



A Hollins Professor Takes to the High Seas to Give Peace a Chance

A late-summer ocean cruise from Spain to Morocco sounds like the perfect getaway, a much-needed respite from the world's problems. However, for Assistant Professor of Communication Studies Vladimir Bratic, such a voyage was by no means a break from reality; in fact, it was planned with a very serious purpose in mind, one that globally could have positive, lasting implications.

On September 4, Bratic joined 1,000 academics, activists, war survivors, and students from around the world for a three-day journey from Barcelona to Casablanca on the Peace Boat, a chartered passenger ship operated by a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Japan whose goal is to promote peace and human rights. According to peaceboat.org, "The ship creates a neutral, mobile space and enables people to engage across borders in dialogue and mutual cooperation at sea, and in the ports that we visit."

Peace Boat is part of a network of three hundred NGOs worldwide called the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC). Formed in 2003, GPPAC resulted from U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan's call for civil society organizations to build a consensus internationally on peace-building and the prevention of violent conflict.

Bratic says the Peace Boat initiative is indicative of an emerging change in how conflicts around the world are addressed.

“The accepted practice has been for the international community to wait for conflict to happen and then try to deal with it as the violence is ongoing,” he explains. “The thinking now is to shift the focus from reaction to prevention. GPPAC is taking a lead role in encouraging NGOs to think about ways you can deal with conflict before it occurs.”

For three years, Bratic has been a core member of GPPAC's media advisory group, which explores how the organization can raise its public profile while developing strategies for its member NGOs to work through the media to achieve its goal of conflict prevention. The experience has given Bratic the opportunity to extend his own expertise and ongoing research in media and peace-building to real-world issues.

“Seeing that the work I do has practical implications beyond the classroom or academic journals, and in some small way can begin something that may prevent people from starting conflicts, is amazing from a personal standpoint.”

This year, Bratic says the media advisory group is focusing on three projects:

- Launching a media campaign to encourage dialogue as a means of lessening tensions in Lebanon

- Utilizing media strategies to prevent a repeat in Kenya in 2012 of the violence that occurred during that country's elections in 2008
- Raising attention through the media about the issues of nuclear proliferation and global disarmament

Bratic believes GPPAC is making great strides through its media initiatives. "Even just meeting a couple of times a year, we have been able to use media to get people together and impact society. You can come into a venue such as the Peace Boat, meet with a couple of important people from a region in crisis, and come up with a media strategy over the course of a three-day trip. The lessons learned are then taken back to that region and instituted.

"A government inherently possesses institutional power, but civil society can earn its own degree of influence through hard work, its strength in numbers, or its expertise. Once people achieve those attributes and combine them with commitment, organization and professionalism, they become capable of changing the social structure."

Though they were marked by conflict, Bratic cites Kenya's 2008 elections as an example of how a media strategy can be impactful.

"The situation in Kenya was not as bad as it could have been because many of the country's journalists were cautious in reporting outbreaks of violence. They decided, 'What happened in Rwanda is a cautionary tale for us, so let's commit that we're not going to exaggerate events, that we're going to report responsibly, and that we're not going to excite violence.'"

Bratic was so pleased with his Peace Boat excursion that he is hoping to arrange a cruise for Hollins students during Short Term. For now, he is looking forward to sharing in the classroom what he has learned.

“I teach globalization and there’s a tendency to focus on the negative aspects of it. But working with people from seven or eight different countries in this media advisory group has shown me that you can cooperate on a global level with ease. Once upon a time the only people who could interact in such a way were kings and queens and heads of state. But now because of all the advances in technology and communication, regular people can organize and bring about change for their own benefit. We should celebrate this and not be so pessimistic about society.”

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