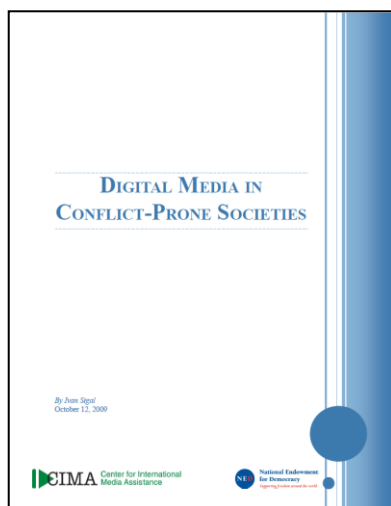


Digital Media in Conflict-Prone Societies



The complex relationship between media and conflict is longstanding. Traditional mass media have long been used to amplify and extend viewpoints and ideologies, to persuade audiences at home, and to influence opposing sides in conflict. However, both media and conflict have changed markedly in recent years. Many 21st-century wars are not only about holding territory, but about gaining public support and achieving legal status in the international arena. Governments seek to hold onto power through persuasion as much as through force.

Media are increasingly essential elements of conflict rather than just functional tools for those fighting. At the same time, newer media technologies have increased communication and information dissemination in the context of conflict. In particular, the growth of citizen media has changed the information space around conflict, providing more people with the tools to record and share their experiences with the rest of the world.

At present, the policy community that considers the role and use of media in conflict-prone settings is just beginning to formulate methodologies and strategies to consider how changes in media technology could affect fundamental issues of political participation and conflict. As a result, many existing media assistance projects in conflict-prone settings reflect a traditional understanding of the relationship between media and conflict. These projects are often viewed through the prisms of state stabilization, sovereignty, rule of law, the creation of modern administrative structures of state control, and civil society support that complements state stabilization efforts.

The shift to digital media and the attendant rise of networked, participatory media is the culmination of a process that has only in the past decade reached a form that we recognize. The rapid spread of digital-based communications and information networks is likely to have an effect on 21st-century wars, which increasingly center on internal conflict, disputed borders of new states, and separatist movements

The spread of digital media networks and communication tools for citizens to countries with chronic violence and endemic weak governance is notable and important. Much violent conflict today takes place in or near civilian populations with access to global information networks, so the information gathered by various parties to conflict may potentially be distributed in real time around the globe.

The ability to communicate, and to produce and receive diverse information through participatory media, is part of a struggle within conflict-prone societies between allowing for non-coercive debates and dialogue that focus on endemic weak-state problems and enabling those seeking power to organize for political influence, recruitment, demonstrations, political violence, and terror. This idea is concisely captured by *Air Force 2025*, the U.S. Air Force's white paper on the future of warfare: "Influence increasingly will be exerted by information more than by bombs."

It is now clear that increased access to information and to the means to produce media has both positive and negative consequences in conflict situations. The question of whether the presence of digital media networks will encourage violence or lead to peaceful solutions may be viewed as a contest between the two possible outcomes. It is possible to build communications architectures that encourage dialogue and nonviolent political solutions. However, it is equally possible for digital media to increase polarization, strengthen biases, and foment violence.

Digital Media in Conflict-Prone Societies offers a number of observations and recommendations for how media development implementers and donors can approach the relationship between conflict and digital media:

- Project design should be prepared for the fact that conflict can be sparked by the spread of information beyond traditional audiences. Digital media tools and technology change quickly and provide tremendous opportunities for access, but human culture and social organization are more resistant. Out of this friction come both opportunities for new information networks and new paths for rumor and incitement.
- Networked media require different policy approaches with regard to state boundaries. Information and communications

development policies that focus exclusively on nation-states neglect the regional and global nature of networked media, and of the impact of international satellite television.

- Policies that articulate digital media networks as either starkly polarizing or as unifying ignore the ambiguous and often multifaceted nature of online and networked communications. The key is to identify projects that respond to specific problems with a focus on media content, resources, relevance to the real world, and relationships within a given network.
- Existing media should not be ignored. In many places, traditional media will be relevant for many years. Rather, how to integrate different media platforms, and pay attention to technical developments that facilitate convergence should be considered.
- Media literacy in a networked digital environment includes the ability to both consume and create content online. Communities of use may be largely self-generating; projects that seek to engage communities with digital media tools should be aware of existing technological capacities and work with local communities to define their interests and motivations.

Digital Media in Conflict-Prone Societies is a publication of the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA). The Center is an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy that works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

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