

Those two pieces are connected, and when we break that connection we sever our collective understanding of the world we live in. That's the dangerous part about the new form, the new medium.

THE NEXT INTERVIEW IS WITH MARK GERZON who understood all too clearly the power that films have to misinform and create propagandist effects. He tried to counter that by putting together an *Entertainment Summit* to bring film makers together across the cold war divide, and published two 30-minute clip reels to illustrate the stereotypes. He sees evidence that camera phones and Internet communications will help to tell the truth in the future.

MARK GERZON

Interviewed December 5, 2008



← Mark Gerzon
Photos Author

MARK GERZON

From a career as a screenwriter and producer in Hollywood, Mark has been the President of *Mediators Foundation*⁹ for the past two decades, as well as the founder and co-chair of the *Conflict Transformation Collaborative*. He helps leaders and their organizations learn skills that are critical for dealing with conflict and collaborating across difficult social divides. He specializes in enhancing the capacity of competing groups and divided organizations to find alignment around shared goals and values. He has directed or supported a wide range of projects focused on building a more just, peaceful and sustainable world. His work in the film industries of the former Soviet Union and the United States helped to catalyze the end of the propaganda war between the two superpowers. He has designed Bipartisan Congressional Retreats, conducted leadership training for the United Nations Development Program and lectured throughout the world. His most recent books are *Leading Through Conflict: How Successful Leaders Transform Differences into Opportunities*, and *Global Citizens*.

⁹ www.mediatorsfoundation.org - providing fiscal sponsorship to projects that enhance the foundation's vision.

THE POWER OF STORIES

EVEN WHILE HE WAS STILL AT HARVARD, Mark wanted to break down the borders between disciplines. He couldn't understand why academia had separate departments for history, economics, political science and philosophy, as it seemed obviously wrong to divide the world up that way. It was like asking which finger of which hand you want to use for the rest of your life. That desire to break down barriers and make connections between people stayed with him, and provided the foundation for his career. After a start with a global newspaper and a series of other experiences, he moved to Hollywood to work as a screenwriter and producer, to learn more about the power of stories.

I went to Hollywood in the first place because of my concern about the stories that Americans were telling themselves about the world, making us behave in ways that were I felt disastrous. If any president made clear the power of story it was Ronald Reagan. He was the master storyteller, and he told stories that made you hate the Soviet Union, and want lots of nuclear weapons, and feel that you should be ready to use them at any moment. In Hollywood we told stories that dehumanized the Soviets. If you dehumanize someone, that's step one towards saying that killing them is okay.

I'm sensitive to the dehumanization that happens in the media, because the media can be used to humanize or dehumanize. I'm particularly sensitive to it because part of my family was killed in the concentration camps, so I'm very aware that dehumanization is not some abstraction. During the Reagan period we were becoming an extremely bellicose, war-like, aggressive power, threatening the evil empire with our nuclear weapons.



← Nuclear Explosion
Photo Kastehimself

Mark tried to make movies in Hollywood that took a different approach to the relationship between the USA and the Soviet Union, hoping to counterbalance the norm of aggressive Rambo-style films that portrayed Russians as evil barbarians. When he pitched concepts to the big studios in Hollywood, he was told, “You’re not going to get these made! They may be good movies, but they’re not going to get made because they don’t fit the ideological paradigm that we want.”

ENTERTAINMENT SUMMIT

HE HAD STARTED a for-profit company with investors who wanted movies that changed the way Americans think about the world and about politics, so they were supporting him to make movies that would challenge the anti-communist status quo, and he had made several trips to Moscow to research the content. He decided resist the pressure to write different scripts that would be easier to sell, and to take a stand.

I said to myself, “I’m not going to accept this! I want this industry to wake up!” But then I thought, “How are we going to wake up?” I noticed that in the Soviet Union there was an anti-capitalist grip on the film industry, the exact mirror image of what was happening in Hollywood. The communist party was running the film union, but Gorbachev was just coming in and they were just starting to change. And I thought, “Wait a minute, if they can break out of their anti-capitalist trance and we can break out of our anti-communist trance, we might make better movies.” And that was my pitch to both sides. And we ended up bringing the top Soviet filmmakers to Hollywood and the top Hollywood people to the Soviet Union, a series of exchanges we called the Entertainment Summit, or *встреча на высшем уровне развлечения* in Russian.

With the help of the American Film Institute, he assembled clips that revealed the stereotypes, from a century of Soviet filmmaking portraying capitalists and almost a century of American filmmaking of communists. He condensed the collection down to two 30-minute clip



McCarthy Hearings Photo

McCarthy Photo

reels, which they then showed to hundreds of people on both sides.

