

# The 'CNN Effect' and the 'New Media'—Its Value and Challenges to Governments and Its Military in United Nations Peace Keeping Operations

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## Abstract:

With technological advancement in communications, news media, dubbed the 'CNN Effect' is now able to broadcast live from anywhere on the globe. The 'New Media' creates both positive and negative impacts which can affect the reputation of an organisation and even the peace and security of a nation. In any military operation, news media must be actively engaged to influence homeland public opinion that the risks involved are calculated and necessary to further its national interest, win support of the stakeholders of the country in conflict, in order to achieve the desired objectives and end-state of transiting from conflict to peace and garner influence with the international community that the participating country is playing its role as a responsible global citizen.

*Keywords: New Media; Technology; Affect the Reputation; Appropriate Management*

## INTRODUCTION

*"Once the commitment is made and the soldiers go, the minicams will be there, and we must prepare the troops for the roll (and the role) of the CNN video. If policy makers and military leaders hold no vision of the human face of our commitments, if they tell no stories from the heart of the how, and the why of our military actions, then others will do it for them, and the results may not be to their liking."*

*Frank J. Stech<sup>1</sup>*

With technological advancement in communications, news media, dubbed the 'CNN effect' is now able to broadcast live from anywhere on Earth. This has set United Nations Peace Keeping Operations (UNPKO) into a global theatre, where decisions and actions of the strategic policy makers and military commanders are scrutinised 24/7 before a live camera that never blinks. With the emergence of 'New Media' such as Short Message Service (SMS), YouTube, Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter and Internet Forums, this effect has

been amplified. "Yet exactly what those effects are, when they are likely to be seen, and even whether they exist at all is the subject of intense debate."<sup>2</sup>

"The 'CNN Effect' and 'New Media' can be viewed as a double-edged sword, both as a strategic enabler and a potential operational risk."<sup>3</sup> In UNPKO, winning the hearts and minds of the people, at home, in the international community and the country in conflict is of paramount importance. This can only be achieved through the means of global media communication to influence the people. With this, it can be argued that the role of both the news media and the 'New Media' are essential to achieve mission success in UNPKO.

In this essay, I will firstly clarify what the 'CNN Effect' and 'New Media' mean and state its influence on governments and its military. Secondly, I will move on to discuss the military-media relationship and highlight the media effects in UNPKO. Thirdly, I will elaborate on the value and challenges of media effects

in UNPKO. Finally, I will attempt to deliberate on how it matters to the SAF.

THE CNN EFFECT

*"CNN is the sixteenth member of the UN Security Council."  
Former UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali "*

"The phrase 'CNN effect' encapsulated the idea that real-time communications technology could provoke

major responses from domestic audiences and political elites to global events."<sup>5</sup> This statement highlights the suggested impact of the 'CNN Effect'. According to Associate Professor Steven Livingston, there are at least three distinct conceptual understandings of CNN effects: (1) "a policy agenda-setting agent," (2) "an impediment to the achievement of desired policy goals" and (3) "an accelerant to policy decision-making."<sup>6</sup> (Table 1 provides an outline of these effects).

CNN EFFECTS	DESCRIPTION
Agenda Setting Agency	An emotional, compelling coverage of atrocities or humanitarian crises may reorder foreign policy priorities. Some examples are: Somalia, Bosnia and Haiti.
Impediment	Two types: 1. An emotional grisly coverage may undermine morale, result in government attempts to sanitise war and limit access to the battlefield. 2. A global, real-time media may constitute a threat to operational security.
Accelerant	Media may shorten decision-making response time and television diplomacy is evident. During times of war, live, global television offer potential security-intelligence risks, But, the media may also be a force multiplier and a method of sending signals. This is evident in most foreign policy issues which receive media attention.

Table 1: Conceptual Variations of CNN Effect.<sup>7</sup>

Policy Agenda-Setting Agent

"To put it another way, media-as-agenda-setting-agent argues that the choices and selections of national interests are too heavily weighted in favour of what happens to get covered by CNN or other media."<sup>8</sup> Steven Livingston suggested that the 'CNN Effect' does not influence every national interest, but rather selected national interest that happens to be covered. Does the news media set its own agenda or do policy makers or even the public influence it?

