A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS AND CONFLICT DYNAMICS IN VULNERABLE SOCIETIES

By Dr. Eran Fraenkel

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Eran Fraenkel is a cultural historian of the Balkans who has been working in the NGO sector for 20 years. From 1994 to 2008, he served as director of Search for Common Ground country offices in Macedonia and Indonesia, and as SE Europe Regional Director based in Brussels. In Macedonia Fraenkel was instrumental in designing and producing Nashe Maalo, an award-winning five-year television series for youth focusing on inter-cultural understanding and coexistence. He also helped train TV production and writing teams to make similar programs in Nigeria and Palestine. In Indonesia Fraenkel led the team in writing and producing a yearlong radio drama series addressing access to justice for women and youth. Since 2008 Fraenkel has been consulting internationally with a focus on programming for social change. He has conducted formative assessments, held trainings, run program design workshops, and prepared summative evaluations in the Balkans, Indonesia, the Middle East, Nigeria, Kenya, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Myanmar. His assignments in Afghanistan resulted in two cutting-edge publications: Media in Afghanistan — Challenges and Opportunities for Peacebuilding (2010); and IONA – the Intended Outcomes Needs Assessment methodology (2011). Since 2011 Fraenkel has further developed his approach to designing social change programming and has trained civil society organizations and media producers in his Intended Outcomes Social Change Assessment Methodology.

CREDITS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The global information and communications landscape has expanded dramatically over the past decade to include more and different digital communications technologies, referred to as digital media, social media, new media, or even new new media.

Digital media differ from traditional media in that content (including misinformation and disinformation) is produced and disseminated by a wide range of media users, who are most commonly non-institutional actors.[1] Rather than contributing to a broad informational commons, digital communications frequently reflect and/or create information clusters that consist of people whose existing ideas and opinions are reinforced by their media consumption.

Whereas most conventional media have been geographically defined, digital communications have the inherent capacity to reach audiences that transcend geography. As globalized digital technologies and platforms flourish, they help to promote increased polarization between us and them based on social, religious, political and other interests or ideologies. The use of digital technology is therefore especially significant within the context of conflict-prone or affected societies. While more conventional media may be limited, mobile phone technologies for instance are often readily available in such vulnerable societies. Having access to digital media, enables a wide range of people to become actors in the dynamics of conflict, including people not physically engaged in the conflict.

Both the media characteristics and the nature geopolitical conflict have undergone major shifts over the last few decades. As the democratization of the media has shifted into high gear, increasingly transcending borders and geography, the nature of conflict has also changed. From the historical conflicts that played out mostly between states or other structured entities, contemporary conflict mostly involve civil, non-state actors, some of whom may not have direct geographic links to the location of the conflict, thereby also transcending geographies.

Because digital communications lack the institutional and geographic features of conventional media, their impact on conflict should be understood in terms of the behavioral rather than institutional dimension of information: who produces, transmits, receives, and uses it.[2] Given that governmental attempts to control media and their contents often verge on the infringement of freedom of speech, the antidote to conflict-generating digital communications is not to stifle extreme opinions or to restrict access to communications technology. Rather, it is to elevate the ability of conflict-affected societies to resist the effects of conflict-generating or conflict-escalating communications.[3]

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This paper examines the complex interactions between globalizing media and processes of democratization within conflict-

1 In his report "Digital Media in Conflict-Prone Societies," Ivan Sigal distinguishes between information created by organizations having "traditional editorial structures" and information created and disseminated by entities "having different objectives and agendas, and different verifications systems, (which) all are attempting to establish themselves as known and trusted sources of information coming out of conflict zones." (2009:8-9).

2 To define media in conflict-affected societies, it is necessary to look not only at the providers of information (structures, actors, practices), but equally if not more importantly at audiences and their behaviors. See Monzani (2009).

3 "Minimizing the risk of the outbreak of violence requires a mix of operational, structural and systemic measures that seek to build national capacities to manage, prevent and address conflicts and their underlying dynamics and root causes." See Kahl and Larrauri, (2013:1).

affected societies. It recognizes that the proliferation of digital media and communications networks will not automatically contribute to or enhance the prospects of peace and stability. Communications technologies simply lack the transformative power to be the panacea that some had hoped it to be. However, it does play a significant role within the context of the decreased ability of nationally-based political systems to direct the world's problems on a global scale, albeit with caveats that should be considered. These include:

- Interventions with social change objectives require time and resources to be designed, planned, and implemented, well beyond the timeframe of interventions designed specifically to enhance a society's technological communications capacities. Communications interventions in conflict-affected societies should not only align their resources and programs with local technological realities, but should avoid an overemphasis on digital technologies based on the assumption that they have some inherent capacity to solve conflict ("cyber-optimism").[4]
- Alongside any digital communications component, media programs should make optimal use of traditional media, especially media that still reach wide-ranging and diverse audiences.

Even in the best of circumstances, resources for media and communications interventions in conflict zones are relatively limited. Before launching new interventions, organizations planning or designing media and media development programs should therefore seek out local and international partners that are addressing core issues and root causes of conflict, so as to multiply and expand the impact of their efforts.

4 For a full discussion of "cyber-optimism" and "cyber-pessimism," see Morozov (2011).

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the ability to share information globally has expanded dramatically as a result of the rapid introduction of digital platforms for the creation and dissemination of data.

