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# Diplomacy in the New Information Environment

Steven Livingston

For much of the last century, journalists and officials have been partners in a type of ritualistic exchange. Through briefings and press conferences, background interviews, press releases, and other institutionally-based interactions, reporters have usually gleaned information in sufficient quantities to report the news. In turn, officials have usually managed to maintain a measure of control over the direction of international affairs priorities and policies. The relationship has not always been amicable of course, as almost any State Department or embassy spokesperson can testify. But as a rule, and as thirty years of political communication scholarship show, overall policy priorities and objectives have been defined by policymakers. Research has found that institutionally-based descriptions of international affairs have formed the core of news reporting and public debate.<sup>1</sup> As political communication scholars Lance Bennett and Jarol Manheim found in their analysis of news coverage of the First Gulf War, "As a practical matter, news organizations routinely leave policy framing and issue emphasis to political elites (generally, government officials)."<sup>2</sup>

This dynamic is almost certainly in the midst of a fundamental change. Advances in information and communication technologies challenge the dominant position of diplomats in international affairs news. Though still formidable, officials are more likely to find their

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assertions questioned, their premises challenged, and their objectives scrutinized by the news media and other organizations now empowered by the Internet, wireless telephony, and the information gathering capabilities of space-based satellite systems. "Media access to technology that was once the exclusive domain of governments," writes Robert J. Kurz, "has changed the nature of who knows what and when, thus altering the terms of policy debate."<sup>3</sup>

The new challenges now facing government officials come from two principle sources. First, advances in the technologies used to gather information from remote or otherwise inaccessible areas have created a more transparent information environment. Second, sophisticated political advocacy organizations have begun to use these technologies, often collaboratively with news organizations, to advocate specific policy positions.

**The CNN Effect (Plus).** The place to begin consideration of advanced information technology is with global real-time television. With the advent of CNN, U.S. foreign policy officials found themselves operating in a more complex and challenging information environment, one that extended beyond the three national network news broadcasts

and a handful of wire services and elite newspapers.<sup>4</sup> As David D. Pearce noted in 1995, "Policies can no longer be presented to the public in the abstract. They are constantly measured against images on television—images that are instantly available, around the clock and around the globe."<sup>5</sup> Though correct in his general point, Pearce overstated the reach of global television *at the time*. Images were instantly available, but from only a limited number of places. Even CNN's coverage of international events was usually limited to the Middle East and a few other major metropolises, such as London, Moscow, Hong Kong, and Washington. Only occasionally was this pattern punctuated by episodic attention to major catastrophes in less developed parts of the globe.<sup>6</sup>

Today, CNN and its competitors are able to reach beyond the typical handful of metropolitan areas and report news live from distant and previously inaccessible locations. Some of this is the consequence of advances in news technology, and some of it is the consequence of growth in the number of news outlets. The growing importance of al Jazeera offers a good example of this latter point.<sup>7</sup> Al Jazeera first gained prominence in the West during the war in Afghanistan, a prominence that was underscored by its role in the more recent war in Iraq. In Afghanistan, al Jazeera caused considerable consternation to U.S. officials by broadcasting videotapes of Osama bin Laden. In response to this and the overall effectiveness of al Qaeda's information offensive against the West, the United States and Britain established the Coalition Information Center, an around-the-clock news center in Pakistan with offices in London, Washington, and Islamabad.<sup>8</sup>

The Bush administration also asked U.S. television networks to stop airing bin Laden's remarks, claiming that the tapes might contain hidden messages to terrorists cells in the United States.

Even though the networks complied with the administration's request, bin Laden's words and images were still readily available on al Jazeera's website, not to mention other news websites from around the world. Even without the Internet, satellite television viewers continued to have access to bin Laden's remarks on al Jazeera and other foreign news networks. "As recently as a decade ago," noted Seth Schiesel of *The New York Times*, "such an agreement between the government and broadcasters might have prevented Mr. bin Laden from communicating by television with any followers in the United States. No more. The global village simply has too many pathways."<sup>9</sup> The privatization of advanced communication satellite systems means that transmitting television signals from the Middle East—or anywhere else for that matter—no longer rests in the hands of a few entities easily swayed by government pressure. Instead, satellite operations are spread around the globe and use a variety of communication satellite systems. What is more, transmission equipment, used by news crews on the ground to link with these satellites now "[allows] television networks to deploy cameras and crew to remote areas more easily than ever before."<sup>10</sup> This last point is taken up in the following article by Jonathan Higgins.

