



NGOs as intelligence agencies: The empowerment of transnational advocacy networks and the media by commercial remote sensing in the case of the Iranian nuclear program

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ABSTRACT

In December 2002 the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS), a Washington-based nongovernmental organization, announced that it had found two previously undisclosed nuclear facilities in Iran. Using information provided by a dissident group called the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), ISIS was able to pinpoint the two suspect sites by using general geographic descriptions provided by NCRI to find more precise mapping coordinates. Using these coordinates as guides, ISIS purchased commercial high-resolution remote sensing satellite images from DigitalGlobe, a leading imaging data provider. Next, working with the news network CNN, ISIS announced its findings to a global television audience on December 12, 2002, some three months before the US invasion of neighboring Iraq. ISIS's disclosure forced the Bush administration to acknowledge the Iranian nuclear enrichment program, something it had been aware of but kept secret for over a year. It may have also forced Iran to allow international inspectors into the two sites the following February, something it had previously refused to do. ISIS's disclosure brought an end to a policy of willful public silence about the nuclear enrichment programs in Iran by both the Bush administration and the government of Iran. Bringing a political communication perspective to geography studies, these events are used to illustrate the way new technologies may empower transnational advocacy networks and media while challenging state control of information.

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1. Introduction

Surveys of contemporary political and military geography note the rapidly changing global environment scholars must make sense of theoretically (Gaile and Willmott, 2006). In addition to an ongoing discipline-wide effort to find linkages across the wide spectrum of subfields (Sluyter et al., 2006), however, this paper argues that political and military geography would benefit from an interdisciplinary voyage across scholarly boundaries to the field of political communication. This is because in many cases answering the questions being raised by both political and military geography is greatly aided in the 21st Century by understanding the role of media in a variety of policy and security contexts. With this in mind, this paper serves as an introduction from two political communication scholars whose research focuses on foreign affairs, and uses a recent case study to demonstrate the utility of thinking about media in theorizing about political and military geography. To be clear, we are not claiming that these subfields, or geographies in general, have never discussed media since clearly this is not the case (see, e.g., Crang, 1999; Morley and Robbins, 1995). Rather, we are expanding on these efforts by showing how political

communication – itself a subfield of both communication and political science – can inform geography. At the same time, the present case study leads to a rethinking of some assumptions and debates within political communication itself.

The argument presented here is this: new technologies, and specifically commercial remote sensing devices, have imbued transnational advocacy organizations with important new epistemic powers vis a vis nation states, in particular by strengthening their position as sources for the independent media they need to advance their agenda and disseminate their messages and information. We thus draw from and expand upon a variety of literatures in geography and related social sciences that in varying ways shows that technology, particularly the Internet but also advances in commercial remote sensing, puts pressure on states by providing opportunities for critics, including transnational advocacy networks, to get their message out, have their message amplified, and reach more “bystanders,” to use Schattschneider's (1960) term.

Our theory proceeds from two strains of political communication theory. The first involves the consistent finding of sociologists, political scientists, and communication scholars that the American news media tend to be far less autonomous vis a vis the government in the foreign policy domain than they are when it comes to domestic politics (cf. Entman, 2004). In particular, the White

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House has a privileged role in framing matters of war and foreign affairs, followed by Congressional actors (Bennett, 1990; Bennett et al., 2007). As a result, the range of opinions and parameters of discussion as reflected in the press on these issues tends to be quite constrained, institutionally-based, and elite-driven (Sparrow, 2006). More generally, news routines and the journalist beat system (assigning reporters to government institutions such as the White House, the police department, Congress, etc.) encourages reporters to be overly dependent on officials, and this tendency is exacerbated in foreign affairs news where a lack of expertise, readily-available alternative sources, economic realities (e.g., the decline in foreign bureaus and correspondents), and cultural issues (e.g., patriotism/jingoism, especially during wartime) are evident (Sigal, 1973).

This raises a critical question for understanding the contemporary role of media, states, non-state actors, and policy: How can news organizations witness events directly and overcome their lack of access to information, except when officials make it available? Hence, media (and by extension publics) are weak in relation to government for the simple reason that it is difficult for them to verify information with their own eyes, a problem only made worse by financial cuts in foreign reporting. Reporters thus are dependent on officials, making it difficult for them to perform any sort of accountability function.