Beyond the expansion of conventional media (print and terrestrial broadcast) and their online platforms, new forms of digital communications[5] have burgeoned independently of their traditional media counterparts. These digital technologies have become so prevalent in daily life that it is difficult to remember what communications and media were like before their arrival.[6] Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, SMS, IMS, Skype, YouTube and other forms of digital communications have vastly expanded how information is gathered and disseminated: who produces it, where it's produced, for whom it's produced, where it's distributed, who uses it, and how it is used. What further characterizes digital communication is the lack of institutional and geographic features that are baked into conventional media, with far-reaching consequences within the context of vulnerable or conflict-affected societies. The impact these technologies have on conflict should therefore be understood in terms of the behavioral rather than the institutional dimension of information, in other words who produces, transmits, receives and uses the data.[7]

While monumental shifts have occurred in the media over the last few decades, violent geographic conflict itself has also shifted in nature. Historically, violent conflict has occurred between entities with clear identities and military forces (states or other internationally recognized forms of governance.) Conflict is no longer restricted to these parameters. A majority of the world's conflicts now take place among non-state actors who may or may not represent the population of the location where the conflict is taking place. "The most prominent form of conflict today occurs within states rather than between them. Since 1945, over 75 percent of militarized disputes have been civil conflicts."[8] Conflict with root causes in one vulnerable society or state may trigger conflict in another country. Participants in a conflict may be backed both ideologically and financially by people and institutions with no direct connection to the locus of the conflict. Within such fluid conflict conditions, there is often a lack of clear distinction between participants and non-participants, such as people not directly engaged in violence, but mobilizing communities to action through the media.[9] These shifts in media and conflict require new approaches and strategies by organizations whose mission it is to reduce or prevent conflict, and by organizations interested in the role of media in vulnerable societies.[10] To date, most interventions to reduce or prevent conflict, as well as those intended to modify or change the role of media in conflict, have relied on the existence of representative institutions and the people who work for these institutions.

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Without some form of accepted leadership, conflicts between entities (whether states or other groups) cannot be prevented

5 This report uses the term "digital media," to refer to digital means of communication in all forms, whether moderated or un-moderated.

6 See Levinson (2013), for a detailed presentation of digital media platforms, their interconnectivity and applications.

7 To define media in conflict-affected societies, it is necessary to look not only at the providers of information (structures, actors, practices), but equally if not more importantly at audiences and their behaviors. See Monzani (2009).

8 See Pearlman and Cunningham (2011).

9 For examples, see: Della Vigna et al (2011); Hockenos (2003); Ghorashi and Boersma (2009).

10 For a specific discussion of approaches to researching new media, see Aday et al (2010).

or stopped. Absent either an editorial or an entrepreneurial structure, media institutions, whether state-controlled or private, cannot be persuaded to behave differently; and at times cannot be engaged in any discussion that focuses on the impact of the media on a vulnerable society. There are ongoing debates regarding how to influence the behavior of media without imposing draconian restrictions on their ability to operate within the bounds of freedom of speech. Fengler, for example, proposes a hierarchy of accountability consisting of concentric

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levels, starting with personal responsibility and extending outwards to media institutions, legal structures, and eventually transnational systems.[11] However, the key issue is that many forms of digital communications function only at the level of the individual whose behaviors are not responsive to the accountability mechanisms pertaining to media institutions.[12] Therefore, organizations that aim to understand and respond programmatically to the role of digital communications in conflict, have to ask what their intended audience is for an intervention, and what makes a particular audience appropriate for designing an intervention. For a media intervention to impact conflict dynamics, it is necessary to understand the characteristics of digital communications and their relationship to conflict analysis and response, to know who the stakeholders are, how many need to be reached, and what kinds of media to use. There are many options: online information curators; bloggers; key leaders; opinion makers in society; civilians; political, social, religious and/or economic elites; insurgents and/or insurgent leaders; Diaspora groups supporting a conflict with money or by other means; and other interest groups claiming to have a stake in the outcome of a conflict, irrespective of their geographic location. There is however a caveat. Any "media development" must be preceded by a thorough conflict analysis and conflict mapping exercise to identify, select and prioritize stakeholders. The findings are then applied to the media intervention design, and not the other way round.[13]

Traditional Media

Much has already been written about the role of traditional or conventional media in conflict prevention and resolution. This paper therefore only references a few important points more fully discussed in media literature.[14] Similarly, a growing body of literature addresses the role of crowdsourcing on platforms such as Ushahidi as early warnings and responses to latent conflicts or to natural disasters.[15]

Traditional media are distinguished by a number of principles to which they are intended to conform and that comprise both their formal and informal standards of operation. They are characterized by a "top-down" and "one-to-many" information flow. Information that consumers receive has gone through a medium's hierarchical selection and approval process (top-down), and each medium individually "broadcasts" its information to the public (one-to-many). These functions are subject to both internal (editorial) and external (regulatory) mechanisms intended to maintain media professionalism and integrity – more or less successfully. Any traditional medium can therefore be held accountable for what it produces and disseminates.

Despite the proliferation of outlets targeting increasingly specific audiences, especially via satellite television and radio, traditional media in general provide a platform that offers information relevant to a wide spectrum of society. They enable interested citizens to become involved in their shared political and social life by choosing and distributing information that helps their audiences to form opinions and attitudes on issues of common concern. Well functioning media further maintain vigilance over governments by engaging the public in setting political agendas, and by holding governments and their officials accountable for their decisions and actions. In stable, pluralistic societies, traditional media also contribute to their audiences' ability to understand issues through the lens of cultural diversity. In such societies, having a common civic identity does not prevent citizens from expressing other forms of personal identity by various means, including supporting and consuming identity-specific media.

Although traditional media have contributed frequently and

11 See Fengler (2012).

12 For a range of discussions concerning media accountability, see Lauk and Kus (2012).

13 An in-depth methodology for conducting a needs assessment to facilitate the design of a successful media intervention has been published by the US Institute of Peace. See Robertson et al (2011).

14 For example, see Bratic and Schirch (2007); Frohardt and Temin (2003); Monzani (2009); Gilboa, (2009); and Puddephatt (2006).

15 See Goldstein and Rotich (2008).

powerfully to the creation and intensification of conflict, they also help to create and maintain a shared civic identity – or a sense of citizenship – when they respect and adhere to core professional standards. At their best, traditional media provide members of society with a shared forum to engage in constructive agreements or disagreements and to resolve social and political conflicts non-violently.