Today, global television is enabled by an astonishing array of devices that collectively reset the terms of debate in the foreign affairs arena. I call this the CNN Effect (Plus). The main point is that television news is less encumbered by logistical challenges when covering news in dis-

tant or inaccessible locations. In the 1990s, television news coverage of remote locations required a significant commitment of money, time, and equipment. Though this is often still the case, there are now alternatives to this. Videophones, for instance, fit in overhead luggage racks on commercial aircraft, replacing the tons of equipment otherwise required for remote television transmissions. Furthermore, they avoid the regulatory requirements that limit other kinds of satellite communications. Indeed, as the *Wall Street Journal* recently noted of the technologies used by journalists covering a U.S. invasion of Iraq, "The prices of the gear, most of it available off the shelf, have fallen so far that even free-lance journalists can file video reports."<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, the astonishing expansion of wireless telephony around the globe, described in this section by Dan Steinbock, has at least three important consequences for journalism and policy-making. First, cellular telephony allows journalists to tap into wireless networks, helping them coordinate their activities with one another and with editors back in home offices. Using their cellular telephones, journalists can file stories, check sources, and access data. Second, wireless telephony has come to play an important role in grassroots political mobilization efforts. Text messaging and conventional voice transmissions enable political activists to organize protests in a highly fluid, spontaneous manner—what some refer to as the creation of "smart mobs."<sup>12</sup> For example, the massive global protest rallies in opposition to U.S. war plans against Iraq were organized by a handful of small groups using email and text messaging.<sup>13</sup> Finally, wireless devices serve as remote sensors, often reaching into unfolding events as they are happening.

For instance, passengers aboard the hijacked aircraft on September 11 called both loved ones and authorities to report what was happening. Similarly, when Chechen rebels took control of a Moscow theater in 2002, several of the hostages, including at least two journalists, used their cell phones to report what was happening inside the theater. When Russian security forces pumped toxic gas into the theater during an assault on the hostage takers, one of the hostages reported events live over a Moscow radio station. More recently, the ability of wireless devices to take and send pictures has added to the capabilities of wireless devices to serve as remote sensor networks. In February, the BBC asked its worldwide audience to send in digital images taken with photo phones from anti-war protests held around the globe.<sup>14</sup> As *Editor & Publisher* remarked, "the now-ubiquitous digital camera and the soon-to-be-ubiquitous photo phone are likely to increase the availability of images that a small photojournalism staff can't get to, or are not in place to capture."<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps no other imaging technology signifies this trend more than commercial, high-resolution satellites. Commercial reconnaissance satellites, discussed in this section by John Baker, Kevin O'Connell, and John Robertson, offer news media and advocacy groups the ultimate ability to take pictures of areas otherwise out of reach. In the last three years, the increased capacity of private firms to take high-resolution images from space has facilitated a revolution in reporting news from "denied access areas." Using detailed satellite photographs, international news media organizations have reported on North Korean weapons facilities and labor camps, as well as Iranian, Iraqi, Israeli, Indian, and Pakistani nuclear

facilities. U.S. military bases such as the Groom Lake complex in Nevada and the new Central Command headquarters in Qatar have also been photographed, analyzed, and described in great detail in news accounts and on websites.<sup>16</sup>

