboards, they attacked one-sided videos, slanted essays, and enemy propaganda with propaganda of their own. Instead of grad rockets, they launched grad school wits. Instead of anti-tank missiles, they battled with anti-spamming technology. In 22 days of combat in Gaza, these were the young fighters tasked with winning the merciless war of public opinion for their side.'[11]

Freelance photojournalist Asteris Masouris reported on how new media were used by Al Jazeera to describe the situation on the ground in Gaza:

‘As actual footage from the ground is hard to come by and news organizations have mostly been forced to report from the sidelines, Al Jazeera, being the only network with reporters in Gaza, has emerged as the main source of direct information from the conflict zone. Its Twitter updates from a dedicated account (@AJGaza) routinely precede those of other media organisations by as much as several hours’[12]

Neda Agha-Soltan’s death

But, perhaps the best illustration of how new media must be considered in our social interactions is symbolized by Neda’s story which struck the world in the aftermath of the Iranian elections in June of 2009.[13]

A young woman named Neda Agha-Soltan was watching the events unfold around her when she was killed by a sniper’s bullet. A camera recorded her final moments, and within minutes of her death, the video was posted on Facebook and then on YouTube and blogs and tweets from around the world made her a global symbol for the horrors of state sponsored violence and political repression in ways that words and statistics could not.

What makes Neda’s image even more compelling is her utter humanity in the brief 40 seconds of video footage. First, her eyes connect with the camera, follow it as it moves, lock onto each of us in that eternal instant before death: an instant we will all face. Eyes that now reach out for help when help cannot come, for justice now forever denied, for peace where there is no peace.

Then, there is her name – Neda means ‘voice’ in Farsi. She does not speak in the video, but the silence of her expression thunders across the global landscape. Her [5] ‘voice’ demands that we listen. The technologies – YouTube, cell phone pictures, instant messages, social networking, twitter – relay the message in a new kind of struggle, where any moment can be captured. Reposting her image in various settings around the world sows seeds of anger, grief and righteous indignation – the seeds of a paradigm shift.

And Neda’s story can also be seen as a religious watershed. The ‘martyrdom’ of this young Islamic woman demonstrates to more than a billion Muslims (and the rest of us, too) that evil is manifested not only in a secular world run amuck, but also in authoritarian injustice perpetrated in the very name of religion. This intersection of ‘first hand’ knowledge in a heavily controlled society causes yet other barriers – cultural differences and geographical distances – to fall before the power of imagery evoked through emerging technologies, calling faithful people everywhere to struggle against dehumanizing injustice in all its forms.

Finding ‘tools of discernment’

If these borders of time and distance and language and national boundaries are being transformed into intersections before our very eyes, how can we create an ethic that responds to this reality, that maximizes the positive benefits of this transformation and that keeps barriers down and intersections alive in the future?

First, we must acknowledge that the borders are crumbling, that new ways of communicating with one another already exist and that this emerging technology is value neutral. It can be used for good or ill. We should not shrink from it, belittle it or condemn it, but try to understand it, especially through the eyes of young people for whom this reality is normative, and explore ways that this new technology can be used to enhance the human condition.

Second, we must find ways to use this technology to promote the public interest. Responsible dissemination of information by individuals, enlightened regulation by governments, social entrepreneurship by media producers, and corporate and foundation subsidies as stewards of this public trust are all essential components in a constructive societal communications framework.

At the same time, it is important to dispel the myth of the level playing field. In a globalized economy, with huge disparities in wealth, fields are inherently uneven. We need an ethic that tilts toward the small and the poor. A system weighted toward 'the least of these' is a foundational principle in religious and ethical thinking that cuts across lines of faith and culture. At its heart, this struggle is a question of justice and the arc of justice bends toward the poor and disenfranchised. We ignore this trajectory at our own peril.

Next, we need clear and robust protections for our children who do not understand the implications of exposing their lives on social networking pages. We must develop 'tools of discernment' and teach these in schools, civic arenas and religious institutions so that young people can ascertain for themselves those internet sites with legitimacy and those that cannot be trusted. And there must be a sense of urgency to our efforts. The forces of media consolidation, exponential changes in technology and the impact of globalization are already upon us.

Finally, it is important to understand the power of entertainment to touch hearts and minds and we must support informal initiatives that reach out to producers to encourage a diversity of ideas, discourage stereotypes, and promote environmentally sound solutions, peacemaking imagery and stories that inspire. [6]

Perhaps, imagination is the key: that human quality that moves us to dare to dream, that emboldens us, that enables us to create new products and practices – that dimension of heart, mind and soul that, when coupled with faith, moves us to ever deeper understandings of ourselves, our world and our God – shattering borders and bringing intersections to life.

Notes

1. For more information on Intersections International, see www.intersectionsinternational.org
2. <http://www.changemakers.com/node/12281>
3. For illustrations on how communication techniques have expanded the messages of Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye, see <http://www.iofc.org/imam-pastor>
4. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20050124_il-rapido-sviluppo_en.html
5. <http://mediamatters.org/>
6. Unless otherwise noted, the following statistics are found at <http://thefuturebuzz.com/2009/01/12/social-media-web-20-internet-numbers-stats/> These statistics were cited as of the writing of this article in September 2009; they are changing rapidly.
7. http://aiim.typepad.com/aiim_blog/2009/08/37-really-cool-statistics-about-social-media.html
8. <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>
9. <http://popacular.com/gigatweet/>
10. http://www.zpluspartners.com/zblog/archive/2006_04_06_zblogarchive.html
11. <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2009/02/how-social-media-war-was-waged-in-gaza-israel-conflict044.html>
12. <http://www.neurope.eu/articles/91859.php>
13. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Neda_Agha-Soltan

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