Digital Communications

Digital communications represent a wide spectrum of processes for the creation and dissemination of information that cannot easily be considered a monolithic phenomenon. Analysts of the cyber-sphere have referred to the profusion of digital communications as a revolution that has democratized the creation and dissemination of information, released from the monopolistic control of governments and/or media companies and transferred to the hands of ordinary people.[16] Unlike the top-down and one-to-many nature of conventional media, digital communications have a flat structure; information is transmitted horizontally by many individuals to many peers (multiplied one-to-one); or by many individuals to groups of peers (multiplied one-to-many). At times individuals (via Twitter or YouTube for example) or groups of individuals (via Ushahidi) transmit to institutions (many-to-one, and bottom-up information flow).

Digital communications share a number of features pertinent to all communications in conflict-affected and vulnerable societies. Despite superficial attribution of some information to a particular source (a post on Facebook for example), the identity and intentions of the producer of that information may be unknown or unclear.

This ambiguity brings up one[17] of the core questions in communications, especially related to, but not exclusively concerning vulnerable and conflict-affected societies. For information to have a constructive role it must be trusted. For information to be trusted, the source of that information needs to be credible to the receiver/user of that information. It is difficult for receivers of communication to distinguish between information, misinformation (defined as possibly misleading or inaccurate information), and disinformation (defined as deliberately false and misleading information) if they have reason to doubt the intentions of a communicator or whether the information is authentic. Trust is based on either personal familiarity with the communicator (inherent credibility) or on previous experience, be it positive or negative, with the provider of information (earned credibility). Such credibility is interconnected with the level of trust that exists between the parties in a communications relationship. Lower levels of credibility (or trust) exist when the parties only share calculus-based trust in which all sides continuously "contemplate the benefits of staying in the relationship." Greater levels of trust (and therefore credibility) emerge when communicators find that they share identity-based trust in which case the parties "have internalized the other's desires and intentions."[18] Should either inherent or earned credibility be missing from the equation, information tends to be ignored or dismissed.[19]

Afghanistan[20] exemplifies this dialectic relationship. Based on their thorough familiarity with local culture and behavioral habits, the Taliban recognized the indispensability of maintaining credibility and have used it effectively to influence and control the behavior of the population through both digital and conventional media. Because of the high level of illiteracy among Afghans, warnings sent to villagers via cell phones not to cooperate with the Western coalition forces (the International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF) often include videos showing the consequences of disregarding Taliban messages. Realizing that both the message and messenger were credible, villagers have acted accordingly. ISAF efforts to convince Afghans of the long-term benefit of resisting the Taliban, whether through digital or conventional means of communication, have had neither inherent nor earned credibility and therefore tended to have little or no impact.[21] The Taliban have known, and have made sure that villagers recognize the veracity of their intentions and

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16 This statement cannot be taken as an absolute truism, given the extent to which powerful governments in highly centralized states are still able to exert control over digital communications by various means and to take action against users of digital communications whom these governments want to discourage or silence.

17 See Lewicki (2003).

18 Ibid.

19 Research regarding trust as a human behavioral trait indicates that trust is contingent on "social connectedness and significant life events," without which trust cannot function well. For a fuller discussion of the dynamics of trust, see Sturgis, et al (2009).

20 See Fraenkel, E., Shoemaker E & Himelfarb S (2010).

21 Ibid.

the accuracy of their communications.[22] Despite its efforts to devise viable "strategic communications," ISAF has not recognized nor addressed the perceived gap between its promises and its credibility.[23]

The circulation of inaccurate or un-trusted information in vulnerable environments can range from reinforcing existing tensions among mutually suspicious communities, to increasing fear and anger, or to inciting actions based on "decisions resulting from these consequences."[24] The anxiety and uncertainty caused by the rapid and easy spread of mis- and disinformation through Twitter or SMS for instance, is more like the spread of rumor than the dissemination of news. In Iraq for instance, public opinion both forms and is formed by the spread of information as rumor. Well-crafted digital communications have the capacity to imitate person-to-person rumor; given the appropriate level of perceived credibility, they disseminate information that can be considered plausible.[25] The potential impact of such communications in vulnerable or conflict-affected societies is aggravated by access to some form of digital technology that enables anyone with minimal skills and equipment to in turn become the source of information, misinformation, or disinformation.

The rapid spread of conflict-generating rumors can occur even in relatively low-tech digital environments, such as Myanmar (Burma), where digital technologies were introduced only recently. As reported by The Guardian (2013), what began as a personal dispute between a Muslim shopkeeper and a Buddhist customer rapidly escalated into a community-wide conflict.[26]

> "In a country in which telecommunication has been historically restricted, the newfound access to social media has been blamed for the swift increase in violence [...] That the violence was so rapidly spread points towards two major concerns. On the one hand, it highlights the fragility of Myanmar's fledgling democracy – replacing nearly half a century of military rule in 2010 [...] equally alarming is the role which new technologies have played in fanning the flames of violence. Uploaded photos and videos effectively advertised events – some footage shows houses ablaze, some pictures show Muslims fleeing for safety. Many have attributed the hastiness of the violent response to social media."[27]

As this example illustrates, the speed with which digital communications are able to disseminate content further elevates the potential impact of these communications in stimulating conflict. However, it should be noted that digital communications is a tool that can facilitate and accelerate information dissemination, but not by itself create conflict in vulnerable societies. When information is inflammatory, whether intentional or not, digital communications tip an incendiary situation into violence by virtue of any mistrust that may already exist between communities. Other factors that can hasten conflict are the speed by which information spreads through mistrustful communities and because the accuracy of information is difficult to establish before violence erupts. Consequently, "in an hour social media can do the same amount of damage that might have taken a week to accomplish in pre-social media days."[28]

The spread of digital communications technology is not new, but has been increasing exponentially over the past decade. Prior to the 1990s there was already marked growth in access to traditional media by non-state actors, particularly through satellite television and radio. Cellular phones have made deep inroads into regions where people have had limited access to other forms of communication in the past. From a worldwide penetration of 5% in 2005, cellular technology had reached 40% by 2010 and is expected to attain nearly universal coverage by 2025.[29]

The transfer of control over the production and dissemination of information away from institutional actors to individual citizens, has led to information networks created by those who use information, and not only by the people who produce it. Some governments have attempted to restrict both the numbers and kinds of user-generated informational networks, and have tried to limit who has access to digital communications technology to retain centralized informational control – almost always unsuccessfully. One example is the Ukrainian Parliament's response to increasing anti-government protests, by passing a law on January 16, 2014 that gave the government license to shut down or block Internet sites it deemed objectionable. Other powers included intercepting and tracking mobile phone communications, and criminalizing the use of traditional

22 For further examples and explanations of Taliban digital media usage, see the BBC Media Action Policy Briefing (2012).