"Media reports can give a false impression through a tendency to 'tunnel vision'—to report on only what is seen through a camera lens."<sup>9</sup> News media is after all,

reporter and organisation biased; it has the ability to frame events and report according to its own agenda to influence the public. A case in point is the role of Qatar based, international news channel, Al Jazeera. "For years, critics have assailed what they see as anti-Semitic, anti-American bias in the channel's news content. In the wake of 9/11, Al Jazeera broadcast statements by Osama bin Laden and reported from within the ranks of the Taliban, earn a reputation as a mouthpiece for terrorists."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, there is little doubt that policy makers have the ability to exploit the news media as in the case of the Communist leadership in North Korea. There is also

cause to believe that the public drives the news media to cover events that interest the people. After all, the goal of the news media is monetary driven and this can only be attained through high viewership. There is no doubt about the agenda-setting impact of the 'CNN Effect' but exactly how great is its impact?

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In the wisdom of Kofi Annan, then Secretary-General of the UN, "When governments have a clear policy, they have anticipated a situation and they know what they want to do and where they want to go, then television has little impact. In fact, they ride it."<sup>11</sup> It is critical to note that the agenda-setting effects of the 'CNN Effect' differ under different conditions. Warren P. Strobel reinforced this by stating, "The findings suggest that the news media's impact is highly dependent on the nature of the proposed intervention and the degree to which government policy is in flux, and that this impact may decline over time."<sup>12</sup> This was illustrated in the case of the 1994 Rwanda Genocide. Although the media coverage of the Rwanda events was more intense than that of Somalia in 1993, the American government did not intervene. This was due to the Clinton administration's new position on engaging in peace operations that was shaped after the Somalia experience, including the potent criterion of having an 'exit strategy' from operations.

To sum it up, a clearly communicated positioning and policy by the military and its government will be able to negate the agenda-setting impact of the 'CNN Effect'. This is succinctly articulated by Warren

P. Strobel, "The effect of real-time television (and news media reports in general) is directly related to the unity, coherence, and communication of existing policy. If there is a policy vacuum or if officials are searching for a new policy, media reports can have a decided effect. Conversely, media reports have little or no effect on a policy that is widely and strongly held within an administration, has been well communicated, and has congressional and public support."<sup>13</sup>

### **Impediment to the Achievement of Desired Policy Goals**

There are at least two types of news media-related policy impediments: (1) 'as an emotional inhibitor' and (2) 'as a threat to operational security.'<sup>14</sup>

The enormous negative coverage of the Vietnam War exemplified how the 'CNN Effect' had served as an emotional inhibitor, undermining the American public support for the campaign and at the same time, eroding the morale of soldiers. In 1993, the same impact was evoked in the UN Operations in Somalia (UNOSOM II), when "the gruesome images of the naked body of one dead United States (US) Special Forces crewman being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, plus a video of the shaken Chief Warrant Officer Michael Durant forced—via Congressional pressure—President Clinton's announcement of a phased US withdrawal from the Somalia UN operation."<sup>15</sup>

The news media's role in the Manila bus siege best supports the idea of the 'CNN Effect' as a threat to operational security. "When the assault on the bus was carried out, footages of the Special Weapons And Tactics (SWAT) teams were shown by various television networks starting from the time the assault teams were deployed, the positions they took and the attempts to breach the bus."<sup>16</sup> This posed serious operational security risks to Special Forces, be it police or military.



*The bus in which the hostages were held in the 2010 Manila Hostage Crisis.*

The hostage taker had full situational awareness of the activities by the SWAT teams on the television in the bus and this deprived the element of surprise for the SWAT teams. The element of surprise is essential in any military operation to ensure its mission success and safety of the combatants and civilians.

### **Accelerant to Policy Decision-Making**

"Here it is, the nexus of media power and foreign policy, where television's instantly transmitted images fire public opinion, demanding instant responses from government officials, shaping and reshaping foreign policy at the whim of electrons. It's known as the 'CNN Effect'.<sup>17</sup> This statement highlighted how the speed of telecommunications has hastened the time

available for policy makers and military leaders to conduct an analysis of the situation and make sound decisions. This was illustrated in UNOSOM II (1993), when a US Army Cobra helicopter overflying Mogadishu fired a tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided (TOW) missile at a Soviet-made rocket launcher near one of the populace's enclaves. In the subsequent daily briefs to the news media, the US Army media spokesperson, Major David Stockwell reported the incident and was challenged by the media with a video showing two missiles being fired instead.<sup>18</sup> The political and military bureaucracies are organisations that are hierarchal in nature. In the eyes of the public, the time required for policy makers and military leaders to make sense of the situation is considered overlong.

The 'CNN Effect', in this instance, has turned the policy making game and military campaign into a battlefield where stakeholders must be viewed as capable of managing situations and taking a stand.

