

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

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SUMMARY

- Over the past decade, the information and communications landscape worldwide – including conflict-affected societies – has expanded dramatically to include more and different digital communications technologies, called ‘digital media,’ ‘social media,’ ‘new media,’ or even “new new media.”
- Digital communications differ from traditional media in that their contents (including misinformation and disinformation) are both produced and disseminated by a wide range of media users, who are most frequently non-institutional actors.¹
- Rather than contributing to a broad informational ‘commons,’ digital communications frequently reflect and/or create “information ghettos” consisting 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 communications technologies and platforms proliferate, they help to promote increased polarization between “us” and “them” based on social, religious, political and other interests or ideologies.
- In many vulnerable and conflict-affected societies, where the presence of conventional media may be limited, some digital communications technology – especially mobile phones – is often available and enables a wide range of people to become actors in the dynamics of conflict; including people not physically engaged in conflict.
- Just as media characteristics have changed, the nature of conflict has also shifted. Whereas historically most conflicts were between states or other structured entities, most contemporary wars involve civil, non-state actors, some of whom may not have direct geographic links to the location of the conflict.
- Because digital communications lack the institutional and geographic features of

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).

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
- Interventions having 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 not only must align their resources and programs with local technological realities, but should avoid an overemphasis on digital technologies, assuming 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. Consequently, before launching new interventions, organizations planning or designing media and media development programs should seek out local and international partners that are addressing core issues and root causes of conflict to multiply and expand the impact of their efforts.

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).

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

Introduction

*“People enjoy sharing information, even when they do not believe it.”*⁵ And over the past decade, the ability to share information - worldwide - has expanded dramatically by the rapid introduction of new of digital platforms for the creation and dissemination of data. Beyond the expansion of conventional media (print and terrestrial broadcast) to Internet sites that they operate, new forms of digital communication⁶ have arisen independently of traditional media. These digital communications technologies have become so prevalent in daily life that it is difficult to remember what communications and media were like before their emergence.⁷ Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, SMS, IMS, Skype, YouTube and other forms of digital communications have vastly expanded the nature of information gathering and dissemination: by whom information is produced; where it is produced; for whom it is produced; where it gets distributed; who uses it; and how it is used. In many respects, these digital communications differ from their conventional media counterparts, both in stable and conflict-affected or vulnerable societies.⁸

Paralleling shifts in media has been an analogous shift in the nature of conflict. Whereas violent conflict has historically occurred between entities with clear identities and military forces (states or other internationally recognized forms of governance), conflicts are no longer restricted to such 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.”⁹ 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

⁵ Karlova and Fisher (2013: 1).

⁶ This report uses the term “digital media,” to refer to digital means of communication in all forms, whether moderated or unmoderated.

⁷ See Levinson (2013), for a detailed presentation of digital media platforms, their interconnectivity and applications.

⁸ According to Deane (2013:6), “Most fragile states are fractured states – states where often deep fault lines divide communities along ethnic, religious, political or other factional lines. Whether because of scarce resources, corruption, inequality or artificial colonial boundaries that ignore socio-political, geographic or economic conditions, these societies are both politically fragmented and often dislocated from – and ambivalent towards – the state. Conflict, or the threat of conflict, is high.” For a map of vulnerable or fragile states, see Deane (ibid:5).

⁹ See Pearlman and Cunningham (2011).

mobilizing communities to action through the media.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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 personnel who populate those institutions. Without some form of accepted leadership, conflicts between entities (whether states or other groups) cannot be prevented or stopped. Absent either an editorial or an entrepreneurial structure, media institutions - whether state 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 levels, starting with personal responsibility and extending outwards to media institutions, legal structures, and eventually transnational systems.¹² The key issue, however, 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.¹³

Accordingly, for organizations that aim to understand and respond programmatically to the role of digital communications in conflict, the questions that emerge are which is the intended audience for an intervention, and, what makes a particular audience appropriate for designing an intervention. In other words, in order for an intervention to impact conflict dynamics, which and how many stakeholders in a conflict need to be reached by which kinds of media? There are many possibilities; among them: online informational 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; interest groups claiming to have a stake in the outcome of a conflict, irrespective of location. Identifying, selecting, and prioritizing stakeholders is contingent upon conducting a thorough conflict analysis and conflict mapping and applying

¹⁰ For examples, see: Della Vigna et al (2011); Hockenjos (2003); Ghorashi and Boersma (2009).