Though Higgins, Steinbock, and Baker discuss each of these technologies separately, it is important to keep in mind that they often operate synergistically. For example, in April 2001 a U.S. EP-3 surveillance aircraft was forced to land at a Chinese airbase after it collided with a Chinese fighter jet. Space Imaging's Ikonos satellite took the first independent photograph of the U.S. aircraft sitting on the runway at the airbase. Defense analyst John Pike captured the significance of the images in an interview with CNN. He said that Space Imaging's ability to produce a series of images from a denied access area represented "quite a breakthrough in

craft, in what was the first-ever unauthorized live television transmission from inside China. Viewers around the world then witnessed Weaver's arrest by Chinese authorities via videophone and continued to listen to her report events live with her cell phone for some time while in custody. Weaver also managed to conduct several interviews with newspaper reporters in the United States—journalists who had watched her arrest on live television just minutes before. In the EP-3 incident, we see commercial remote sensing, communication satellite technology, and wireless telephony working together to pry open glimpses of events that would have been completely shrouded in secrecy just a few years ago.

What effect will these trends have on journalism and policymaking? As a result of videophones, wireless devices, and remote sensing satellites, the emphasis in

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satellite newsgathering, that we're able to get the satellite imagery almost as quickly as the classified community is."<sup>17</sup> Pike's point is the same as mine: there is a growing balance between official and non-official sources of information concerning international affairs. Groups and organizations outside of government now have access to quality information almost as fast as government officials.

Videophones and cellular telephones also played a new role in the EP-3 event. CNN producer and correspondent Lisa Rose Weaver used a videophone to transmit pictures of the U.S. crew members departing China on a commercial air-

journalism will probably shift more towards pictures for reporting the news. Indeed, the very definition of news may continue to shift to "that which is happening now and can be seen in pictures." This is news as voyeurism. If true, this has political significance: News will tend to come from the streets and frontlines of battle, rather than from the traditional venues of institutionally-situated reporting of official pronouncements and descriptions. Whether this results in less control of the policy agenda remains to be seen. Certainly, the experience of the embedded reporters during the war in Iraq suggests that at least the Pentagon has

adapted to the new information environment and has found ways not only to control it, but to even take advantage of it. Still, in other circumstances, it is easy to imagine that rather than setting the agenda, officials will more often find themselves reacting to an agenda determined by others empowered by an array of information gathering technologies.

**Grassroots Intelligence.** Information and communication technologies have reshaped the information environment. “This revolution is not simply an increase in the volume of information,” notes political scientist Bruce Bimber, “it is also qualitative, as information of all kinds becomes cheaper, its structure ever more complex and nonlinear, and its distribution far more symmetric than at any time in the past.”<sup>18</sup> This idea is similar to what political scientists Bernard I. Finel and Kristin M. Lord describe as transparency, which Lord examines in greater detail later in this section.

For much of the twentieth century, information, including intelligence, was costly to obtain and store; its distribution was highly asymmetrical; and, therefore, it was generally held by complex hierarchical organizations. In intelligence matters, the asymmetrical nature of the distribution of information was a product of both the technical means of acquisition (highly classified reconnaissance satellites and signals intelligence) and of a statutory mandate. As a result, news organizations and advocacy groups lacked access to information that would have allowed them to conduct independent technical assessments of remote or otherwise inaccessible circumstances. This is clearly less true today.<sup>20</sup>

Advanced information and communication technologies enable groups and organizations outside of the government

to collect data, analyze them, and formulate their own perspectives and demands. GlobalSecurity.org, the Federation of American Scientists, and the Institute for Science and International Security, among other organizations, now have the ability to independently assess weapons programs, nuclear facilities, troop deployments, and other major developments using satellites and other technical means. Until very recently, policymakers enjoyed a monopoly on satellite surveillance data. This allowed them to either avoid public debate altogether regarding intelligence or national security issues, or to rely on a “trust us, if you only knew what we know” argument when debate could not be avoided. That monopoly has now been broken. Advocacy organizations can now say, “we do know what you know, or at least we know enough, and here is our analysis of the situation.” As a result, policymakers have lost a measure of control over the nature, timing, and content of foreign affairs debates.