23 During his research missions in Afghanistan, the author and several other media experts met to discuss this dilemma with strategic communications officers from ISAF coalition countries.

24 For a discussion of the social diffusion model of misinformation and disinformation for understanding human information behavior, see Karlova and Fisher (2013.

25 See Kelley (2005).

26 The Guardian. March 20, 2013. Ethnic violence erupts in Burma leaving scores dead," by Kate Hodal.

27 See Davis (2013).

28 See Gombitas (2013:2)

29 See AREPPIM statistics (2012).

media, online media, and social media to organize protests and demonstrations of dissent.[30] The law was quickly rescinded when the government's heavy-handed attempts to control information backfired by adding fuel to the protesters' cause and bringing more people onto the streets. The conflict and violence in Ukraine escalated dramatically, leading – among other things – to the fall of the Yanukovych regime in February and the subsequent referendum in Crimea on its status. Indicating the continued importance of traditional media as an opinion-maker in the lead-up to the Crimean referendum, the signals of Ukrainian radio and television stations in Crimea were cut and replaced with Russian channels, and Crimean websites advocating for the peninsula to remain part of Ukraine were also blocked.[31]

Another recent example of extreme and unsuccessful attempts by a government to censor digital communications occurred in Turkey on March 20, 2014, when the Turkish authorities blocked Twitter "… hours after [Prime Minister Recep Tayyip] Erdogan vowed to 'wipe out' the social media service during the campaigning period for local elections on March 30 […] Those trying to access Twitter found an Internet page carrying court rulings saying that the site had been blocked as a 'protection measure.'"[32] The ban led to demonstrations advocating for free speech. As in other countries, citizens found alternative ways to post their content online. The ban was declared illegal by a court in Ankara on March 26, 2014.[33] However, two days later, the Turkish government went after YouTube, again, as in the past, trying to block or ban it. Attempts by the government to restrict the use of digital communications speak to the ability of digital technologies to mobilize popular support for or against actions taken by authorities, and the authorities' inability to thwart such mobilization.

30 See Transparency International (Ukraine) at ti-ukraine.org/news/4269.html.

31 According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), "Over the past few days the terrestrial signals of Ukrainian television stations Inter, Briz, 1+1, 5 channel, 1st National, STB have been cut, including the signal of the independent Chernomorskaya TV, and replaced with Russian channels NTV, 1st channel, Rossiya 24, Rossiya RTR, TNT and Zvezda. The Internet connection of Crimean Tatar ATR channel is down."

32 See CBC News (2014).

33 See Al-Jazeera (2014).

3 THE DILEMMA OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

Digital communications serve dual and often contradictory purposes, especially in fragile environments. Herein lies its dilemma.

As a reflection of the democratization of the media, digital communications provide an opportunity for previously muted or marginalized voices to be heard. The ability of formerly disregarded populations to participate in affairs that affect them is largely determined by the availability of technology and their skills at using available technologies. As access to digital communications technologies proliferates, women, members of minority ethnic, language or religious communities, and other disenfranchised groups are often first to make use of these technologies to voice matters that concern them. On the positive side, the inclusion of previously excluded voices is considered an essential criterion for preventing or resolving violent conflict, and is therefore a prime objective for most conflict-transformation and media development programs. On the other hand, however, there are distinct downsides to this phenomenon that affect conflict dynamics.

Insularity

A distinction has to be made between an inclusive state that respects and accepts a diversity of views and voices, and a society in which multiple voices are tantamount to small conflicting political constituencies. Former Yugoslavia and its successor states represent these two poles of the diversity within unity paradigm. Under Josip Broz Tito, the central government in Belgrade encouraged media in the languages of all the constituent Yugoslav republics. Within these six republics, certain minorities with a recognized ethnic status were allowed their own media and education in their own languages. Though done with precise political calculation, this policy was intended to allow for controlled diversity within the unitary, centrally-run Yugoslav government. Following the collapse of Yugoslavia, the diverse media in each republic – both conventional and digital – became advocates for their own specific ethnic and linguistic communities, offering rival and at times highly conflicting versions of politics. Expressions of diversity within unity became expressions of disunity.

In fragile states lacking institutions that promote inclusivity and shared civic values, the multiplication of voices using digital communications promotes an increased rate of social fracturing. This splintering occurs as people gain more access to, and increasingly rely on information that reinforces ideas and opinions they have already formed. Media analysts speak of self-correction as a process by which inaccurate information is filtered out of the digital communications sphere. Self-correction can occur in cases when information comes from multiple sources with regard to one event. Data about a discrete occurrence collected and distributed through crowdsourcing can for instance be considered self-corrected, as it is assumed that the moderator/curator of the site has at least considered which version of an event is statistically most credible. During super storm Sandy on the eastern U.S. seaboard in 2012 for example, Twitter helped dispel rumors and stopped the spread of misinformation as people anticipated being struck by the storm.[34] However, self-correction does not necessarily apply to information that is disseminated by an individual via SMS, YouTube, or a tweet. Like rumor gaining credibility through strength of repetition, the more frequently a tweet or SMS is retransmitted, the less self-corrected it can become. During the Haiti earthquake, for example, Twitter perpetuated a variety of rumors, elevating already high levels of uncertainty and anxiety.[35] Similarly, in Afghanistan in 2010, examples exist of the spread of the rumor via SMS that cell phone calls originating in Pakistan would result in the death of the person answering the call. Consequently, for nearly a week, Afghans in Kabul (and reportedly more broadly in the country) refused to take calls coming from Pakistan. The profusion of more voices cannot automatically be viewed as an equivalent of greater democracy or of greater informational reliability. Instead, it may create more noise or

