

# Researcher seeks to sustain peace through media

March 16 2018, by Jonathan F. Mcverry

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Credit: TEDxPSU

In most conflict zones around the world, half to a majority of the population is under 18 years old. Young people make up to 70 percent of the population in some of these areas. Knowing the role young people will play in the future of these regions, faculty member Yael Warshel

studies the effect that media has on children and youth in conflict zones, primarily in Africa and the Middle East. Her research on peace communication, social change and conflict will be keys to revealing new interventions that influence children and youth's behaviors around the world.

Warshel is an assistant professor of telecommunications at the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications and an award-winning scholar. She is also a Rock Ethics Institute core faculty member and an affiliated faculty member of comparative and internal education, international affairs and Middle Eastern studies. In February, Warshel participated in the [TEDxPSU event](#) on the University Park campus where she presented her talk on making and sustaining peace through mass media.

## **Q: What is peace communication?**

Warshel: Peace communication research determines whether communication—from interpersonal to mass media—can have an impact on managing armed conflicts. I am interested in seeing if media changes people's [political beliefs](#)—to vote directly or indirectly "with their feet" and their intergroup attitudes—to hate people less. I see what kind of behavior change there is on the part of the audience or participants as a direct result of media or interpersonal communication interventions. Attitudes and beliefs are what you feel and think, and the actual behavior is what you do.

## **Q: What types of behavior change are you talking about?**

Warshel: I mostly focus on the relationships between political beliefs and peace-making behaviors. Will a change in political beliefs cause you to vote differently? Will you protest? This is what I look at, and whether

that, in turn, brings about change to existing material structures. If you're not changing beliefs and associated structures, then an intervention doesn't have a meaningful impact. Most of the time, people do not change their political opinions, but I am seeing if there is a change and how it happens.

## **Q: What are some examples of media interventions and an intervention you've studied?**

Warshel: A media intervention can be as low tech as a puppet show or as high tech as a smart phone app. I pay attention to how the intervention is designed, but my focus is on the audience because that's what matters. I find out what the audience is taking away from it and I use that information to recommend new designs or new interventions.

The intervention I spent the longest on is a study of an Israeli-Palestinian version of "Sesame Street." It was created to manage conflict between Israeli-Palestinian [children](#). It was the first time "Sesame Street" went into a direction that was not just reading, writing and arithmetic. It focused on peace-building and changing the kids' attitude and stereotypes. They wanted to give them a model that shows Israeli and Palestinian children can be friends.

## **Q: What did you learn from these studies?**

Warshel: The kids did not see "the other" in the show because it didn't match their stereotypes and corresponding political beliefs about the conflict. These are five- to eight-year-olds, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is already a function of their daily lives. Palestinian children defined someone who is Jewish as a member of an army or someone with a gun. When they watched the mock episode of "Sesame Street" I showed them and didn't see someone in a military uniform, they

explained that they didn't see anyone who was Jewish (whether Israeli or of another citizenship). When I asked Jewish-Israeli children the same question about Palestinian characters in the episode, they did not see one. In their case, they defined Palestinians as terrorists. I also spoke with Arab/Palestinian-Israeli children, and they had their own interpretations too. These stereotypes and the responsibility they associate for the conflict is already happening at five years old.

### **Q: What have you learned about children and the media?**

Warshel: I never planned to work with children, my original focus was on media and conflict (and its management), so I've learned a lot now that most of my projects target them. One thing I learned is that it takes very few years on this earth for human beings to be encoded culturally. Time and time again people have the inaccurate assumption that children are naïve. People think five-year-olds aren't prejudiced and haven't formed political beliefs, and that is totally not the case. Children make astute comments. By five years old, I see major political beliefs and there is also a false assumption about children's media literacy abilities. A lot of people think that we must catch these five-year-olds before they get older, and if we show them the right messages, everything will be fine.

### **Q: So adults may not be taking children serious enough. What about researchers?**

Warshel: It depends. There are lines of research that assume kids are naïve and, when that happens, they aren't questioned in a way that's intelligible. So that researcher gets answers that make kids seem incapable—or they don't get answers at all. They're not engaging kids in a way that's meaningful. Either they don't ask, or they ask in a way that

doesn't generate a sophisticated response. They're talking down to them so get what they construct.

## **Q: What are some strategies that get children to provide useful answers?**

Warshel: I will often tell my students, if a child answers you with "I don't know" or if you ask them where they learned something, and they say "from me," it means you are not asking the question the right way. Those questions are more about the researcher than the child. You, for example, do have to use simpler language and you also have to break your questions up so that multi-part questions are broken down into several individual questions.

Sometimes I will say to the kids, "I have homework. Can you help me?" They want to help because they are not used to being a source of knowledge. They are used to being asked questions that test them, so they are always performing for a test and guessing what you want to hear, instead of sharing how they feel or what they think. Generally, speaking, children are not used to adults who are genuinely interested in what they have to say. We need to get them engaged. Sometimes (after a session), they'll say "Wow, this was fun." It's not every day that someone asks children their opinion.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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