Norms & Standards	Evolving Environments	Emerging Actors

All That Is Solid Melts Into Air

ANTHONY OLCOTT | MAY 2010

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF DIPLOMACY

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."

The Communist Manifesto

It is eerie to reread *The Communist Manifesto* while contemplating the profound and deeply unpredictable effects of the new information revolution. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels saw dialectical materialism and the iron laws of history as driving change, not the Internet and the digitization of information, but their jeremiad, that "all that is solid melts into air," looks startlingly prescient in regard to huge swaths of the information industry. Book publishing, TV network news, newspapers, and even traditional universities are, if not melting into air, then at least finding their revenue bases eroding, their customer bases migrating, and the positions of prestige they once occupied shrinking toward nothingness.

There are many factors driving this evaporation—economic, social, demographic, and cultural—but one that all of these troubled industries share is that they are losing the power and prestige they once enjoyed as gatekeepers, or intermediaries. As network analysis has shown, an element in any web of relations, or network—what this type of analysis calls "nodes"—may be described by any of three dimensions:

The contours of diplomatic engagement are changing rapidly, as are the environments in which diplomacy is crafted, honed, and practiced. New media have changed the pace and content of political awareness and provided new tools for diplomacy.

Every global issue now tests the assumptions and practices of traditional diplomacy. Non-state actors—whether benign or malign, constructive or disruptive—now play increasingly important roles in the conduct of international politics and lead us to think differently about global development, conflict, and reconciliation.

These issues, conditions, and actors are helping to refine, and perhaps redefine, what diplomacy means, how it is conducted, and how we examine the new terrain of diplomacy.

edmund a walsh school of foreign service   georgetown university

- its degree of connectivity, or how many direct links it has to other nodes in the system;

- its degree of centrality, or how few links are required for it to reach the greatest number of other nodes in a network; and

- the degree of its "between-ness," the inelegant term for the degree to which a given node serves as a pinch-point or portal, a gatekeeper that controls the flow of information through the system.

It is the last of these, "between-ness" or the ability to be a gatekeeper, that is generally considered to be the single most important measure of power in a network.

Control of information is also one of the defining qualities of the modern state. In fact, since the first purpose of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 was to institutionalize the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio,* giving kings the right to define the religion of their realms, information control is a fundamental element of sovereignty. As important as the right, however, are the *means* to create gates that may be kept, by privileging some kinds of information and hindering, suppressing, or outlawing other kinds. States have developed a variety of ways in which they can control and shape information flow, through economic levers (taxation, subsidization, privileging distribution); legal levers (censorship, libel laws, antitrust laws); and administrative controls (licensing, spectrum allocation).

What has become plain only in retrospect, however, is that what most helped states, and the elites who lived within them, to maintain their control over information was an accident of technology—that, until just a decade or so ago, information was far cheaper to receive than it was to create and send. The purchase price of a single newspaper—what economists call the Nth copy price—is just a few pennies, while the "first copy cost"—the means required to buy the printing presses, pay the salaries of those who wrote, edited, printed, and distributed each day's press run—would run to millions of dollars. Nth

copy prices are more difficult to calculate for broadcast media, particularly in places where advertisers or sponsors absorb the cost in exchange for audience attention, but still the tens of dollars required to buy a radio, or the hundreds to buy a TV, are insignificant in comparison to the resources required to set up even the smallest radio broadcasting station, to say nothing of a nationwide TV network. The concentration of financial resources necessary to fund large information outlets, and the concentration of physical assets in which that resulted, provided governments with significant levers of control.

Another consequence of the imbalance between would-be receivers of information and ways in which that information might be sent was that those who managed to get their information sent or, even better, to become the public face of that information were presumed to have made it into the privileged information "flow" because of the innate quality of their information or of themselves. To be a "published author" or a "much-quoted expert" or a "TV personality" lifted the person who was any of those things to a higher plane of authority. Indeed, in many instances, the conveyor of the information became more important than the information itself. To Americans of a certain age, the best example of that phenomenon was CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite, dubbed "the most trusted man in America" and even considered, on that basis, as a possible vice presidential candidate in 1972. This phenomenon was not exclusive to the United States, however: Even in the U.S.S.R., radio announcer Yuri Levitan came to be considered "the voice of the news," adding gravity to whatever he was broadcasting, while later announcers such as Svetlana Sorokina and Aleksandr Nevzorov would, for a time, become the faces of *glasnost* and the new Russia.