34 See http://gigaom.com/2012/10/30/hurricane-sandy-and-twitter-as-a-self-cleaning-oven-for-news.

35 For Haiti, see Onook (2010). Also see the case study presented by Situngkir (2011) regarding Twitter and "the spread of hoaxes" in Indonesia.

possibly active dissent in the cyber sphere. Rather than facilitating greater inclusivity through diversity, the proliferation of digital communications can just as easily promote insularity within self-defined groups.[36]

Segregation

Members of digital informational communities have to rely on earned credibility, which is more easily lost than gained, when their ties are weak. If they are young, members of such digital communities may not have had personal and/or positive experiences with communities perceived as their rivals, and may be unable to reference any inherent credibility in the other. Given the demographics of most vulnerable and fragile states, where the majority of the population are youth, the absence of experiential trust and the weakness of ties via digital technologies are a potent mix easily susceptible to abuse and manipulation.[37] As ever narrower digital informational communities proliferate, ties between members within communities become increasingly thinner, while ties that connect information communities to each other become more difficult to maintain. Communications analysts have identified the presence and role of information brokers/curators who serve to mediate (or regulate) relations between weakly tied informational communities. The impact of any such curator hinges on that individual's intentions, and whether those intentions are transparent or opaque to communities whose information is curated. The insularity of self-defined informational groups is consequently further accompanied by greater segregation and distance between discrete groups.

Failed Relationships

Conflict transformation practice addresses another aspect of weak ties between communities. Fundamental to any conflict is the question of whether the conflicting parties have any interest in maintaining, changing, or abandoning their relationship.[38] If conflicting parties are not concerned whether their relationship survives the conflict, or if one or both parties consider theirs a failed relationship, they are often prepared to do whatever it takes to achieve the outcomes they want. When parties to a conflict are interested in preserving a relationship, their behavior towards each other changes, regardless of the form, conditions and means they are willing to consider in addressing their relationship. Among other things, they need to develop trust in information coming from the other" and in return must learn how to provide and transmit credible information. If inherent credibility has been lost or damaged, the parties must recreate and re-gain earned credibility. In contrast, members of narrowly defined digital information communities, with their weak ties and frequent lack of experiential trust, may have little or no interest in preserving a relationship with the other. In such cases communications technologies serve as yet another tool to achieve each party's desired outcome in a conflict.

The disappearance of geography

The gap between the digitally constructed us and them is further widened by the disappearance of geographic boundaries in the cyber sphere. Whereas armed conflict by definition requires that people risk their lives, digital technologies allow people who are physically removed from the conflict to participate without this immediate risk.[39] The engagement of outside parties in conflict is not a new phenomenon, whether through donating funds or providing information from abroad. Digital technologies facilitate not only the spread of information, but also the formation of virtual informational alliances, whose basis may be a sense of shared religion, ethnicity, politics, or another ideology or cause.

The ability of physically distant actors to mobilize their communities to make threats towards their "enemies" and to "propagate conflict narratives" demonstrates that domestic authority structures have limited control over information in conflict situations and that "ICT [can] empower outside actors to influence the situation."[40]

36 Although social media have been credited with incubating, if not driving the social change movements of the Arab Spring, data also indicate that in Syria (for example), "social media – or at least Twitter – appear to have become tools for the creation of like-minded communities." See Lynch, et al (2014:27-28).

37 An area needing further research concerns the role that "media – especially electronic and new media – can have on the constitution and wherewithal of collective identities." See el-Nawawy (2008:20).

38 In his book Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution (1992) Dudley Weeks elaborates his idea of the "conflict partnership process" in which preserving or abandoning a relationship is a key consideration.

39 Risks definitely haunt people in conflict zones who engage as citizen journalists or as members of media organizations. Consequently, some media interventions in conflict-affected societies have focused on increasing the safety of journalists and improving digital security. See the report on Pakistan released by the Internews Center for Innovation and Learning, "Digital Security and Journalists," (May 2012). Nonetheless, as stated by Lea Shanley, director of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Science and Technology Innovation Program, "social media also makes it easier for those seeking to exacerbate and exploit violent situations via incendiary messages and misinformation – oftentimes at little risk to the perpetuators." See Zenko (2013: 6).

40 See Franceso Mancini and Marie O-Reilly (2013:88).

4 TWO CASE STUDIES

Kyrgyzstan

Events in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 illustrate explicitly how the growth of user-defined informational networks based on digital technologies and governmental attempts at informational control can affect the dynamics of conflict.[41] New media had begun to penetrate Kyrgyzstan in the wake of the Tulip Revolution of 2005, when then-president Askar Akayev was removed from office. His government had attempted to block both domestic and foreign websites and had prohibited any coverage of opposition activities.[42] This was countered by numerous international development organizations that funded digital media that included blogs, online news services and video-hosting sites. By the time in April 2010 when the current government of Kurmanbek Bakiyev was accused of corruption, digital communications had grown substantially.[43] The central government, although not technologically in the know, attempted to limit opposition communication by restricting terrestrial television broadcasts. Kyrgyz citizens responded by using Twitter, Facebook and blogs to organize anti-government protests, resulting in the departure of President Bakiyev within a month.[44] Until that point, the main contribution of digital media had been "reporting directly on some key events, linking groups of like-minded persons and helping to increase a sense of anger with the regime [...] In this way, the role of new media [...] was to enlarge the information sphere to a wider audience, rather than to provide something distinct from conventional media."[45]

This changed in May 2010 when pro- and anti-Bakiyev groups engaged in violent confrontations in southern Kyrgyzstan, which has a large Uzbek community. The geographic shift of the conflict from the more homogenous north to the more heterogeneous south introduced an inter-ethnic (Kyrgyz/Uzbek) component to what had previously been an intra-ethnic (N. Kyrgyz/S. Kyrgyz) political conflict. Consequently, the media's role also morphed from political to ethno-nationalistic. Both conventional and digital media took up the cause of its own communities. Nationalistic and provocative messages and videos began to appear on online forums and Twitter, with Kyrgyz and Uzbeks accusing each other of various wrongdoings. The reach of digital communications was limited, as the southern region lacked technology infrastructure at this point. Nonetheless, by June 2010, the conflict had escalated to violence, leading to hundreds of deaths, thousands of refugees, and significant loss of property.

