

## Information intervention?: a test of democratic intent

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The role of information and communications in generating conflict throughout the 20th century is well documented. There are many examples, of which the propagation of Nazi ideology across Germany's airwaves and Joseph Goebbels's articles in *Das Reich* in the 1930s, and the leading role of the Hutu-controlled *Radio-Television Libre des Mille Collines* in galvanising genocide in Rwanda, are only among the most notorious.

At the same time, information and communications have played a vital role in preventing and reacting constructively to conflicts, and in rebuilding societies attempting to recover from conflicts. The Potsdam agreement of August 1945, contained a provision to "prevent all Nazi and militarist propaganda" with the long-term intention to construct a more democratic media space. Similar interventions have been attempted in the wake of numerous conflicts since; in Kosovo, for example, the OSCE has invested millions of dollars in local media development since the 1999 war, on the grounds that "a free and responsible media is an integral component of any democratic society".

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While the first role (media as a source of conflict) has attracted a good deal of attention, the second (media as a mitigator of conflict) is arguably undervalued. This is particularly the case when information and communications form part of a wider intervention by one state, or group of states, in the affairs of another. The international community's intervention in Darfur - provisional and contested as it is - is but the most recent example of this attention-deficit; and it has occurred despite the very positive impact of radio stations established (by the BBC World Service Trust and Internews, among others) in Sudan itself and neighbouring Chad.

But the problem lies too with the flaws in the way intervention has been conducted: for although freedom of information and effective communications flows are integral to democratic development, interventions to date have failed in two key respects:

\* as tools of intervention: the priority has consistently been the promotion of the agenda of intervening powers, rather than the local embedding of democracy. This denies information its potentially empowering role; the capacity of information as "self-determination"

\* the nature of the information and communications environment ultimately created. In this regard, the inclination has been towards a notion of persuasion and influence on grounds of self-interest, rather than the fostering of objective democratic debate or a sense of common purpose.

### The case for information intervention

In a world of unprecedented global communicative potential and power, access to information and effective communications flows are integral to the actions of governments, groups and

individuals alike. Interventions to promote democratic, social and economic development ought therefore to have a clear information and communications strategy - or at the very least, an awareness of the impact of the intervention on the information environment in which it operates.

The idea that information plays a key role as the connective tissue in developing and deepening democracy is well established. In part, democracy is procedural, denoting structures and practices of government: an assembly for members of parliament, or elections. But there is increasing recognition that effective democracy must also be substantive; that is, embedding democratic values across society.

Freedom of expression and the public sphere are constitutive features of democracy. Procedurally, information and communications are the means through which government and citizens communicate to inform and influence each other. An open and healthy local media sector will both supply the public with information, and serve as a guarantor of government accountability. Amartya Sen outlines the need for "transparency guarantees" to play "a clear instrumental role in preventing corruption, financial irresponsibility and underhanded dealings". Public discussion is "an inescapably important requirement of good public policy", making governments responsive and responsible.

Substantively, too, effective information intervention has vast potential impact. If local communications and information networks begin to function effectively in a transitional state, they can both consolidate statehood and help construct a broader sense of national identity. This is crucial in the post-conflict context, especially in encouraging shared understanding through the exchange of ideas between former rival groups.

In Kosovo today, for example, some online media such as the news site KosovaKosovo.com have started to serve as a forum for cross-ethnic integration and reconciliation. The Institute of War and Peace Reporting and the Balkans Investigative Reporting Network (Birn) have also played prominent roles in the training of local journalists and the dissemination of reliable information. But information and communications are not just unifying tools. Most importantly, they create a platform for the debate and dissent essential for the popular implementation and development of democratic norms.

### **Information and communications as self-determination**

Democratic rule must by nature be the free choice of those involved: as Bhikhu Parekh has said: "when democracy is externally imposed, it becomes associated with aggression and is an assault on national pride". So when a state collapses, and democratic development falls to the interveners, the importance of communications in presenting the public with free choice in the reconstruction of statehood and wider development only increases in importance. Yet information interventions to date have failed to prioritise local needs and preferences over those of the international community.

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In Iraq, to take the starkest example, the priority has been to beam in to the country the messages of the powerful rather than to use information and communications to foster a locally-rooted democratic media. The period of Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) rule in the year after the invasion and occupation of 2003 saw the temporary closure of al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya, while the Iraqi Media Network essentially became a platform for Paul Bremer and the CPA to boast of its successes. At the same time, a foreign-media bombardment was highlighted by the creation of the al-Hurra and al-Alam stations, and the investment by the BBC of £70 million in an Arabic TV service.