¹¹ For a specific discussion of approaches to researching new media, see Aday et al (2010).

¹² See Fengler (2012).

¹³ For a range of discussions concerning media accountability, see Lauk and Kus (2012).

the results to the design of a media intervention; rather than engaging immediately in “media development” activities.¹⁴

Traditional Media

To answer these questions it is necessary to understand the characteristics of digital communications and their relationship to conflict analysis and response. Much has already been written about the role of traditional – or conventional - media in conflict prevention and resolution, so that this paper will only reference a few salient points that have been elaborated elsewhere.¹⁵ Similarly, a growing body of literature speaks to the role of crowdsourcing on platforms such as Ushahidi in early warning and response to latent conflicts or to natural disasters. Again, this paper will only reference a few of the main issues that appear in these discussions.¹⁶

Stated briefly, 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. Namely, 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. Irrespective of a given medium’s professionalism, it can 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 are a platform providing 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 government by engaging the public in setting political agendas, and by holding government and its 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

¹⁴ 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).

¹⁵ For example, see Bratic and Schirch (2007); Frohardt and Temin (2003); Monzani (2009); Gilboa, (2009); and Puddephatt (2006).

¹⁶ See Goldstein and Rotich (2008).

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.

In sum, although traditional media have contributed frequently and powerfully to the creation and intensification of conflict, they help both to create and to 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. That is, information technologies have been released from the monopolistic control of governments and/or media companies and have transferred to the hands of ordinary people.¹⁷ Unlike the “top-down” and “one-to-many” nature of conventional media, digital communications are characterized by a flat structure where information is transmitted horizontally by many individuals to many other 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 significant features pertinent to all communications in conflict-affected and vulnerable societies. Among them is that, 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 of the core questions in communications, especially but not exclusively concerning vulnerable and conflict-affected societies: Namely, for information to have a constructive role, it must be trusted; and for information to be trusted,

¹⁷ Certainly 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.

the source of that information needs to be credible to the receiver/user of that information. Doubt in the informational veracity or the intentions of a communicator make it difficult for the receiver to distinguish between information, misinformation (defined as possibly misleading or inaccurate information), and disinformation (defined as deliberately false and misleading information.). Trust is based on either personal familiarity with the communicator (here defined as ‘inherent credibility’) or on previous experience – be it positive or negative – with the provider of information (defined here as ‘earned credibility’). Such credibility is correlated to 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 (CBT), in which all sides continuously “contemplate the benefits of staying in the relationship.” Greater levels of trust (and therefore credibility) emerge when communicators find they share “identity-based” trust (IBT), in which case the parties “have internalized the other’s desires and intentions.”¹⁸ Absent either inherent or earned credibility, information tends to be ignored or dismissed.¹⁹

Research conducted by the author in 2009 in Afghanistan²⁰ exemplifies this dialectic. 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 digital and conventional media. For example, because of the high level of illiteracy among Afghans, warnings sent to villagers via cell phones not to cooperate with the Western coalition forces (International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF) have often included 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 done via digital or conventional means of communication, have had neither inherent nor earned credibility and therefore tended to have little or no impact. The Taliban have known, and have made sure, that villagers recognize the veracity of their intentions and the accuracy of their communications.²¹ Despite its efforts to

¹⁸ See Lewicki (2003).

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 et al (2010).

²¹ For further examples and explanations of Taliban digital media usage, see the BBC Media Action Policy Briefing (2012).

devise viable “strategic communications,” ISAF has not recognized nor addressed the perceived gap between its promises and its credibility.²²

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.”²³ The anxiety and uncertainty caused by the rapid and easy spread of mis- and disinformation, through Twitter or SMS for instance, is akin to the spread of ‘rumor’ rather 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 in that, given the appropriate level of perceived credibility, they disseminate information that can be considered plausible.²⁴ 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 become the source of information/misinformation/disinformation.

The rapid spread of conflict-generating rumors can occur even in relatively “low-tech” digital environments, such as Myanmar (Burma), where digital technologies have been introduced only recently. As reported by *The Guardian*, on 20 March 2013 what began as a personal dispute between a Muslim shopkeeper and a Buddhist customer rapidly escalated into a community-wide conflict. “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. . . . But 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.”²⁵

As this example illustrates, the speed with which digital communications are able to disseminate their contents further elevates the potential impact of these communications in

²² 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.