The now ethnically divided media in Kyrgyzstan played an essentially destructive role both in escalating the conflict to violence and in justifying each community's actions during the violence. On the one hand Uzbeks (mostly refugees who had reached neighboring Uzbekistan) posted videos on YouTube showing extreme violence directed at their community. In turn, Kyrgyz users of Twitter, blogs, Facebook and video hosting sites cast accusations about who had initiated the crisis and distributed rumors and misinformation, alleging that members of the Tajik community had participated in the violence. According to one eyewitness, cell phone users were instrumental in determining which and how much information people received about the violence. Because the government prevented local TV channels from reporting in real time, people used their

41 For a full report on Kyrgyzstan, see Melvin and Umarliev (2011).

42 For more information on press/media freedom in Kyrgyzstan, see Freedom House (2012).

43 In 2009, under 20% of the population had access to the Internet, although over 90% had cell phones. Of Internet users, only 16% were above the age of 40. Melvin and Umarliev (2011:3).

44 According to a contemporaneous report in the New York Times (18 April 2010), Kyrgyz authorities tried to block digital communications following the online release series of highly damning exposes on the Bakiyev family's finances. This attempt to censor local Web sites led to complaints not only from the Committee to Protect Journalists and from Freedom House, "but also from an unlikely advocate for free media in the wired world: the Russian Foreign Ministry." See Kramer (2010).

45 Melvin and Umarliev (2011:12).

mobile phones and the Internet to spread their own version of events that officials were unable or unwilling to refute or to prove. "Above all, [cell phone and Internet users] created a new pace for the flow of information that the provisional government could not manage to cope with in the end." [46]

Not all media coverage of events in Kyrgyzstan promoted violence. Some bloggers and online news services conscientiously avoided extremism and refused to disseminate unsubstantiated information.[47] Furthermore, media skeptics argue that the media themselves were not the actual trigger of events, but only served as a tool for people to organize traditional means of protest. They point to effects of digital technologies as promoting weak ties – ties among people having little personal connection – which are insufficient to mobilize successful social change movements.[48]

What the new media in Kyrgyzstan did achieve, however, was the polarization of society along ethnic lines. At first, "new media was a conduit for citizen journalism and worked to mobilize and unite groups (having) a sense of a united online community working together in solidarity." However, in the wake of violence and the introduction of ethnicity into the political conflict, "the online community itself became part of the battleground connected to the growing ethnic polarization in the country."[49] The Kyrgyz experience demonstrates the cyclical nature of media and conflict in vulnerable states, and how political fragmentation can lead to analogous informational fragmentation, and informational fragmentation can in turn promote ethnic polarization and thus increased vulnerability, destabilization and possibly violence.[50]

The Kyrgyz example also illustrates how the use and impact of digital communications in fragile or vulnerable societies can mirror a generational divide. Youth appear particularly inclined to create or join informational networks as part of their identity formation, especially when there are inadequate or weak institutions to promote a common civic identity. Given their levels of technical dexterity, they quickly organize peer-to-peer social networks on digital platforms that they use to confront issues of common concern. But, in line with the weak ties hypothesis, digital informational communities, unlike complex social groupings, do not need to accommodate both shared and divergent opinions and goals. Rather, they effectively act as "single interest" groups, whose vitality and cohesion may dissipate when and if that single interest is lost – as occurred after the overthrow of the Bakiyev government in Kyrgyzstan.

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Indonesia

What differentiates us from them expands as a conflict absorbs more people and groups that reside on the increasingly outlying edges of an issue. This is evident in conflicts that are commonly but inaccurately identified as "inter-faith."[51] Although currently not in hot conflict, Indonesia is experiencing many of the same repercussions of a flourishing media sphere – both conventional and digital.[52] Issues such as women's rights, freedom of speech, human rights, power sharing and others have been framed as an ostensible conflict between Islam in Indonesia and proponents of foreign values. The "enemies of Islam" at times may be Christianity, the West, non-Muslim Indonesians, or others.[53] Similarly "defenders of Islam" in Indonesia may be situated in Jakarta, but also Cairo, Amsterdam, or elsewhere. Irrespective of their location, their rhetoric has been consistent as has been the means of communication via blogs, Twitter,

46 See the website diesel.elcat.kg, and Wolters (2011).

47 For specific examples, see Melvin and Umarliev (2011:17 and 21).

48 In his article in The New Yorker, "Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted" (October 2010), Malcolm Gladwell asserts that strong ties of person-to-person relationships significantly outweigh the efficacy of weak-tie relationships created online. He dismisses so-called cyber-optimists who maintain that Martin Luther King, Jr. would have been a more effective civil rights leader "had he been able to communicate with his followers through Facebook, and contented himself with tweets from a Birmingham jail." Also see Joyce (2013).

49 See Melvin and Umarliev (2011:21).

50 IREX's *Media Sustainability Index* (2013:259) summarizes the situation as follows: "The Kyrgyz media has been at the epicenter of these turbulent events, as a willing participant, as collateral damage, and as the subject of political machinations. Repeated calls to "pull the plug" on various media outlets from political figures and "AstroTurf" social movements resulted. Kyrgyzstan's competitive and diffuse politics meant that the government could not rudely control the media, but opaque ownership, poor professionalism standards, and a weak economy allowed most outlets to be used as tools for politicians to further their agendas. A vicious circle has been created, whereby this influence led to further deterioration in professionalism and pluralism."

51 For a more elaborate discussion of religion, media and conflict, see Marsden and Savigny (2009).

52 In 2012, Indonesia had a population of nearly 250 million, and an average of 2 mobile phones per person. Due to high costs, however, home-based computer usage was still limited to major urban centers.