It was so powerful! It was just like being hit by a truck! I remember we showed it in Hollywood at the American Film Institute. Alan Pakula¹⁰, the director of “All the President’s Men,” said, “My friends, we have a problem!” That quote hit a nerve with the media, and found its way onto the CBS Evening News, the front page New York Times, and was reported all over the world.

Reagan had originally worked in Hollywood, and when he saw what was happening there, he felt the shift. Combined with the shift that was happening in Moscow with Gorbachev, this created a different climate, largely due to the power of the media to reflect back to human consciousness a new reality, a new level of awareness. If you had to say, “Mark, what was the project you’ve done that had the most tangible and immediate effect on history?” it’s clearly that project, and it was totally media driven.

The full 30-minute reels were only shown privately, but 3-minute condensations of each were shown on all kinds of media, including entertainment programs, news programs, in schools and universities. The widespread media coverage derived from the combination of the

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_J._Pakula



Gorbachev and Reagan signing ceremony

high level political message and the sensationalist imagery, as the clips were full of violence and brutality. On the American side it ended the Cold War on the big screen. If you look at the films before and after '86-'87, it's as if the world changed. This was a case where politics and media imagery were moving in exactly the same direction and reinforcing each other to end the Cold War. You could suddenly talk to people in the Soviet Union because of the Entertainment Summit. An organization called the "American Soviet Film Initiative" was started to make co-productions, an attractive proposition in Hollywood, partly because they were less expensive to produce in Russia.

It was a reframing, and I got to experience that reframing up close and personal. People in the White House told me that this moved Reagan, because Reagan was a product of that blacklist McCarthy period. He was doing "evil empire" talk for the first part of his administration, but in the last part he was reaching out to Gorbachev, shaking his hand and saying let's go to Iceland. "Let's ban nuclear weapons!" they said in Iceland; but it still hasn't happened obviously.

I saw the late Sydney Pollack¹¹ a couple of years later. He was a great director who was active in The Entertainment Summit, and I said, "Sydney, I still haven't made a movie and you've made so many great movies." Sydney said to me, "Mark, you may not have made any movies, but you did something I never did. You changed this town!"

THE IMPACT OF TERRORISM

THE STORYTELLER LOOKS FOR protagonists and antagonists, in Hollywood usually the good Americans and the evil enemies. After 9/11 it became clear that Muslim Arabs are the new favorite enemies. There was a period of uncertainty in American filmmaking after the end of the cold war, but even before 9/11 you could see Arabs as villains, easily identified by their headdresses. The Middle East had become the new Soviet Union. Mark watched this happen and started to wonder if it would be valuable to try a second entertainment summit.

I said to myself, "Something needs to be done!" I tried to do it first in film and a number of people said, "But film isn't what's actually impacting people, it's television." I had no professional history in television, so it was more challenging than the first time. I had to try to organize a community that was not my professional community, and that's one reason why it hasn't quite worked yet. The other reason is that we're in a different arc in terms of the enemy. The Soviet Union was our enemy for sixty years before the thaw. Now we're in the ascendancy of a time when the Muslim Arab is seen as our enemy, so I don't think media is powerful enough to influence a change, either here or in the Middle East. In the Middle East the Western infidels are hated quite profoundly, and in the West there is a great fear of terrorism. You saw what happened to Barak Obama during the election campaign. "He's a Muslim" was the worst thing you could say about him even though it wasn't true.

If you had said to me five years ago, "Mark, somebody with the middle name Hussein will be the President of the United States," I would have said, "What have you been smoking?" We had a meeting in Dubai last year of television professionals from Al Arabiya, CNN, BBC, a number of different television enterprises, having a conversation about why they put certain images on the screen. They all said the same thing. As they work in a commercial field, there is pressure to screen and

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sydney_Pollack



repeat images that attract viewers. The Al Arabiya folks said, “It’s a lot better for us to put on images of Western or Israeli aggression against poor and defenseless Muslims and Arabs, so when something happens that fits that model, we play it again, and again.” The Western news people said, “It plays better for our audiences to show a car driven by terrorists that attacks Heathrow and starts to burn; when that happens, we’ll play the image of the burning car again, and again, and again. We’ll play 9/11 till Hell freezes over. Our audience wants to see those images.”

The economics of the media reinforce existing world views, and the power of storytelling is enhanced by heroes and villains, producing repetition of the tendency to repeat the same cycles, currently replacing Soviets with Arabs, but always looking for an easily identifiable target. That lowers the level of awareness with which we are trying to deal with problems. The optic nerve has a unique relationship to the brain, so when someone with a certain attitude sees a set of images repeated, it can imprint opinions. An example of that is the toppling of the Saddam Hussein statue in Baghdad.