²³ For a discussion of the social diffusion model of misinformation and disinformation for understanding human information behavior, see Karlova and Fisher (2013).

²⁴ See Kelley (2005).

²⁵ See Davis (2013).

stimulating conflict. It is worth restating here, however, that digital communications technology should be regarded as a tool that can facilitate but does not by itself create conflict in vulnerable societies. The introduction of digital technologies accelerates information dissemination. When information is inflammatory – whether intentionally or not – digital communications can bring an incendiary situation beyond the tipping point of violence by virtue any mistrust that may already exist between communities; due to the speed by which information spreads through such 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.”²⁶

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 states where people have had limited access to other forms of communication. From a worldwide penetration of 5% in 2005, cellular technology had reached 40% by 2010 and is expected to attain nearly universal coverage by 2025.²⁷ This rapid expansion of access to wireless and mobile technologies has changed both who produces and who receives information, and for what purpose.

As previously stated, new technologies have transferred control over the production and dissemination of information away from institutional actors to individual citizens. The result is the appearance of information networks created by the people who use and not only by the people who produce information. Some states have attempted to restrict both the numbers and kinds of user-generated informational networks; that is, governments have tried to limit who has access to digital communications technology in an attempt to retain centralized informational control – almost always unsuccessfully. For example, in response to increasing anti-government protests, on 16 January 2014 the Ukrainian Parliament passed a law that would effectively have given the government license to shut down or block Internet sites it deemed objectionable, track and intercept mobile phone communications, and criminalize use of traditional media, online media, and social media to organize protests and demonstrations of dissent.²⁸ The law was signed by President Yanukovich a few days

²⁶ See Gombitas (2013:2)

²⁷ See AREPPIM statistics (2012).

²⁸ See Transparency International (Ukraine) at ti-ukraine.org/news/4269.html.

later but quickly rescinded when the government's heavy-handed attempts to control information backfired, adding fuel to the protesters' cause and bringing more people out into the streets. After that, 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.²⁹

Another recent example of extreme, and unsuccessful attempts by a government to censor digital communications occurred in Turkey on 20 March 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."³⁰ The ban led to vigorous demonstrations protesting the abridgement of free speech in Turkey. As in other countries, enterprising Turks found alternate means of posting their contents on the Internet. Under both domestic and international pressure, the ban was declared illegal by a court in Ankara on 26 March 2014.³¹ On 28 March 2014, however, the Turkish government has again sought to block or ban YouTube, which it had attempted to do previously. Most probably, this ban will also be ruled illegal and lifted. Both attempts by the government to restrict the use of digital communications are an indication of the ability of digital technologies to mobilize popular support for or against actions taken by authorities, and the authorities' inability to thwart such mobilization.

The Example of 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.³² New media had begun to

²⁹ 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.”

³⁰ See CBC News (2014).

³¹ See Al-Jazeera (2014).

³² For a full report on Kyrgyzstan, see Melvin and Umarliev (2011).

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.³³ This was countered by numerous international development organizations that funded new media including blogs, online news services, and video-hosting sites. When, in April 2010, the current government of Kurmanbek Bakiyev faced accusations of corruption, digital communications had grown substantially.³⁴ The central government, however, was not technologically savvy and 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.³⁵ Until that point, the main contribution of new 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.”³⁶

This changed in May 2010, when pro- and anti-Bakiyev groups engaged in violent confrontations in southern Kyrgyzstan, which also 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” community: Nationalistic and provocative messages and videos began to appear on online forums and Twitter, with Kyrgyz and Uzbeks accusing each other of various wrongdoings. Given that the South was not very technologically developed, the reach of digital communications was also limited. Nonetheless, by June 2010, the conflict had escalated to violence leading to hundreds of deaths, thousands of refugees, and significant loss of property.

³³ For more information on press/media freedom in Kyrgyzstan, see Freedom House (2012).

³⁴ 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).

³⁵ 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).

³⁶ Melvin and Umarliev (2011:12).