53 For a more elaborated analysis of the "enemies of Islam" in Indonesia, see Budiwanti (2009). For further insight into the role of the Internet on daily life in Indonesia, see Lim (2013).

SMS, video-hosting, or Facebook.[54] However, since "most of the population is not yet connected to the Internet, the Internet also needs to be explicitly linked to other media in order to extend its influence. Using the intermodalities of media networks, various individuals and groups can create linkages that allow information originating from cyberspace to reach audiences beyond the Internet. The Internet and its linkages to other media have enabled the realization of new connections. Radical groups use the Internet as a trawling tool to reach potential members at local, national, and global levels."[55]

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At the same time, the allegedly monolithic character of Indonesian Islam has also been fragmenting as people with divergent views of their own religion have confronted each other online and on the ground. Perhaps the greatest jeopardy to Indonesia's constitutional democracy[56] is the increasing engagement of external Muslims since 1998 (from Saudi Arabia and other Arab states) in an ideological struggle to define true Indonesian Islam. During President Suharto's reign (1965-1998), the government forbade discussion of what made Indonesian Islam "Indonesian" and whether Indonesia should be governed as a Muslim society to uphold the two basic principles of recently independent Indonesia ("Unity in Diversity" and "Pancasila"). Following the ouster of Suharto in 1998 and the introduction of more liberal social, political and religious modes of expression, the debate over Islam and national identity has re-surfaced. This debate, taking place on television, radio, and print, as well as the Internet, has not only been a matter of differing clerical opinions. One consequence has been that the minority Ahmadiya Muslim community has been branded as heretical and mortally dangerous to the well-being of the majority Sunni Muslim population.[57] Once this community had been delegitimized, SMS and YouTube were used to mobilize so-called true Muslims to forcibly remove, and in some instances kill, Ahmadis who rejected being labeled heretics.[58] According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, Indonesia's tradition of religious pluralism has diminished due to threats against "individuals considered religiously deviant and by the violence of extremist groups like the Islamic Defenders Front targeting Ahmadiyya, Christians, Shi'a, and Hindus."[59]

54 With 64 million people on Facebook, Indonesians are Facebook's third largest user community. See: www.insidefacebook.com/2010/06/24/indonesia-facebook-english.

55 See Lim (2005): viii. By 'intermodalities' the author is referring to the flow of information between various media platforms, digital and conventional, in a society where the majority of people don't have ready access to Internet.

56 Indonesia officially recognizes six religions. Although over 90% of the population identify as Muslims, in its Constitution Indonesia explicitly is not a "Muslim" state.

57 According to Koike (2002), Indonesian scholar Merlyna Lim has focused on the website of Laskar Jihad, an Islamic fundamentalist group, and is concerned about the negative role of the Internet in fragmenting Indonesia into religious factions.

58 See: http://ahmadiyyatimes.blogspot.com.es/2011/04/indonesia-ahmadiyah-hate-crime-trial.html; www.thejakartaglobe.com/archive/indonesia-a-failed-state-fate-of-the-ahmadis-shows-it-could-be; / http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/believers-or-heretics-battle-between-mainstream-muslims-and-ahmadiyya-community.

59 See United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2013).

5

LESSONS LEARNED

As practitioners of social and behavior change communications (SBCC) can attest, the connection between communications and behavior is at best correlational rather than causal.

In the key practice area of SBCC, health behavior change, many intended behavioral changes are clearly visible and measureable, such as the reduction in the number of smokers, or an increase in the rate that women seek pre-natal checkups with doctors.[60] Nonetheless, it is difficult if not impossible to draw a direct cause-and-effect line between behavior change and communications intended to change behavior. Communications may change behavior in conjunction with a variety of other factors – factors that communications practitioners must take into consideration, but which they cannot incorporate as a whole into their program design. As stated in the United States Institute of Peace's report on advancing new media research, the influence of new media on conflict is "powerful but ambiguous." The report calls upon both researchers and policy makers to "move on from the tired debate over whether new media help or hurt the spread of democracy in some universal sense," and admits that "the long-term political consequences of such tools are difficult to discern."[61]

Susan Benesch attributes the relationship between media and conflict to the phenomenon of dangerous speech, which she distinguishes from hate speech. "When an act of speech has a reasonable chance of catalyzing or amplifying violence by one group against another, given the circumstances in which it was made or disseminated, it is Dangerous Speech."[62] The "given circumstances" that Benesch identify as underlying dangerous speech, comprise five variables:

- The power (credibility or influence) of a speaker over an audience.
- The presence of grievances and fear within the audience.
- The clarity of the message (as a call to violence).
- The existence of suitable historical conditions to make an audience receptive to dangerous speech.
- The level of influence of a specific means of speech dissemination.

Benesch stresses that dangerous speech needs to be evaluated in terms of the full set of variables, but that not all variables are equally important in any given circumstance; the impact of speech on conflict depends on variable correlations among the five factors she specifies.

Of these five conditions, only the last one relates specifically to an aspect of communications technology – the influence of any one means of communications is a reflection of the kinds and numbers of communications technologies present in a conflict-affected environment. The greater the variety of voices, the less influential any one voice is prone to be. Consequently, the second lesson learned is that although new technologies may be tools used in conflict, they are not the cause of conflict solely by virtue of technology. As has been demonstrated by the examples of Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine and many others, restricting access to any one media technology is ineffective in eliminating the ability of parties to communicate. Given that most digital communications contents cannot be controlled other than by the actual provider of those contents, it is more fruitful to respond to the role of digital media in conflict by addressing the human rather than technological dimension of conflict dynamics. The goal of an intervention therefore needs to be focus on elevating a vulnerable society's ability to resist conflict escalation, including the influence of media on such escalation. In this respect, approaches to digital communications and con-

60 For further discussions on behavior change information, see Figueroa et al (2002).

61 Aday et al (2010:2).

62 Whereas "hate speech" is offensive and hurtful (and in some instances illegal), it generally does not lead to large-scale escalation of conflict to violence. See Benesch (2013:1).

flict fall squarely within the core principles of conflict resolution practice. In addition to Benesch's speech-specific criteria, there are three main points to be made about interventions.

