



The power of the media to form public opinion

Oftentimes we in the media seem to either ignore difference or position ourselves on one side or another in line with social, cultural or even financial accountabilities. There is a third alternative: Blurring difference in line with inevitable human evolution and the relentless ebb and flow of civilizations.

During a recent visit to Israel, at a time when difference was taking a catastrophic toll on human life, I stood on the beach at Caesarea, amid the vestiges of civilizations built upon destroyed civilizations. I was aware of the fragility of material wealth, lifestyle, values and culture that, in our own time, each of us hold so dear and pondered the importance—or even wisdom—of blurring difference.

On this very spot since the fourth century BC the Sidons, Egyptians, Romans, Phoenicians, Muslims and Crusaders all had a good go at establishing flourishing communities and infrastructures that would in turn be destroyed. I thought of how important figures such as Straton, Pompey, Pontius Pilate, Baldwin I, Saladin and Louis IX had strutted their stuff on this site—to no permanent avail.

I thought also to the previous 100 years or so that have witnessed the demise of the Ottoman Turk, Austro-Hungarian and British Empires. I wondered how the future would look if we were to accept the futility of wreaking inhuman havoc in the name of self interest.

Yet alongside difference, violence, death and suffering, I was amazed to come across an exciting reality that, as far as I know, does not play out at all in the mainstream media. I discovered a vibrant strata of Israeli artists whose work

reflects a distinct quest for a commonality that will transcend, rather than replace, the differences that beset their country.

This recurring theme of the earth, its resources and the relentless passage of time set against the futility of self-interest was evident in artistic expression wherever I went. Accustomed to media reports that so often reflect anger, hate, despair and deception, I discussed my observations with as many Israelis as possible. And I am encouraged to believe that a significant proportion of the population understands and supports these sentiments.

That my two favourite artists, Tsibi Geva and Ayal Shifron, enjoy national as well as international recognition would perhaps support this assumption.

As someone who witnessed the birth of the *New South Africa* first hand, I remember how resistance art in that country so powerfully underscored the possibility of a nation that would transcend the scars of the past. Dramatic *fusion* music, theatre and fine art took the country by storm at a time when people despaired of a new political dispensation. It was almost as if the art community reassured the politicians that the country was ready to embrace change.

Since that time I have always looked to the arts to measure any given community's pulse. Perhaps Israeli artistic expression is again a foretaste of things to come?

If artistic expression in Israel is to be taken seriously, then a basic common appreciation of the earth we inhabit, the natural resources we enjoy and the basic human right to inhabit the planet outlasts any other cultural value.

This is nothing new. Yet past endeavours have sought to eradicate rather than accommodate self-interest—an imposition of values rather than a quest to secure inescapable respect for common interest. The often vilified United Nations is the furthest the current civilization has come to achieving this end. If that organization is ineffective it is perhaps because the inevitable Law of the Jungle usually carries the day.

What has this to do with us in the broadcast industry?

The power of the media to form public opinion is beyond dispute. Instead of fuelling self-interest with selectively applied morality, could we not strive to beat an incessant drum for common interest? Mindful of the futility of the destructive/constructive pendulum swing that marks human evolution, would we not do well to dangle common interest before our audiences as a desirable objective?

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