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. On the other hand, Kyrgyz users of Twitter, blogs, Facebook and video hosting sites cast accusations about who had initiated the crisis and distributed "rumors and misinformation," also 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 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."³⁷

Not all media coverage of events in Kyrgyzstan promoted violence, by any means. Some bloggers and online news services conscientiously avoided extremism and refused to disseminate unsubstantiated information.³⁸ 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.³⁹

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."⁴⁰ In sum, the Kyrgyz experience demonstrates the cyclical nature of media and conflict in vulnerable states; namely, political

³⁷ See the website diesel.elcat.kg, and Wolters (2011).

³⁸ For specific examples, see Melvin and Umarliev (2011:17 and 21).

³⁹ 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).

⁴⁰ See Melvin and Umarliev (2011:21).

fragmentation can lead to analogous informational fragmentation; and informational fragmentation can in turn promote ethnic polarization and thus increased vulnerability, destabilization and possibly violence.⁴¹

As the Kyrgyz example also illustrates, the use and impact of digital communications in fragile or vulnerable societies often mirrors a generational divide. That is, 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, youth 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” just mentioned, 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.

The Dilemma of Digital Communications

The dilemma of digital communications is that they serve dual and often contradictory purposes, especially in fragile environments. 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 the 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 them to put forward issues of concern to 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.

⁴¹ 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.”

Insularity. A distinction has to be made between an inclusive polity that respects and accepts a diversity of views and voices, and a society in which multiple voices are tantamount to conflicting “mini-polities.” 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 having a recognized ethnic status also were allowed 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 political sphere. 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 digital communications voices promotes an increased rate of social fracturing. This 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: Namely, data about a discrete occurrence collected and distributed through crowdsourcing can be considered “self-corrected” in that the moderator/curator of the site has at least considered which version of an event is statistically most credible. During super storm Sandy in 2012, for example, Twitter was instrumental in dispelling rumors and misinformation reaching people who were anticipating being struck by the storm.⁴² 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 by strength of repetition, the more frequently a tweet or SMS is retransmitted, the less “self-corrected” it can become. For example, during the Haiti earthquake, Twitter served to perpetuate a variety of rumors, elevating already high levels of uncertainty and anxiety.⁴³ Similarly, in Afghanistan in 2010, the author witnessed the spread

⁴² See <http://gigaom.com/2012/10/30/hurricane-sandy-and-twitter-as-a-self-cleaning-oven-for-news>.

⁴³ For Haiti, see Onook (2010). Also see the case study presented by Situngkir (2011) regarding Twitter and “the spread of hoaxes” in Indonesia.

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. In short, 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 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.⁴⁴

Segregation. When their ties are weak, members of digital informational communities have to rely on ‘earned credibility,’ which is more easily lost than gained. If they are young, members of such digital communities may not have had personal and/or positive experiences with ‘rival’ communities, and therefore may be unable to reference any ‘inherent credibility’ in the other. Given the demographics of most vulnerable and fragile states, where a plurality (or majority) of the population are “youth,” the absence of experiential trust and the weakness of ties via digital technologies are a potent mixture easily susceptible to abuse and manipulation.⁴⁵ As ever narrower digital informational communities proliferate, ties between members within communities become increasingly thinner and, as significantly, 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. Consequently, the insularity of self-defined informational groups is further accompanied by greater segregation and distance between discrete groups.

Failed Relationships. Conflict transformation practice speaks to 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.⁴⁶ If conflicting parties are not concerned whether their relationship survives the

⁴⁴ 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).

⁴⁵ 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).

⁴⁶ 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.

conflict – that is, if one or both parties consider theirs a failed relationship – they are often prepared to take whatever measures they deem necessary to achieve the outcomes they want. When parties to a conflict are interested in preserving a relationship, in whatever form and under whichever conditions, their behavior towards one another changes, as do the 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. In other words, 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 to participate in conflict without this risk.⁴⁷ The engagement of outside parties in conflict is not a new phenomenon, whether by donating funds (e.g., supporters of the IRA in the US) or providing information from abroad (e.g., Radio Free Europe, Voice of America, Radio Liberty, BBC World Service). 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.