1. **Aligning an intervention with the phase of conflict: pre-violence, during violence, post-violence.** Are media positioned to propose alternatives to violence, and if so, which media? To prevent the kind of violence that was incited by Kenya's presidential elections of 2007/8 Ushahidi's crowd-sourcing platform has been used to track flash points in real time and to provide early warning to concerned Kenyans who are prepared to take necessary conflict de-escalation measures. In Macedonia, international NGOs facilitated co-operation between Albanian and Macedonian radio owners and reporters before and during the wars of 1999/2000 and 2002, to reduce the possibility that communities served by participating stations would be drawn into the ongoing violence.

   Following the violence in Kyrgyzstan, some on-line bloggers and news services began to provide identical information in Kyrgyz and Russian to diminish the insularity of information communities based on language. Local and international observers of the Kyrgyz mediascape agree that professionalizing and increasing Uzbek-language media is necessary to avoid marginalizing this community, especially in the south. Despite the efforts of international media development organizations to foster uni-lingual (Uzbek) and multilingual (Uzbek/Kyrgyz/Russian) radio, the situation remains acute, due in part to the lack of skilled Uzbek journalists. To the detriment of national reconciliation, Uzbek audiences in Kyrgyzstan therefore get most of their information from neighboring Uzbekistan.[63]

   It should be noted that while the Kenyan and Kyrgyz examples pertain to digital communications, the Macedonian case demonstrates the continued importance of traditional media. This is of particular importance when a conventional medium such as any television or radio station with a national footprint, can still reach a broad spectrum of the population.[64] As with the saying, when you have a hammer everything looks like a nail, media interventions can "suffer from the same problem of assuming that the world is defined by what we happen to be looking at. If we're excited by social media, we tend to see every problem through that microscopic lens [... whereas conflict dynamics] have far more to do with age-old, systemic, structural historical, political and social-cultural reasons than with what media happen to be in vogue at that time."[65]

   In each instance, by increasing and changing the numbers and kinds of voices to which vulnerable communities have access to an intervention, addresses Benesch's criterion of reducing the influence of any one particular channel of information dissemination.

2. **Partnering with local and international actors who are dealing with root causes and triggers of conflict in order to amplify the impact of their efforts.** As in all behavior change endeavors, conflicts are prevented or resolved when the involved parties have identified alternate solutions to their problems (current behavior) and have decided that these alternatives have sufficient value to pursue them (change their behavior).

   For media to have a positive effect in vulnerable and conflict-affected environments, they need to cooperate with organizations engaged in addressing the root causes and triggers of conflict in order to amplify the impact of their endeavors. As illustrated by the Taliban in Afghanistan, the credibility of information may be supported or refuted by the relevant experiences of the recipient of that information. Coordinating media programs with on-the-ground development and social change efforts may elevate the earned credibility of both, although not guaranteed.[66]

3. **Assessing the level of urgency and accordingly the amount of time available for action.** Social change programs, irrespective of the tools employed, involve a slow, non-linear, and often times reversible process. Whereas media analysts have the luxury of taking time to develop, test, and change their theories about how media impact conflict, media practitioners usually do not. Still, media and conflict programs are sometimes designed and implemented with greater urgency than a conflict calls for, often because of donor demands for quantifiable results such as numbers of new blog sites, hours of online news provided, or volume of Tweets counted concerning a given topic.

   If sufficiently urgent, and if violence seems inevitable, it may be appropriate to launch an intervention, such as an SMS campaign to attempt to dissuade people from engaging in

63 See Eurasianet 2012.

64 For example, Fondation Hirondelle's Radio Okapi in Congo, or Search for Common Ground's Studio Ijambo and Talking Drum Radio in Burundi and Rwanda.

65 See Himelfarb and Aday (2013: 5-6).

66 "Assuming there is a technical fix for what is an inherently political problem is a dangerous path, no matter what technology is at hand. New technologies ...are no panacea for holistic solutions. Especially when trying to integrate operational prevention (targeting a crisis at hand) and structural prevention (addressing root causes of conflict) new technologies should be accompanied by more traditional tools such as preventive diplomacy, governance reforms, and economic incentives. They may complement these...but should not replace them." See Mancini and O'Reilly (2013:89).

armed conflict. However, even under such cases, it is critical for an intervention to take into account the source and level of trust that audiences have in the source of information escalating a conflict. If there is not enough time to establish earned credibility, an urgent intervention must begin with some level of inherent credibility. Otherwise the intervention may merely be opposing rumor with futile counter-rumors. [67]

Rather than focusing primarily on increasing the quantity of information, whether on traditional or digital communications platforms, the long-term objective of interventions in conflict-affected societies needs to be increasing the public's information literacy. Expanding the range of voices from which audiences may choose can be one, but not the only means to achieve greater information literacy. Like any behavior change effort, achieving greater informational literacy requires long-term commitment to a society, whether well enough in advance of latent violence to reduce its likelihood, or long enough following violence to reduce the likelihood of its recurrence.

67 For example, the Organizations for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reports that in Kosovo in early 2004, the Albanian community was already so beset by anxiety that reports of an unsubstantiated event sufficed to set off inter-communal violence. The report contends that the media did not "generate sentiments or hostilities overnight." Rather, they "strengthened existing or previously generated stereotypes and animosities" by providing "one-sided and prejudicial reports" regarding actions of people about whom the Kosovar already had grave doubts. See: OSCE (2004:14-16).

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Internews Washington, DC Office
1640 Rhode Island Ave. NW Suite 700
Washington, DC 20036 USA
+ 1 202 833 5740

Internews Administrative Headquarters
PO Box 4448
Arcata, CA 95518 USA
+1 707 826 2030

www.internews.org
E-mail: info@internews.org
Twitter: @internews
facebook.com/internews

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