Last year’s disclosure of Iran’s nuclear facilities demonstrates the new balance of information and its affect on policy. On December 12, 2002, CNN reported that two nuclear fuel facilities were under construction in Iran. The facilities appeared related to the production of enriched uranium and heavy water. When an inspection visit by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in December was rebuffed by Iran, David Albright, a former IAEA inspector and founder of the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS), realized that the Bush administration would likely remain silent on the matter. Though the U.S. had known about the facilities for over a year, it “did not want to draw attention to Iran at a

time when it wanted to focus on Iraq, and when it wanted the rest of the world to focus on Iraq."<sup>21</sup> Disagreeing with this policy, ISIS and CNN developed a story using satellite images of the facilities taken by Digital Globe's high-resolution satellite. Within days, the Bush administration was faced with a battle for control over the policy agenda.<sup>22</sup> As Michael Gordon of *The New York Times* noted, "The new information on Iran's program comes at an awkward time for the Bush administration, which is making final military preparations for a potential U.S.-led invasion to topple the government of Saddam Hussein—an action justified partly on grounds that Iraq is seeking to develop nuclear weapons."<sup>23</sup>

Political scientist Daniel C. Hallin postulates that the power of the president is found in his ability to manipulate symbols. "The exercise of this kind of symbolic power naturally depends to a large

degree on the president's control of the news."<sup>24</sup> But in an era of high-tech media, the Internet, and savvy advocacy groups, controlling information is more challenging, if not simply impossible.

It is important to avoid the tendency to describe the emerging international information and policy environment in black and white terms, as either still controlled in a monopolistic fashion by officials or as completely free and uncontrollable. Either argument would be an oversimplification. Instead, we should consider general trends. The reasonable conclusion one reaches after considering the changes in the information environment described by the contributors to this special section is that technology is redistributing power to non-governmental and non-state entities. This is the major consequence of new information and communication technologies.

## NOTES

1 See Leon Sigal, *Reporters and Officials: the Organization and Politics of News Making* (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1973) and Steven Hess, *International News & Foreign Correspondents* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1996).

2 W. Lance Bennett and Jarol B. Manheim, "Taking the Media by Storm: Information, Cuing, and the Democratic Process in the Persian Gulf Conflict," *Political Communication*, no. 10: 331–351.

3 Robert J. Kurz, "Congress and the Media: Forces in the Struggle Over Foreign Policy," in Simon Serfaty, ed., *The Media and Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991), 76.

4 See Steven Livingston, "Clarifying the CNN Effect" (The Joan Shorenstein Center for Press, Politics and Public Policy, The Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1996); Nik Gowing, "Real-time Television Coverage of Armed Conflicts and Diplomatic Crises: Does it Pressure or Distort Foreign Policy Decisions?" Working Paper 94-1 (Cambridge, MA: Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard University, June 1994); Johanna Neuman, *Lights, Camera, War: Is Media Technology Driving International Politics?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

5 David Pearce, *Wary Partners: Diplomats and the Media* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Books, 1995) 21–22.

6 Steven Livingston and David Stephen, "American Network Coverage of Genocide in Rwanda in the Context of General Trends in International News," in Susanne Schmeidl and Howard Adelman, eds., *Early Warning and Early Response* (New York: CIAO, 1998).

7 Fouad Ajami, "What the Muslim World Is Watching," *The New York Times Magazine* (18 November 2001): 48; Elaine Sciolino, "An Arab Station Offers Ground-Breaking Coverage," *The New York Times* (9 October 2001).

8 Elizabeth Becker, "In the War on Terrorism, A Battle to Shape Opinion," *The New York Times* (11 November 2001).

9 Seth Schiesel, "Stopping Signals From Satellite TV Proves Difficult," *The New York Times* (15 October, 2001).

10 Schiesel.

11 Emily Nelson, "Media to Employ High-Tech Gear Unavailable in 1991 Iraq Conflict," *Wall Street Journal* (12 March 2003).

12 Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution: Transforming Cultures and Communities in the Age of Instant Access* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2002).

13 George Packer, "Smart-Mobbing the War," *The New York Times* (9 March 2003): 46.

14 Steve Outing, "Photo Phones Portend Visual Revolution," *Editor & Publisher* (13 March 2003).