

# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## On Conflict, Framing and Accountability

Ian Macduff (NZ Centre for ICT Law & School of Law, Auckland University) · Friday, April 26th, 2019

It's just over six weeks since the horrific shootings at two mosques in Christchurch, leading to 50 deaths, and a month since I felt compelled to make that event the topic of my [blog](#). Now, in the wake of the attacks on three churches and three luxury hotels in Sri Lanka leading to over 250 deaths (that figure having recently been revised downwards) and over 500 people injured, I must begin with a similar theme – of horror at the senselessness and evil of such killings. At the time of writing there has also been a suggestion, by a junior minister in the Sri Lankan government, that these events were in some way linked, and that the Sri Lankan suicide bombings were a retaliation (by radical Islamist groups) for the Christchurch shootings (by a white supremacist). Fortunately, sane voices currently prevail in politics here in New Zealand and the point is made that there is no good evidence for this linkage, though there's [plenty of reason](#) to believe that there will be groups which might wish to claim the link. There's further reason, too, to be concerned about the wildfire of social media and careless journalism in noting the uncritical speed with which that claim of retaliation has been repeated, at the risk of turning speculation or provocation into fact.

Having visited and worked in Sri Lanka on a number of occasions between 1999 and 2006 – during the civil war – and having worked with the most wonderful groups of frontline medical personnel, many of whom regularly faced personal danger during the conflict, I can only add my voice of sympathy and bewilderment at the loss that many of them will now experience. I think in particular of those colleagues who, as psychiatrists, dealt at first hand with the trauma to individuals and communities through the violence of the civil war; and I think of the psycho-social health workers who, often not knowing what was happening to their own families, were picking up the pieces of compatriots' shattered lives, regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation.

In the days following both of these assaults on innocent communities, the responses of civic and political leaders becomes vital. As I commented in my previous [blog](#), it was clear that the tone set and leadership offered by New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, was central to the ways in which the rest of the community responded. In terms of the practical lessons for negotiators and mediators in any of this, I make just one observation: how such events as this are **framed** by political leaders, at the earliest stages, is critical. Readers may recall that the New Zealand PM very quickly framed the mosque attacks in terms of the shared trauma of the Muslim community and the rest of New Zealand, that they were "us", and that compassion and empathy would be at the core of the response of the community. This, in turn, was echoed by leaders of the Muslim community at a range of public events and commemorations.

Thus, how the bombings in Sri Lanka will be framed is vital, especially in a community that has so recently emerged (in 2009) from over 30 years of inter-communal (Sinhalese and Tamil) violence – and all the more so as false or incautious moves in offering explanations or articulating collective responses could so easily fan the flames again.

If ever there were powerful – and tragic – examples of the importance of how we frame our perceptions of conflicts and of others, these two events stand out.

As we know, too, words matter; as I finish the draft of this blog on ANZAC Day (25th April) in New Zealand, I read the news that Turkish authorities have arrested a Syrian national in a town near Gallipoli, he apparently having plans to attack Australians and New Zealanders attending the commemorations – and to do so in revenge for the Christchurch mosque shootings. This comes just weeks after the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, had replayed, at election rallies, the Christchurch shooter's live feed of his attacks – as apparent proof of anti-Islamic sentiment globally – and had announced that New Zealanders and Australians who came to Gallipoli with “bad motives” (however defined) would be going home in boxes.

One other related feature has since become important – though why it took these most recent events to galvanise action, rather than any of the preceding acts of terror is open to question. Still on the theme of framing, what has become clear is the wave of reactions, even revulsion, against the degree to which the framing of conflict or public events has become increasingly unaccountable, and in the virtual hands of social media giants. It may be that the Christchurch shootings and the very clear, united response of New Zealand politicians have made the response easier; it may be, too, the fact that the killing in the mosques was streamed live via Facebook's live-streaming facility has sharpened our collective focus on issues of rights and responsibilities in social media. Leaving aside the emerging and pressing questions on regulation of social media, which are to be addressed at an international forum in Paris in May, co-chaired by France and New Zealand, the mediator's and conflict intervenor's issue in this is the question of who does the framing and what their level of accountability might be. We have seen in the wake of such events that it's all too easy for the incautious, bombastic, opportunistic, or malevolent to provide often unfounded and demonising explanations which may serve external audiences and ends, but which do not provide accounts which enable citizens to grasp what's going on. All the more so, when the framing is more like flaming; and anonymity shields those responsible from accountability; and the platforms – digital and distributed – maintain the stance of prioritising the “social” over the civic.

Well-established research in communication theory has also pointed out that framing is more a communicative than cognitive action [see, for example, Drake & Donoghue, “Communicative Framing Theory in Conflict Resolution”, *Communication Research* 23(3):297-322 (1966)]. To that end, how significant parties – for example, political leaders – frame issues such as these recent events is a way of conveying a message about how we might collectively continue the conversation. Equally, clearly articulated framing, especially with a degree of affective and empathetic content (“they are us”) is likely at least to assist in fostering a degree of convergence and – in the face of the modern power of social media – a capacity for resistance to the more inflammatory versions. And third, powerful framing – and reframing – is likely to contribute to actionable outcomes which, we'd hope, draw the support of those with an interest in the outcomes.

As Barry Lopez comments, at the end of his magnificent new book, *Horizons* (2019):

“. . . when the scaffolding of the certainties we carry with us, and by which we navigate, collapses, when indisputable truth suddenly reassembles itself in front of us, like the images in a kaleidoscope

. . . [w]e go on professing confidently what we know, armed with a secular faith in all that is reasonable, even though we sense that mystery is the real condition in which we live, not certainty. We forge ahead, stating what we know, watching for, hoping for, those who believe as we do, and trying to keep the peace with those who see it differently.”

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The graphic features a black background with white text and a circular icon. The icon depicts a group of four stylized human figures, with a magnifying glass positioned over the central figure. The background is accented with horizontal lines in blue and green.

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