

Communicating across borders

peacebuilding and the media in the South Caucasus

Rachel Clogg and Jenny Norton

***“Before, I thought Azerbaijanis were our enemies, I never thought I’d be able to sit down with them, have a cup of tea and a chat, but during this project I met Azerbaijanis for the first time and they’ve become my friends. I didn’t feel any barriers between us.”* Armenian participant in a cross-border film project in the South Caucasus**

As the Soviet Union fell apart in the early 1990s, armed conflict broke out in the South Caucasus. Armenia and Azerbaijan went to war over the disputed region of Nagorny Karabakh. Georgia went to war in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Although these conflicts all have different roots and nuances, they also have many things in common and their eventual resolution is inevitably linked. Escalation in one area has a knock-on effect on the rest of the region. Progress in one domain could have a significant catalysing effect in another.

Since the early 1990s the South Caucasus has been in a state of ‘no peace, no war’, criss-crossed by impassable borders, front lines, and once-busy roads and railways which gather dust on the way to nowhere. For the past decade and a half there has been very little contact between ordinary people across the conflict divides. Travel is either physically or psychologically impossible, or politically discouraged. There are no postal connections and in some cases people cannot even make phone calls to the other side.

Against this bleak background, the media has proved an important way to help people begin to reconnect and try to rebuild some of the ties broken by war. Organisations like the Institute for War and Peace Reporting and Internews have been creative in challenging and supporting journalists in the war across divides. In a small but symbolic way, Conciliation

Resources has also supported cross-conflict media work that is helping to overcome the borders, both real and imagined, that continue to keep people apart.

In 2002 a small group of local radio journalists from Georgia and the breakaway region of Abkhazia started up a joint project recording ordinary people talking about things that had happened to them in everyday life. Most of the stories – dubbed *Radio Diaries* – were in Russian, a language still widely understood across the South Caucasus. They covered the stuff of ordinary life everywhere – birth, death, marriage, conflict, joy, sadness, loss and hope. They were both heartbreaking and hilarious.

The stories were initially broadcast on radio stations on either side of the Georgian-Abkhaz divide. For the first time since the war ended they gave people on both sides the chance to hear each other speak, to remember the shared life they had once had, and to see each other as individual human beings rather than ‘the enemy’.

Over the next five years twenty more radio stations from other parts of the South Caucasus joined the project. Between them they recorded more than 1,300 stories. The reach of *Radio Diaries* extended beyond the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict to bring in contributions from Armenia, Azerbaijan and the disputed regions of Nagorny Karabakh and South Ossetia. The enthusiasm of the journalists who took part in the *Radio Diaries* project, and the positive feedback that participating stations received from listeners, demonstrated that despite everything, ordinary people caught up in the Caucasus conflicts were still interested in each other, and that common ties had not completely dissolved.



Women cross the bridge that marks the Georgian/Abkhaz conflict divide
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By 2006 it was clear that the media environment in the region was changing fast. While radio is a good way to reach predominantly older listeners on a local level, it was important to reach out to a wider audience, including younger people, and to explore the new possibilities offered by video and the internet.

One of the most impassable and militarised borders in the whole South Caucasus is the 'line of contact' between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces controlling the disputed region of Nagorny Karabakh. Before the 1991-94 war, a journey from the Azerbaijani capital Baku to Karabakh's main town Stepanakert (known as Khankendi to many Azeris), would have taken about seven hours by car. Now it involves two flights, via Georgia and Armenia, followed by a six-hour drive.

The official peace process focuses on high level contacts between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the only recognised parties to the conflict. Efforts bringing people together from across the divide generally exclude Karabakh Armenians, even though their region and identity lie at the heart of the conflict.

In 2006 three local media organisations in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Karabakh decided to challenge the impasse by reaching out to each other through a unique endeavour called *Dialogue Through Film*. The idea was to train young people from Azerbaijan and Karabakh to make short films about everyday life. The project involved contacts and conversations on different levels between young people taking part in workshops together on neutral ground, and watching each other's films;

and between audiences on both sides who watch the films and get a rare, unfiltered glimpse of life on the other side.

Over four years the young people involved in *Dialogue Through Film* have made more than 30 films, most of which are available on video-sharing sites on the internet and many of which have now taken on a life of their own via Live Journal and Facebook.