Or at least this is the dominant view of political communication scholars (and many in other disciplines, for that matter). Indeed, in general, it is certainly an accurate description of the overall state-media relationship in foreign affairs. Yet at the same time, this paper draws attention to important caveats to this perspective, which operates from an anachronistic understanding of the changing role of the nation-state in the contemporary world system. Namely, it fails to take into account globalization of media and the emergence of transnational nongovernmental organizations. Furthermore, technological advances in newsgathering and information dissemination more generally have created the greater potential (not always realized) for events, interest groups, and even journalists themselves to occasionally wrest control of the news agenda from the state (Entman, 2004; Lawrence, 2000; Livingston and Van Belle, 2005; Livingston and Bennett, 2003; Bennett and Livingston, 2003; Livingston, 2003; Livingston and Robinson, 2003). Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, non-state actors, including mega-corporations and nongovernmental organizations, have taken on a growing importance in international affairs. Greater global interdependence and the nature of global challenges mean the state is not necessarily the best source of information or the most likely catalyst of policy change and stability. Advances in information technology coupled with the growth and sophistication of nongovernmental organizations, have further altered the relationship between states and non-state actors.

To date, while political communication theory regarding state-media relations has done an inadequate job of accommodating these changes, geographers have shown greater interest in understanding how new technologies alter the field's theoretical assumptions about the primacy of the state (Morley and Robbins, 1995; Toal and Shelley, 2006). Henry et al. (2004) explore these dynamics in their rethinking of networks and epistemic communities, which they argue thrive in conditions of conflict and are largely autonomous from policy makers. Several scholars have shown how opposition networks and coalitions can use technology to challenge the dominance of the state over the information environment (e.g., Yanacopulos, 2005). The Internet, in particular, has been shown to be especially useful in empowering critics of the state to both evade more traditional media structures more susceptible to its control, and to reach a broad audience (Castells, 1996; Pickerill and Webster, 2006), though this potential is often limited by infrastructure challenges in poorer countries (Warf

and Vincent, 2007). Clark and Themudo (2006), for instance, argue that "dotcauses," Internet-based networks, are important structures of mobilization for the globalization protest movement, and that policymakers have difficulty reacting to and controlling an information environment influenced by the resulting rapidly dispersing organization.

This paper shows how commercial remote sensing technology may similarly play a role in altering the power dynamic between state and non-state actors, specifically transnational advocacy networks (TANs). This technology allows TANs to overcome the problem of political "scale" differentials (Adams, 1996; Jonas, 1994). Jonas (1994), for instance, shows how protest organizations that can take advantage of resources at one scale to overcome the state's control of resources at another scale are in a better strategic position than those who work within environments dominated by the state. In other words, if one adopts Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model of media and its argument that the corporate, profit-driven, and elite-dependent mainstream press will never provide room for a serious critique of the status quo, Jonas shows that utilizing technology outside the corporate media may simultaneously empower critics and weaken state hegemony.

Adams (1996) is particularly useful in thinking about how commercial remote sensing may act as just the kind of scale-jumping technology Jonas describes. His study of the use of telecommunications in the early American Civil Rights Movement, the late 1980s anti-Marcos protests in the Philippines, and the pro-democracy protests in China in 1989 shows that while technology may not ultimately lead to "victory" for the protest organization, it at least expands the number of bystanders bearing witness to the message of state critics. His study also points to the potential power of information technology to alter the information environment in a way that at least keeps the state off balance and may, as in the case of the Civil Rights Movement, ultimately lead to some fundamental change.

As others have noted (Geoghegan et al., 1998; Wright et al., 1997) various global information systems including commercial remote sensing technology can provide just such an avenue for oppositional voices to not only be heard, but perhaps even force the state to adapt, bend, or reverse course entirely. We expand on this line of research by not only providing a case study of how commercial remote sensing was used to force the United States to engage publicly on an issue it preferred to keep quiet, but specifically how the technology may especially empower TANs to perform this function, and how they can do so through the mainstream media. Thus, one important implication of our research is the idea that commercial remote sensing's scale-jumping properties not only empower TANs, but can do so through a media which many scholars in a variety of domains – including geography and political communication – assume is intrinsically incapable of being a platform for fundamental critique of the state (Bagdikian, 1990; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 1999; Gitlin, 1980, 1987). In this way, this relatively new technology can also be thought of as empowering mainstream media to perform their watchdog role more vigorously.

1.1. TANs and the press

As we have written elsewhere (Aday and Livingston, 2008), an important way in which political communication research can address globalization is to address and theorize about the increasing role of transnational advocacy networks in affecting foreign policy and security issues. Indeed, some have referred to the state's decreasing ability to dominate the policy arena as "neo-medievalism" (Bull, 1977). This opens the door for important changes in the power dynamic between states and non-state actors. This takes us to our second line of inquiry.

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