In the Kyrgyzstan example cited previously, the government was unable to block the Internet entirely, and was therefore “unable to censor the voices of the Diaspora abroad, whose message was carried to the domestic population over the Internet.” 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

⁴⁷ 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 perpetrators.” See Zenko (2013: 6).

structures have limited control over information in conflict situations and that “ICT (can) empower outside actors to influence the situation.”⁴⁸

The Case of Indonesia

What differentiates “us” from “them” expands as a conflict absorbs more people and groups that reside on increasingly outlying edges of an issue. This is evident in conflicts that are commonly but inaccurately identified as “inter-faith.”⁴⁹ Although currently not in hot conflict, Indonesia is experiencing many of the same repercussions of a flourishing media sphere – both conventional and digital.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ 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, SMS, video-hosting, or Facebook.⁵² Since in Indonesia, however, “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.”⁵³

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. Accordingly, perhaps the greatest jeopardy to Indonesia’s

⁴⁸ See Francesco Mancini and Marie O-Reilly (2013:88).

⁴⁹ For a more elaborate discussion of religion, media and conflict, see Marsden and Savigny (2009).

⁵⁰ 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.

⁵¹ 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).

⁵² With 64 million people on Facebook, Indonesians are Facebook’s third largest user community. See: www.insidefacebook.com/2010/06/24/indonesia-facebook-english.

⁵³ 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.

constitutional democracy⁵⁴ 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 in order 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 merely been a matter of differing clerical opinions. Rather, 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.⁵⁵ Once this community had been delegitimized, SMS and YouTube were used to mobilize “true Muslims” to forcibly remove – and in some instances to kill – Ahmadis who rejected being labeled heretics.⁵⁶ 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 (FPI) targeting Ahmadiyya, Christians, Shi’a, and Hindus.”⁵⁷

Lessons Learned and to be Learned

As practitioners of behavior change communications can attest, the connection between communications and behavior is at best correlational rather than causal. In the key practice area of behavior change communications – 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.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, it is difficult if not impossible to draw a direct cause-and-effect line between

⁵⁴ Indonesia officially recognizes six religions. Although over 90% of the population identify as Muslims, in its Constitution Indonesia explicitly is not a “Muslim” state.

⁵⁵ 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.

⁵⁶ 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>.

⁵⁷ See United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2013).

⁵⁸ For further discussions on behavior change information, see Figueroa et al (2002).

behavioral change and communications intended to change behavior. Hence most communications practitioners lay claim to a correlation between information and behavior change. 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 USIP’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.”⁵⁹

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.”⁶⁰ The “given circumstances” that Benesch identifies as underlying dangerous speech consist of five variables:

1. the power (credibility or influence) of a speaker over an audience;
2. the presence of grievances and fear within the audience;
3. the clarity of the message (as a call to violence);
4. the existence of suitable historical conditions to make an audience receptive to dangerous speech;
5. 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: Namely, 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. In other words, the greater the variety of voices, the less influential

⁵⁹ Aday et al (2010:2).

⁶⁰ 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).

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 new media in conflict by addressing the human rather than technological dimension of conflict dynamics. That is, the goal of an intervention needs to be 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 conflict 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 crowdsourcing 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 cooperation 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 equally necessary in order to avoid marginalizing this community, especially in the South. Despite the efforts of international media development organizations to foster uni-lingual (Uzbek) and multi-lingual (Uzbek/Kyrgyz/Russian) radio, the situation remains acute, due in part to the lack of skilled Uzbek journalists. Consequently, and to the detriment of national

reconciliation, Uzbek audiences in Kyrgyzstan get most of their information from neighboring Uzbekistan.⁶¹

- It is imperative to point out that although 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.⁶² Just as having a hammer makes everything look 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.”⁶³
- In each instance, by increasing and changing the numbers and kinds of voices to which vulnerable communities have access 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.

⁶¹ See Eurasianet 2012.

⁶² For example, Fondation Hironnelle’s Radio Okapi in Congo, or Search for Common Ground’s Studio Ijambo and Talking Drum Radio in Burundi and Rwanda.

⁶³ See Himelfarb and Aday (2013: 5-6).

- Coordinating media programs with on-the-ground development and social change efforts may, but is not guaranteed to elevate the “earned credibility” of both.⁶⁴

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 topic X.
- Under conditions of sufficient urgency, if the tipping point to violence is palpable, it may be appropriate to launch an intervention, such as an SMS campaign attempting to dissuade people from engaging in armed conflict. Even under these urgent circumstances, however, 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. Absent the 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.⁶⁵
- 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

⁶⁴ “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).

⁶⁵ 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).

reduce its likelihood; or long enough following violence to reduce the likelihood of its recurrence.

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