An ongoing programme of community screenings in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Karabakh ensures that they reach local audiences and that ordinary people can discuss the films together. Some have been shown on local television, although it remains a challenge to convince state-controlled national channels to screen them.

For many viewers, watching the films can be a deeply unsettling experience, provoking strong emotions and often heated debate. For Azeris and Armenians forced from their homes during the war, for example, or people with strong family connections to places shown in the films, it can be very difficult to see much-loved and familiar places so changed and so out of reach.

For the young generation growing up with the myths and negative stereotypes that prevail on both sides about each other, it can be disorientating and upsetting to see how different the reality can be from what they have been lead to believe. Young people are crucial players in our cross-border media work, but their involvement clearly underlines both the challenges and the limits of projects of this kind.

While the *Radio Diaries* project was led by professional journalists in their 30s or 40s, *Dialogue Through Film* has focused on young people who grew up during or after the war. For them it has proved more of a challenge to meet in person. They have no shared past to fall back on. In some cases they do not even have a common language. Mistrust and fear have to be overcome. Connections have to be made from scratch.

The shared experience of making films, and taking part in workshops and screenings together, helps to establish those connections. But while young people have the tools to stay in touch – email, social networking sites, mobile phones and so on – they do not always have the incentive to do so. When meetings end, both sides go home to their separate worlds and to the prejudices and negative propaganda that neither encourage nor facilitate continued communication with new friends.

What this clearly underlines is the need for grassroots cross-border projects to be part of a wider political process. Media projects in isolation can break down barriers inside peoples' heads, but in a politically stagnant environment those barriers can just as easily build up again. Media projects suggest possibilities for further contacts, and in doing so they raise expectations that cannot always be met unless politicians are also engaged in the process.

The very existence of these media projects provokes obvious questions about Armenian and Azerbaijani commitment to peaceful change. Why should it be impossible to show Armenian films on Azerbaijani national television, and vice versa? Why can't Azeris travel to Karabakh, or Armenians to Baku? Without these elementary building blocks of conciliation in place, how serious can leaders be about peace?

In order for cross-border initiatives not to burn out, policy-makers and peace envoys need to recognise what a useful tool they can be. They remind us that peace deals are not just about presidents and politicians meeting behind closed doors. They are also about the people who will have to find a way to live together again once the peace deal has been signed. This was even more clearly demonstrated by a web-based video project, which started up in Georgia after the war with Russia over South Ossetia in 2008.

Eyewitness Reports trains ordinary people across Georgia to be 'citizen journalists', making short video reports about interesting stories in their local communities. The journalists behind the *Eyewitness* project had all been involved in cross-border and boundary efforts before the August 2008 conflict. In the period immediately after the war it seemed that their links with colleagues from both Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been irrevocably damaged.

But very cautiously they worked to rebuild trust and to re-establish contact, and former colleagues from both regions are now beginning to contribute their own videos to the site. The result has been that *Eyewitness* is now in a strong position to challenge the wave of chauvinism and negative propaganda unleashed by all sides during and after the 2008 fighting.

Their video reporting holds up a mirror to Georgian society, reminding ordinary Georgians that they are living in a complex and multicultural country. It reminds people living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia that there is another Georgia behind the negative images they see both on local and Russian television channels. And it reminds Georgians that the reality of life in the two 'conflict zones' can be very different from what they might wish or imagine it to be.

This in essence is the real value of cross-border media projects. They create independent channels for ordinary people to reconnect, supportive of formal peace processes while also challenging leaders to relax their hold on them. By showing the realities of life on the other side, cross-border media projects invite people to start thinking about what a new post-peace settlement world might look like, and how they can prepare themselves for that time in a more constructive and realistic way.

They offer both a reminder and a vision of the South Caucasus as a unified region without today's rifts, in which communication is free and common values can emerge from behind the current divides.

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Jenny Norton is a journalist with the BBC World Service and has spent much of her career following developments in the former Soviet Union, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus. She studied Russian at Leeds University and spent nearly three years in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in the late 1990s running the BBC's Central Asia bureau. Jenny has worked with Conciliation Resources since 2001 when she produced the first ever joint Abkhaz-Georgian radio series about the legacy of the conflict. Current projects include *Dialogue Through Film* for young Azeri and Karabakhi filmmakers, and *People and Times* – a local newspaper for Abkhazia's Georgian community.
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