## THE NEW MEDIA

*"Some traditional means of communication have become less relevant, and the rise of Web 2.0 confronts us with a fresh set of challenges and opportunities."*

*Lieutenant General William B. Caldwell IV<sup>19</sup>*

"Broadly defined, new media are those consumer level digital devices and the forms of instantaneous, interactive communication they make possible because of their integration with global communications networks."<sup>20</sup> The advent of consumer mobile devices such as smart phones, portable tablets and computers, and its technological advances in image and video capturing capabilities and internet connectivity have magnified the 'CNN Effect' into the 'CNN Effect Plus.'<sup>21</sup> Citizens are recording images and videos of events as it happens and transmitting it to the news media, enabling television networks to cover events without its reporters on site. This in turn, places soldiers under constant public scrutiny to uphold the image of its military organisation and government. Beyond enhancing the news media's reach, the 'New Media' has introduced additional platforms for information sharing.

"People around the world are now both consumers and contributors. The open-ended and even democratic nature of the new media allow users to bypass traditional gatekeepers such as editors and producers."<sup>22</sup> The 'New Media' has empowered virtually anyone to broadcast information through outlets such as the internet and mobile networks.

Operational security risk became inherent within militaries and governments as in the case of the Israeli soldier revealing details of a military operation on Facebook.<sup>23</sup> The way diplomacy is conducted has changed, since the Wikileaks episode and yet its motives remain debatable.<sup>24</sup> The impact of communication applications on mobile networks can no longer be ignored. This was demonstrated by the role of BlackBerry Messenger (BBM), where it was instrumental in coordinating the 2011 London Riots—it was free, instant, a part of a much larger community than regular SMS, covert and more importantly, untraceable by the authorities.<sup>25</sup> However, the strength of the 'New Media' lays not in its connectivity to the people as a platform beyond the news media.

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"With Social Media, you need to build a community or get involved in an existing community to get your message out. With traditional media, there is no community building."<sup>26</sup> With the emergence of Social Media such as Facebook, Twitter and Internet forums, "web-users are not only able to post their comments on news sites but also write and publish their own thoughts while participating in real-time discussions online."<sup>27</sup> This in turn, led to like-minded people forming online communities and initiating social movements. It has an immense influence in shaping public opinion and has "played a central role in shaping political debates, as observed in the Arab Spring."<sup>28</sup>

## UNDERSTANDING THE MILITARY-MEDIA RELATIONSHIP

*"We are, simultaneously, both your supporter and your detractor. By virtue of that characterisation we will remain, under the best of circumstances, allies in separate trenches."*

*U.S. Army Major David Stockwell<sup>29</sup>*





A Facebook post of the Singapore Army which garnered about 5,400 likes and 468 shares shows how 'New Media' reaches out to a wide community that is able to participate in real-time discussions.

### On the Media and the Military

"The military want to control, as much as possible, everything on the battlefield or area of operations. On the other hand, the reporters want unfettered access to all aspects of the operation. Commanders worry over leaks of information that might compromise an operation. Keeping secrets is anathema to a reporter. Exacerbating these divergent tendencies are the different personalities the two professions attract. The military attracts people who follow rules; the media attracts those who thrive on 'less is more' when it comes to establishing rules for reporting."<sup>30</sup> The military interest is in the safety of its soldiers, operational security and success of the mission, while the media's interest is in the public's right to know and the reporting of timely news. The characterising of the tense relationship between the military and the media is not unique to any one country or society. The differences between two professions in organisational structure, institutional culture and professional ethos are universal and are constantly divergent.

Is there a relationship between the military and the 'New Media'? Can there be a relationship when the stakeholders in the 'New Media' are ever-changing?

It is clear that it is impossible to control the media content in the unregulated internet world, where web-users are both the consumers and contributors. Engaging online communities will require the same clear positioning and communication of policies as with the news media. In addition, engaging 'real-time' online discussions will require the military and policy makers to remain clear headed and not convey an incorrect position of policies and situations.

### MEDIA EFFECTS IN UNPKO

*"You have to have the pictures."*

*~ Roy Gutman, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for Newsday.<sup>31</sup>*

In the context of a UNPKO, the impact of the media (both 'CNN Effect' and the 'New Media') is dependent on the stability of the mission situation. "Put another way, the more fragile the peace the peacekeepers are there to protect, the greater will be media and public interest."<sup>32</sup> The media will be constantly looking for interesting events that may be extraordinary, disgraceful, scandalous or even heinous. A series of mischief to disrupt elections of the country in conflict will not excite the news media as much as an heinous act of killing a massive number of people by a suicide

bomber, such as the case of Iraq's parliamentary elections day.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, the capture of rebels and progress in the security of a country in conflict will not generate as much headlines as a disgraceful act of prison wardens on the Prisoners of War (POW)—a case in point was the notorious Iraqi prison, Abu Ghraib.<sup>34</sup>

