

From the MIPJ Executive Editor

INTRODUCTION

The origin of the MIPJ came from the confluence of various experiences, both personal and among friends and colleagues in international and humanitarian discourse who have been both in the field and among the more rarefied contingents of think tanks, academic institutions, and policy organizations. In each case, we had noted that there seemed to be a profound disconnect between “field reality” and the policy discourse surrounding human security issues—and particularly those during crisis, conflict, and disaster.

In each case, there seemed to be a couple of common themes responsible for this discrepancy—ones that have a profound effect upon the well-being of those very populations affected by crisis.

One of these is field experience. It is thought by many who have been to the field, and even among those who haven't, that no one should be able to make critical decisions about crisis-affected populations unless one has had sufficient time among them, being, firsthand, in the midst of that reality. Without that context, no one has the knowledge sufficient to determine actions or policy that will affect their well-being.

The second is the ability to parse information—both that which is direct from the field and that which comes from other means, sometimes circuitous, and often without having been vetted. If it has been vetted, the question then is by whom, as this still inherently necessitates the ability

to determine the relevancy and authority of those through whose hands it has passed.

With these issues and ideas in mind, while we cannot offer readers field experience in terms of the role of information in the international sphere, we can indeed do something in terms of its examination.

Over the last few decades, we have been bombarded by the supposition that this is indeed the “Information Age”—from the pervasive presence of mass media, the 24 hour news cycle, the advances in technology that allow for instant data aggregation, analysis and communication regardless of distance across continents, to the recent effects of social media, through its content and immediacy of dissemination, on international events.

In the cacophony of information being transmitted for consumption by various parties, the excitement over the technological means of aggregation and dissemination of content has sometimes surpassed what should be a critical emphasis on the integrity of the information—in other words, the integrity of the content—itsself. This includes issues of both how and why the information was aggregated, its immediacy versus its accuracy, inherent attention to both source transparency and accountability, and, especially during heightened tensions surrounding crisis, conflict and disaster, whether or not the information procured with all of these factors in mind can then be actionable when faced with the needs of the most vulnerable populations.

As many of us may remember from attempting even the most basic of programming in the 70's and 80's at the very begin-

nings of the ubiquity of personal computers, there was a common refrain that to this day sticks in many of our minds, and if it doesn't, it should:

“Garbage in, garbage out.”

Despite this “old-fashioned” wisdom of a seemingly bygone (and some among Generations X and Y would say arcane) technological era, in many cases, students these days are not taught to value critical analysis regarding where their information comes from, the intent of the source, how the information was procured, and whether or not it was sufficiently aggregated and analyzed by acceptable (and according to whom) means before being disseminated. The lines between “fact” and “opinion” (or even “documentary” and “editorial”) become blurred, as many have now been told that anything is truth, apparently, “if it is truth to someone.” Even the classic five W's (who, what, when, where, why/how), a mainstay of education for some of us during media units in primary or secondary education, have in many cases disappeared.

This presents critical problems in a world in which information, whether reliable or not, or used with the “right” intentions or not—is used to make decisions—whether on a personal scale or that which affects entire populations.

H.G. Wells, the famous science fiction writer and futurist, in seeing the rapidity of change in his own time following the Industrial Revolution, with such classics as *The Time Machine* in which progress would reach a dire and dystopian end, predicted the following in 1920, in *Outline of History*:

Human history becomes more

and more a race between education and catastrophe.

Russell Baker, the well-known essayist and “Observer” columnist for *The New York Times*, said the following, making a rather salient point, which in light of this subject, hits home:

An educated person is one who has learned that information almost always turns out to be at best incomplete and very often false, misleading, fictitious, mendacious - just dead wrong.

Flash forward to the present. Released May 1, 2012 in the second edition (2012) of *Empowering Independent Media* from the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Senior Director Margaret H. Sullivan in her introduction quotes Eric Newton of the Knight Foundation:

It's like the century after Gutenberg—there's a change in the model of knowledge. We don't understand it because we're in the middle of it.

His recommendation:

In this situation you have to run towards the confusion, not away from it.

As with any age in which progress is—or at least seems—exponential, this “Information Age” can either be a boon to the human cause, or like with any form of progress or technology, its capacity to change human life can also destroy as much as, if not more, than it creates. Its merits are wholly dependent upon those who wield its power, and their willingness to make a concerted effort to understand its capacities, which include both its values and its dangers.

And in this vein, because the use

of information in this age can often resemble a game of “telephone,” which has its international counterparts regardless to what area of the world one goes, information content can, if not unwittingly be mangled, also be rather decidedly finessed, manipulated, or even subverted depending upon in whose hands it resides and their intent in disseminating certain information, whether cherry-picked or outright vitiated for a particular cause.