It is important to stress that those who were at the interface between information and the public gained enormous authority even in states with tight central political control. Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod has described in her book, *Dreams of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt,* the curious power that accrued to those who made soap operas for Egyptian state TV. Although it was the state that set the topics for the soap

operas—conceived as a means for educating and improving Egypt's peasantry—those who wrote, directed, and filmed the episodes were able to insert large portions of their own agendas into their vastly popular shows, even when those agendas were at odds with those of the state.

In short, what all of these figures, and others like them—the pundits, the experts, and the authorities—enjoyed was control of the gates through which information flowed—or did not. Although some of these people or institutions might also create the information that flowed through the pinch-points they controlled, it was the gates themselves that were of greatest importance, conveying significance upon whatever information passed through them—*simply because it was being allowed through.* Undoubtedly there were always those who dissented or disagreed with what entered the sanctioned information space, but the enormous difficulty of distributing information that elites and authorities did not anoint by letting it pass through society's gates usually reduced that disagreement to kitchen mutterings.

That this is no longer the case can be demonstrated by comparing two similar "expert" pronouncements. In February 1968, after returning from a visit to Vietnam, Walter Cronkite told his audience that "it is increasingly clear to this reporter" [full text—partial video] that the war then being fought in Indochina was unwinnable—a moment that is widely credited with having sharply shifted U.S. public opinion and also is said to have played a large part in motivating Lyndon Johnson's surprise announcement, a month later, that he would not seek reelection. In September 2004, Dan Rather—Cronkite's replacement—aired a segment of *60 Minutes Wednesday* that featured memos said to have been "authenticated by experts retained by CBS" that were highly critical of George W. Bush's performance as a member of the Air National Guard thirty years earlier. Within minutes of that claim being aired, bloggers and others who distrusted Rather or who supported Bush (or both) set about trying to prove their contention that Rather's documents were forgeries. This dispersed network of volunteers, partisans, and "Rather-phobes" quickly managed to find people who

knew that the memo's typeface was not used on typewriters in the 1970s, while other amateurs created and posted an ani-mated GIF file that demonstrated convincingly that the memo that claimed to be from 1973 was in fact contemporary, pro-duced using Microsoft's 2004 version of Word. For about two weeks, Rather and those who supported him defended the au-thenticity of their story (this included a *New York Times* article a week after the incident that bore the remarkable headline that the memos were "fake but accurate"), but in the end CBS was forced to recant and apologize. Four senior CBS editors were forced to resign, and Rather later stepped down as news anchor, even though his contract still had more than two years to run. Rather subsequently sued the network, but without result.

One difference between these two incidents is that Rath-er's claim was factbased, and so could be disproven, while Cronkite's was more open-ended, with no single document or "fact" that might disprove, or indeed prove, his contention. Far more important, however, is that Cronkite controlled an impor-tant information chokepoint, while Rather did not. The "bully pulpit" that the news anchor seat had once seemed to provide had by 2004 been increasingly contested, not just by the much greater number of on-air TV news shows and news commen-tators, some of whom contested Rather's version for ideologi-cal reasons and some because the story made "good copy," but also, and more importantly, by bloggers, on-line journals, and even the cascade of simple emails that people could send one another about the controversy—all means of communication that were cheap, ubiquitous, and easy to create and to dissemi-nate.

Some of the famous "debunkings" credited to the Internet in recent years—the disgracing of politicians George Allen and Trent Lott, the demonstration that Iranian missile tests and Is-raeli bombardment of Beirut had been "digitally enhanced," the discovery in England that prominent members of Parliament had significantly padded their expense accounts, and others— could be said to share some of what proved fatal to Rather's reputation, the provision of informal or nonsanctioned infor-mation that disputed the "official" version that the principals

were trying to maintain. Far more broadly, however, research has demonstrated convincingly that the phenomenon of "expertise," of claimed authority, is mostly a function of limited information. The most exhaustive of these studies was Philip Tetlock's *Expert Political Judgement,* which compared the public statements made by nearly three hundred scholars, economists, policymakers, and journalists about what was happening and what was going to happen in the U.S.S.R. to what actually had happened, or what became known after the country dissolved. The results, in the words of one reviewer, showed that "the experts" had performed less well than "dart-throwing monkeys." Financier and author Nassim Taleb has made similar claims about so-called "expert authorities," albeit with less data and more acerbity, in his books *Fooled by Randomness* and *The Black Swan.*