Hence, it can be argued that the media effect in UNPKO serves as an 'impediment to the achievement of desired policy goals', where it is largely an 'emotional inhibitor'. Warren P. Strobel reinforces this by stating "the potential for media impact is far greater once a mission has begun than it is prior to the decision to intervene. The media has a stronger effect of pulling a peace operation out of a crisis-ridden country than they do in pushing one in."<sup>35</sup> As long as policy makers have a clear positioning of policies on its country's involvement in UNPKO, the media impact is limited. However, there will be exceptions, such as to the super powers like the United States, where it has a global responsibility to lead in times of need. It is only upon the commencement of the mission and deteriorating stability that will place pressure on policy makers and its military to balance between maintaining the desired end states for the country in conflict and protecting its national interests.

In UNPKO, where the core business of the peacekeeper is to maintain the cease-fire truce and oversee the transition from conflict to peace, there may be instances of requiring the peacekeeper to be involved in the latter parts of peace enforcement and peace-making, as well as the early stages of peace building.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, the risk on operational security is relatively low as the focus of peace keeping is on fostering support and building trust between the international community, peacekeepers and the local populace, which requires openness and unbiased reporting and sharing of information.

## VALUE OF THE MEDIA IN UNPKO

As explained earlier in this essay, the role of the 'CNN Effect' is essential to any military operation and that includes UNPKO. The news media must be actively engaged to: (1) influence homeland public opinion that the risks involved are calculated and necessary to further its national interest (2) win support of the stakeholders of the country in conflict, in order to achieve the desired objectives and end-state of transiting from conflict to peace and (3) garner influence with the international community that the participating country is playing its role as a responsible global citizen. Beyond engaging the news media to achieve strategic goals, reporters from the news media can serve as an avenue for intelligence at the tactical level. The reasons are, "first, they may be in country before operations begin, as in Haiti, Bosnia, and Somalia. This gives them important first-hand knowledge of the people, its culture, the landscape, and events leading up to the operations. Second, reporters can sometimes move about the area of operations more freely than uniformed military can."<sup>37</sup>

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Likewise to the 'CNN Effect,' the 'New Media' is able to achieve the same strategic outcomes as discussed earlier and may even accomplish it better with its capability to conduct 'real-time' online discussion. Beyond traditional news reports that are communicated to the public, weblogs and 'Social Media' such as YouTube allow stories to be told at a personal level, putting a 'face' to it. The 'New Media' also allow peacekeepers to communicate with their families, sustaining their morale for the mission.

## CHALLENGES OF THE MEDIA IN UNPKO

With the focus on information openness to achieve transition to peace, the operational security risk is low. However, it still presents ample opportunity for any adversaries to collect intelligence such as the case of elections, where the location of polling booths and poll accounting centres are easily known. More often than not, the challenges of UNPKO is not on the media, but rather on the negative actions of the peacekeepers that will most definitely be captured by the news media or transmitted through the 'New Media.'

Unique to the characteristics of the 'New Media' is the empowerment of any web-user with unregulated posting of information and the unprecedented speed of information sharing. This presents a challenge for reputation and damage control to the military and its government as the 'truth' may be distorted by web-users to undermine the mission's efforts.

## HOW IT MATTERS TO SAF

"The mission of MINDEF and the Singapore Armed Forces is to enhance Singapore's peace and security through deterrence and diplomacy, and should these

fail, to secure a swift and decisive victory over the aggressor."<sup>38</sup> One of several means to achieve deterrence and diplomacy is through the SAF's participation of UNPKO. The media's positive portrayal of the SAF as a credible armed forces in UNPKO is two-fold: one that builds deterrence and diplomacy against would be adversaries and allies respectively, and one that strengthens homeland support, bonding the social fabric with the military.

## CONCLUSION

"Once you've got all the forces moving and everything's being taken care of by the commanders, turn your attention to television because you can win the battle or lose the war if you don't handle the story right."<sup>39</sup> This statement by Colin Powell epitomises the role of the media in military operations. It is of paramount importance to strategic policy makers and military leaders to actively engage both the news media and the 'New Media' to achieve the desired strategic end-states in UNPKO. The challenges of the media in UNPKO missions are not what the media does, but rather what the military and its government do. So long as there is a clear positioning of strategic



One of the SAF's New Media outlet, which also includes a Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr account



policies and professional conduct of the military in operation, the media impact will remain limited. 🌐

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