The failure to use information and communications networks to consult and communicate with local populations is a flawed approach that leads to counterproductive policies. In Kosovo, this has been evident in a debate over the place of media as a component of post-conflict reconstruction policies: should there be regulation or liberalisation? Unmik was at first too lax, allowing publication of provoking articles such as that which led to the murder of Serb journalist Peter Topoljski in 2000. It was then too harsh, fining *Dita* - the paper involved - vast sums, suspending its operations, and provoking an outcry among journalists. A more effective information intervention could have used communicative power to consult better with local experts to construct less antagonistic policies.

Furthermore, in a time of particular sensitivity to the imperial idea, the failure to use information and communications to vest power and responsibility locally increases antagonism against the very concept of intervention. In the case of Kosovo, protest organisations such as Albin Kurti's radical youth movement *Vetevendosje* thrive on the rhetoric that Unmik behaves imperially: *Vetevendosje*, consciously echoing resistance movements of previous liberation movements, calls for "Self-determination! Unconditionally!... Until the complete liberation of our country." Interventions remain necessary, yet notoriously difficult to justify and to negotiate. Effective information intervention could significantly contribute to the continuing feasibility and success of interventions in global politics.

### **Information and communications: fostering democratic debate**

The potential of information intervention has also been hindered by the primary use by post-intervention authorities of information and communications as vehicles of self-promotion rather than as means of fostering democratic debate.

In Kosovo, with the exception of the sometimes excellent work of the OSCE and a few NGOs, this priority has been painfully apparent. Unmik appointed a nominally independent "temporary media commissioner" there, but in effect closely monitored his or her activities. Anna DiLellio, who occupied this role, admitted: "Oh yes, the pressures are there. You have to learn not to give in, but they are certainly there". Moreover, journalists critical of Unmik grew used to expecting reproachful phonecalls from its officials.

There is no problem *per se* with information interventions being politicised; indeed it would be unrealistic to suggest they can be anything but that. "Interests" can never be fully removed from the equation. But many remain opposed to the idea that the information and communications networks they develop and become involved in may end up critiquing their own stance; hence Unmik's often overly prescriptive activity. Information and communications flows by nature facilitate not only self-promotion but debate and disagreement, allowing for disapproval and revision of established societal and political policies, procedures and norms. As John Keane puts it, such "democratic procedures enable citizens to think twice and say no".

Public diplomacy has conventionally involved using information and communications to address hostile propaganda and conduct rival propaganda, believing this to be in the best interest of the

actor involved. But public diplomacy itself is being redefined, in ways that reveal the ill-considered, "identitarian" view of where self-interest lies that has long dominated it. As Mark Leonard has written: "The tone and feel of many messages is declamatory and about telling rather than proving through actions, symbols and words - or engaging in dialogue with a real intent to listen. Governments need to change the tone of public diplomacy - so that it is less about winning arguments and more about engagement." If engagement is necessary for effective promotion of self-interest, then any actors in an information and communications environment- be they intervenors, local governments or others - must welcome democratic debate.

### **Information intervention and the "responsibility to protect"**

The notion of the "responsibility to protect" has become increasingly popular in the first decade of the 21st century, among governments and citizens alike. But the great oversight of this doctrine was the failure sincerely to account for information and communications. Conflicts drag on, and still the potential role of information and communications in preventing, reacting and rebuilding is often ignored. But if people are well informed and communicating in advance of and during conflicts, then conflict is less likely to break out or be perpetuated.

In addition, if those who intervene - and more broadly, for whom information and communications are (consciously or sub-consciously) a part of their work - ground their practices in the concept of the responsibility to protect, this could ultimately increase their likelihood of success. For if they do so, the focus would shift from how those who intervene use information and communications to how the local population involved can benefit from their power. If information and communications are viewed as a tool in implementing democracy, then the emphasis must be on the notion of information as locally-rooted self-determination.

This would require from those charged with or who assume the "responsibility to protect" an unaccustomed combination of qualities: most prominently a genuine commitment in practice to promoting democracy to match the fine rhetoric. If actions and words are consistent, the local information and communications environments which the intervenors foster and interact in must also be democratic and empowering. The public sphere must be accessible, open to reason and debate, not dominated by unengaged self-promotion and influence-seeking.

If the best practices of "information intervention" were made an integral part of the "responsibility to protect", then the lessons of Kosovo, Iraq, Darfur, and elsewhere - as of the conflicts of the century past - could become the source of lasting and more effective local and global partnerships than these interventions have allowed.

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