However, it is not just in the arenas of politics or finance that the rising tide of information has begun to swamp the gatekeepers. Adherents of religions that are based upon strict literal interpretations of text-based laws, such as Judaism and Islam, have systems that empower certain people to issue authoritative judgments about how important texts are to be understood and the actions that those texts then require. Although there has always been disagreement among the various authorities, thus leading to various schools, "masters," and *rebbeim*, the realities of how information was transmitted meant that people were largely subject to the authority where they lived. There is a group of western scholars who have argued that, for Islam at least, the Internet has had a profoundly disruptive effect on that system, providing the resources for would-be adherents to bypass established hierarchies, encouraging what Olivier Roy called "autodidactism," Peter Mandaville called "syncretism," and Bruce Lawrence called "Allah on-line."

The impact of more easily available information on traditional authority structures is profound even on a mundane level. Orthodox Jews and observant Muslims alike need authoritative decisions on whether particular practices are permitted or not:

- Examples from Islam include: May a <u>woman ride a bicycle</u>? Are <u>*sukuk* bonds</u> permissible financial instruments? Are specific named <u>sexual activities permitted</u>?

- Examples from Judaism include: May someone take <u>oral medicine on fast days</u>? Is it permissible to use <u>prewashed bagged lettuce without rewashing it</u>? Must a person using a grocery store cart be concerned that the user before <u>may have placed forbidden food items</u> in it?

Such questions have always arisen among the faithful of both religions, but until very recently the only answer a person might receive was that given by the local rav (for Jews) or mufti (for Muslims). The Internet and cellphones have disrupted that age-old authority chain, allowing believers, if they wish, essentially to seek until they find an answer they find congenial, through a process that among Muslims has come to be known as <u>"fatwa shopping"</u> and among Jews as "<u>rabbi shopping</u>"—the latter a practice that <u>one Web site</u> declares unequivocally to be "a disgrace, an abuse, and circumvention of Rabbinic authority."

"Fatwa shopping," "rabbi shopping," and, for that matter, the <u>abundance of widely circulated conspiracy theories</u> also make clear something about the new information environment that the focus on incidents such as the Dan Rather fracas, or the findings of Tetlock's *post facto* review of pundit predictions, does not. Although a great deal of the antiauthority, antiexpert activity on the Internet may be disputation of fact, what most people are doing in the vastness of this new sea of information is *shopping*—looking for information with which they already agree. It is not that a particular fatwa or rabbinical ruling is "correct" or "incorrect" (though of course there are people who will call any given clerical pronouncement each of those), but rather that the wealth of information now available allows people to search for, and find, the information that they consider to be "true."

There is a large body of scholarly research devoted to demonstrating that humans are not swayed by—indeed, may not even be able to perceive—information that does not fit into

the narrative frameworks that they already possess.[1] Modern globalized life in general and the information explosion that is such a fundamental part of that in specific are having at least two profound changes:

- The vastly variegated information that is now literally at almost every person's fingertips is moving those narratives away from the "natural" position they had always enjoyed and increasingly turning them into "metanarratives," or belief systems that their carriers are able to perceive as in competition with other narratives, and thus they become conscious of them specifically *as narratives,* rather than "reality;" and

- Save perhaps for a few exceptions, most people confront any challenges to their own narrative by seeking corroboration and reinforcement. Numerous studies all suggest the same thing—that most people use the Internet and other new information resources to find others like themselves [example one; example two: example three].