And no one is more vulnerable than the populations for whom life has reached critical mass—those who are on the vulnerable, failing, or failed end of the human security spectrum. These are the populations who have the capacity to be subjugated twice: once because of whatever crisis, conflict, or disaster; a second time when information is inaccurate, compromised, or, even if verifiable (as accurate, transparent, and accountable as possible) it comes too late, is never even disseminated at all, or is disseminated to those without the will or the capacity to take decisive action when it is most called for.

In addition, while many international stakeholders might have only the best of intentions concerning such populations, in many cases, self-interest can either consciously or unconsciously come to the fore in the process of gathering, analyzing, and disseminating information. Intent is a powerful force, and when used for official purposes, such as fundraising, advocacy, research and a stakeholder's public information, information integrity can either purposefully or inadvertently take a hit when it comes to serving the best interests of an organization, whether government, public, or

private. Such self-interest, even among humanitarian contingents, whether consciously or unconsciously represented by their PR, public information, information operations and even data collection—including during the course of aid, development, and other humanitarian operations and subsequent monitoring and evaluation (if M&E is subsequently done)—when self-interest trumps information integrity, has the capacity to harm the very vulnerable populations whom the stakeholder most purports to serve.

Those with the education, as supposed by Russell Baker, to know better, do. Those who have seen firsthand the progress of a certain age, such as H.G. Wells, have the wisdom to approach the new with caution, knowing from experience that any new age, with the tendencies of humanity, can and often will be wielded like a sword, and with its proverbial double edge intact. And in this new age, like any other, the decisions made by virtue of information, evidence, data, or whatever other content will always be at the mercy—from aggregation to dissemination—of those who control it, for whatever purpose.

The primary mission of the MIPJ will be to examine and ask crucial questions about the role, the integrity, and the uses, wherever possible, of information content—and its varying media—of aggregation, analysis, dissemination, and reaction—in international relations and humanitarian affairs, particularly during heightened needs in crisis, conflict and disaster.

Additionally, in conjunction with our partners and other contributors, we will also seek to illuminate certain international issues and crises not receiving

sufficient coverage—including in terms of specific, yet critical nuances and context—in examining such crises, showing how information can be used for broader, positive purpose, and such cases where it isn't. We hope it is understood that contributions represent the ideas and experiences of the contributor, and sometimes, opinions will differ or even clash. However, they have been included because the ideas are important to a larger discourse—and even debate. Also, via these contributions, the reader might better be positioned to ask certain critical questions regarding the role of information—in all its forms—in international policy, human security issues, and humanitarian affairs.

CONTENT IN THE INAUGURAL EDITION

Again, as this is the inaugural edition, we will be covering a great deal of ground, seeking to look both at varying past and current issues and events.

For those interested in the more academic definition and relevancy of the MIPJ (as we will be acting as a hybrid for those in academic and professional spheres, but also for the public who are interested in the sub-

ject matter), information policy, broadly defined, is the following:

The role of information (content) and its flow from source to eventual target population: how it is gathered, analyzed, and disseminated; via what medium; to what population; and for what purpose.

The policy aspects of this are dependent upon the stakeholder, and the outlook on how this is and/or should be achieved.

We will also be looking into specific events, operations, and histories themselves and the actors who have participated, and how they chose to handle or reflect crisis, conflict, and disaster.

PARTNERS, CONTRIBUTORS, AND ADVISORY BOARD

We would like to thank our partners, contributors and advisory board members, without whom the MIPJ would not be possible, and without whom this inaugural edition would have been without some of its most extraordinary content.

These current partners include VII, PBS MediaShift, MediaStorm, FotoEvidence, News-motion.org, PROOF:Media for Social Justice, and SocialDocumentary.net.

Individual contributors for text features include: Patrick Meier, Svetlana Bachevanova, Jason P. Howe, Mark Southard, Janet Ritz, Professor Richard Norton, Monica Campbell, Anne Nelson, Claudia Hinterseer of NOOR, Teohna Williams, Melissa Ulto, Sean Mullan, Julian Rubinstein, and Leigh Barrett.

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Last but not least, a warm thanks to our Advisory Board: Michael Ware, formerly of CNN and currently of Penance Films; Brian Storm of MediaStorm; Marcus Bleasdale of VII; Christopher Mikkelsen and David Mikkelsen Troensegaard, Co-Founders of Refugees United; Dr. Erica Pardini of Pax Ludens; and Professor Alan Hatcher.