← Top Left - Civilian Casualties
 Photo Google Images
 Top Right - Statue of Saddam
 Photo Google Images
 Below - 9/11 Aftermath
 Photo Slagheap, Creative Commons

After 9/11, one of the most widely seen images around the world was the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square in downtown Baghdad, and then Iraqis stepping on the statue and dancing and hitting it with sledgehammers and celebrating, and some hitting it with their shoes. And it was shown around the world, implying, “Look how glad the Iraqi people are, how jubilant they are to be finally free.” The statue was actually toppled by a US Army tank, and it was a psychological operations unit of the US Army that brought a group of Iraqis in by bus to stomp on the statue.

We have video on YouTube showing this second version, so you’ve got the official version that went around the world and you’ve got the alternative version. And that’s the difference now compared to when I was a boy. Then I would only have seen the official version, because there wouldn’t have been a

second version. Now you see a second version, a third and a fourth. Why, because someone's there with a video camera, or somebody's there with a cellphone camera. The human brain through the optic nerve is now being fed multiple stories, not one story. I believe that is one way that media is raising our level of consciousness and inspiring us to think more complexly, more globally.

CAMERAS EVERYWHERE

A DRAMATIC INCIDENT of reporting from a second camera occurred in downtown Rangoon in Myanmar in September 2007, when the army was breaking up a crowd of demonstrators. A seasoned Japanese photojournalist called Kenji Nagai was on the edge of the panic-stricken crowd, when he was pushed to the ground by a soldier and shot dead at point blank range. Video of the incident was captured on a cell phone and smuggled out of the country. In the few seconds before he was killed, Nagai appeared to be filming the military as it faced down the crowd.

I got curious and tracked down the person who smuggled the images out of Myanmar. The story was very simple. A friend of his was standing on a rooftop in Myanmar watching the riot; he pulled out his cell phone and shot a video with it of the soldier killing the Japanese photographer. When he realized what was recorded, he sent it to his friend in Los Angeles, who sent it to CNN, and CNN put it up on their iReport, and it went around the world. Within three days the statement by the Burmese military dictators that it was a "stray bullet" was proven wrong. It only took three days for the truth to travel around the world.

I was just so struck by this story because it woke me up to the fact that anywhere there is a cell phone with a camera in it, or anywhere someone has a video camera, we now can get an alternative view of whatever happens. I think that the new



The Death of Kenji Nagai

media is empowering democracy in ways that not only dictators, but even democracies can't understand; that now it's not what the government tells us happened to Kenji Nagai, or the government tells us what happened in Firdos Square, or the government tells us what happened in Afghanistan, we now have the government's version, and some citizen's version, and a whole set of other versions.

I think this will allow us to witness the world in a new way. The media is now saying to every human being, "You can have a direct relationship to the world." A direct relationship: not mediated by your government or your national intelligence services. You can have your own relationship to the world. You can use your own eyes, your own ears, and listen and see the world.

The technology for recording is becoming ubiquitous, as we all have access to inexpensive devices, and can communicate through the Internet. The barrier of the "technology divide" seems to be melting away, eroded by the microphones and cameras built into cell phones, and the accessibility of video cameras and editing software. Mark is optimistic about the impacts of these changes. The dark side exists, as Al-Qaeda can use Google Earth to help target where to put a bomb, but anything can be used for evil purposes, including a vaccine or a microbe. On balance he thinks that maximizing connectivity between people is an overwhelmingly positive force.

My sense is that on the whole, the democratization of the media is a very positive thing, because it holds people accountable and it democratizes words and images so we can access them without the control of a dominating power. I think that's an overwhelmingly positive force.

I guess the place I see it most clearly is China. If you said to me, "Are these new media having a positive or negative impact in China," I'd say, "Overwhelmingly positive." They're not being used for terrorism; they're being used by people to get a new view on the world, and China is a quarter of mankind.

There's a lot of people now who can't be fooled by that old trick of saying, "We have an enemy, follow me." That's the game leaders have been playing since tribes were born. I feel that that is ending, and why is that? One media project actually illustrates it. They are putting television sets in Arab villages, and television sets in Israeli villages, and television sets in America, and they're hooking people up one-to-one to talk to each other, so they can have their own interactions. When you can actually talk with your enemy, say "Hello," have a phone conversation, see each other on the cameras on the computer, governments can no longer mediate that relationship. In the past authorities could dehumanize the enemy and convince people that they had an enemy. I think that's much, much harder today, and the media can play a key role if we wake up!

PROFESSOR SHINICHI TAKEMURA is concerned that we are hiding the truth about the planet as a whole from ourselves, and he has set out to produce media to reveal the truth. He talks about his efforts in the next interview.

PROF. TAKEMURA

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