There are enormous consequences and implications that flow from this transformation, not all of which are fully elaborated, or even clear. One consequence that seems already to be evident, however, is that the power to control information, which organizations and authorities have enjoyed so long, is being strenuously challenged by the emergence of enormous numbers of other places to which people now can turn to seek the information they desire. This does not mean that gatekeeping has become a thing of the past—in fact, all studies of Internet behavior suggest that in all categories of content, "success" (defined as the number of people who visit a particular site) is sharply differentiated, with a small percentage of "super-star"

---

1. Prominent examples include George Lakoff, *The Political Mind;* Drew Westen, *The Political Brain;* Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture;* Kishore Mahbubani, *Can Asians Think?;* Richard Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought;* Charles M. Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars, *Building Cross-Cultural Competence;* and Farhad Manjoo, *True Enough.*
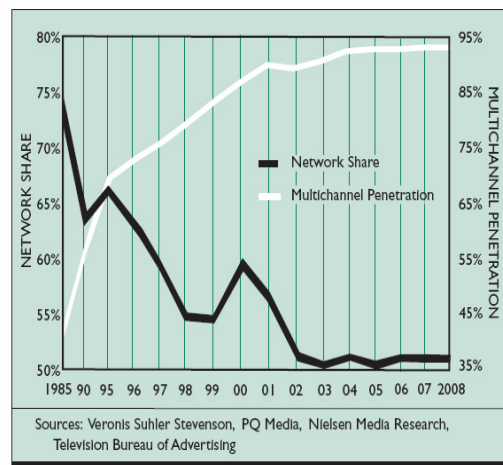
sites getting the <u>overwhelming majority of the visitors</u>, while the vast majority get few. In fact, a <u>recent study</u> shows that 60 percent of all Internet activity goes to about one hundred sites, while just thirty of these "hyper-giants" enjoy 30 percent of all Internet activity.

What even those numbers show, however, is that as the number of gates grows, the importance of any particular gate shrinks—even a "hypergiant" faces competition. The transformation of the vast U.S. TV audience shows this clearly—as the number of channels that may be watched grows, the percentage of the overall audience that watches any one channel shrinks dramatically. As <u>writer Ken Auletta has noted</u>, in 1965 advertisers could reach 80 percent of the U.S. audience by buying time on just three networks, while in 2004, to reach the same percentage, time would have to have been bought on 125 different channels (the same point is made by the graph at right). The pace of change has continued so dramatically since that article was written that even the 125 figure now seems far too low. Nor is it just the number of competitors within a medium—most information media now also face competition from other media. TV appears to be <u>losing some audience overall</u> to computers, especially among younger users, while <u>newspapers are bleeding customers</u>. Some may be moving to the newspapers' on-line versions, but many seem to be <u>vanishing entirely</u>.

Nor is that phenomenon of hyperabundance limited to the United States—the Middle East has witnessed an explosion of free-to-air (FTA) satellite TV stations (over five hundred Arab-language ones at last count, with another one thousand—one thousand five hundred available in other languages). The consequence, a <u>Jordan-based media analyst complains</u>, is that "too many stations are chasing too small a market," making it impossible for any of the stations to <u>become commercially viable</u> (one consequence of which is that they all remain dependent upon sponsors with regional political agendas). Indeed, in a series of studies done at a time when there were about 350 FTA Arab-language TV stations, respondents in four

Network Prime-Time Audience Share vs. Multichannel TV Household Penetration

Sources: Veronis Suhler Stevenson, PQ Media, Nielsen Media Research, Television Bureau of Advertising

FTA Stations Named Among "5 Favorites" by at least 50 Respondents

different Middle Eastern countries were asked to name their "five favorite TV stations." As may be seen in the graph at left, about half the two thousand one hundred respondents named MBC 1, a general entertainment channel, among their favorites, with consensus over other stations dropping off sharply thereafter. Only thirty-eight of the possible three undred fifty FTA stations were named by ten or more respondents, but even more notably, two hundred and twelve of the stations—or about 60 percent of those offering themselves to viewers—were not named by a single respondent. They were, in effect, gates through which no one wished to pass.

What has most affected the power of gatekeepers, of course, is not so much what is new about the information environment but rather what remains eternal—a day still has only twenty-four hours, and the human brain can only absorb and process about eight bytes of information a second, creating an effective absolute cap on the amount of information that any one human can use. Despite all the shortcuts and tricks that people are developing to try to cope better with the ever-expanding bazaar of information that clamors urgently for our attention, the fact remains that there is far more information available now than can possibly be absorbed. As a consequence, the gatekeeping equation has become inverted—authorities, institutions, and experts who wish to enjoy influence over people's views must now compete with one another to try to draw people to their gates, rather than the gates of others. For long-privileged institutions and authorities, accustomed to being heeded simply because it was they who were speaking, that inversion can indeed seem like the profanation of the sacred, the melting of the solid into air—even if the causes for that have nothing to do with Marx.