Battling Radical Islamist Propaganda in Somalia: The Information Intervention Option

by Jacob Udo-Udo Jacob

While the international community continues to dither over Somalia, Islamic fundamentalists have taken over control of the country's information space and other key strategic assets. This article discusses the precarious media environment in Somalia and revisits discourses on Information Intervention, conceptualised by Jamie Metzl in 1997. It examines the nature of UN's 'Information Intervention' in Somalia and argues that the international community can do more by drawing on available legal instruments to carry out 'coercive' information intervention.

The atrocities of the 1990s in the Balkans and Rwanda have generated a consensus among a growing number of communication and conflict scholars that preventing genocide which can result from hate speech, ethno-nationalist propaganda and information deprivation in conflict areas are justifications for 'information intervention'. Jamie Metzl coined the term in 1997 when he argued for an information intervention mechanism within the UN rapid deployment force to counter "situations where media activities incite mass violence".[1]

In an interview with Mark Thompson in October 2000 contained in Price & Thompson, Metzl describes information intervention as "a soft form of humanitarian intervention" involving the use of information in an aggressive manner when it is justified on strong human rights grounds[2]. Metzl's thinking on information intervention is informed by the role information plays in situations of conflict which, he argues, in extreme circumstance should necessitate a form of 'humanitarian intervention'. He rightly argues that several major humanitarian crises and humanitarian wars over the past century began with a propaganda phase involving a control of the means of mass communication by extremists for use as instruments of incitement against other groups. A key reference is Rwanda in 1994 where Hutu extremists used *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines* (RTLM) to organise the extermination of Tutsis and moderate Hutus. Metzl believes that if information intervention had been applied in Rwanda, genocide could possibly have been avoided. To prevent genocide information intervention addresses

Misuse of mass communications, and asks how we can use a more aggressive form of information related action, first to provide counter-information that opposes

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[1] Metzl, Jamie (1997) Information Intervention: When Switching Channels Isn't Enough. *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 6, 15-20
[2] Price, M and Thompson M (2002) *Forging Peace: Intervention, Human Rights and the Management of Media Space.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p41.

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harmful incitement and second to proscribe or suppress the latter in extreme circumstances[3]

Beyond these two functional scopes of information intervention which I will for the sake of this article, refer to as Reactionary Information Intervention, Metzl also talks of a broader use of information by the UN in its Peace Support Operations which he terms 'Phase II' Information Intervention – coming after the international community has established itself in a conflict area. Phase II and reactionary information intervention both demand a totally different legal and political framework and will obviously demand different strategies. In extreme circumstances, reactionary information intervention in a crises society may involve jamming of incendiary media broadcasts. One of Metzl's recommendations in this regard is the formal introduction of an information intervention component in Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

Price and Thompson have significantly built on Metzl's work on Information Intervention. They define information intervention as "the extensive external management, manipulation or seizure of information space in conflict zones".[4] They see information intervention, not necessarily as a quick-fix media intervention programme but as an intervention architecture undertaken by states or Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs) in response to misuse of mass communication especially when there is potential for mass violation of human rights. The legal framework surrounding reactionary information intervention with coercive powers such as jamming without the consent of the home state remains contested, however Article 41 of the UN Charter tacitly supports coercive 'Information Intervention' as a means of executing a resolution of the security council:

> The Security Council may decide what measures not involving the use of armed force are to be employed to give effect to its decisions. These may include complete or partial interruption of … radio, and other means of communication[5].

Embedded within Chapter VII of the UN Charter, Article 41 provides a legitimate window through which the international community can take necessary action to limit or proscribe incendiary broadcasts by both state and non-state actors in situations of conflict where the media is used as a tool to dehumanise the other or to broadcast hate propaganda. Furthermore, the Geneva Conventions empowers the international community to take necessary steps to "prevent and punish … direct and public incitement to commit genocide"[6].

Though tacitly supported by the UN Charter, and the Geneva Conventions, Information Intervention has not featured prominently on any specific UN mandate. Although the UN has strengthened its Strategic Communications Division within the Department of Public Information it is yet to take adequate steps to create a mechanism for monitoring and responding to incendiary use of hate media in crises states. At Mission level, the question of what information tools the UN should use in its peace operations has occupied the attention of several blue ribbon and high level review panels of the United Nations ever since its creation. Notably, the August 2000 (Brahimi) report on UN Peacekeeping Operations has made interesting recommendations for the involvement of the media in peace operations such as emphasizing the

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[3] Ibid, p42

[4] Ibid, p8

[5] United Nations (1945) *Charter of the United Nations*, Chapter VII, Article 41

[6] UN General Assembly,(1948) *Convention on Prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide*, 9 December 1948, A/RES/260

imperatives of designing a public information campaign strategy particularly for key aspects of a mission's mandate as part of the first elements of deployment in a new peace support mission[7]. However, the major failing of the report in terms of public information is that it failed to provide a clear framework for mission public information operations. It also failed to include media restructuring as an element of post-conflict peace-building. But the document did rightly criticise the DPI's Peace and Security Section as having "little capacity to create doctrine, strategy or standard operating procedures for public information functions in the field other than on a sporadic and ad hoc basis" (United Nations, 2000 Par 235).   This seems to be a major problem with the UN – absence of a clear framework. For instance, UN doctrine on Information Operations recommends the use of the most appropriate media of reaching specific target audience (TA) in a conflict area, but it also fails to provide a clear framework for operationalisation.

Doubtless, after the Rwandan genocide the UN has carried out a number of reforms of its Public Information strategies. In 1997 for example, Secretary General Koffi Annan set up a nine-member task force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities to review and make appropriate recommendations on ways and means to enhance the UN's public information capability. The panel's 34-page report, ― *Global Vision, Local Voice: A Strategic Communications Programme for the United Nations*, released in August 1997 maintained that the fundamental principles of UN Public Information Operations needed a complete turn-around and that bureaucratic changes was just not enough. The UN, the panel stressed, needed to be more assertive and cease to be passive. It was the first time the UN openly declared the intent of its public information programme. It marked a turning point in UN Public information because until then the DPI's work was not informed by any of the researches in the social sciences ―nor was there a systematic approach to researching its audiences and use those findings as a feedback for UN policymaking.[8]

Also, at mission level, the UN was learning to broaden its use of the media in its Missions information and education programmes. In Cambodia for instance, the UN Transition Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) actively used its mission radio service to dispel rumours and rebel propaganda. Notably, UNTAC dispelled the Khmer Rouge's propaganda that the ballot-marking pencils contained radio beacons that can reveal votes to the Khmer Rouge and make voters targets for reprisal attacks[9]. In the Democratic Republic of Congo where the UN has maintained one of the most robust Peace Support Operations in history, Radio Okapi – a joint project between the UN Mission in the DRC (MONUC) and Swiss-based NGO Hirondelle Foundation, has been broadcasting on Short Wave and FM bands across the country since 2002. Radio Okapi is currently one of the most popular radio stations in the DRC[10].   The case in Somalia however is totally different. The UN does not have a de facto presence in Somalia. But it does have a Support Office to provide strategic communications support (among other logistic and strategic support systems) to the African Union Mission in Somalia. Before considering the

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[7] Brahimi, L., et al (2000) *Report of the Panel of United Nations Peace Operations.* New York: General Assembly, A/55/305 S/2000/809.

[8] Alleyne, M. D., (2005) United Nations Celebrity Diplomacy, *SAIS Review,* Vol XXV No. 1, Winter-Spring.

[9] Lindley, Dan (2004) Untapped Power? UN Public Information Operations. *International Peacekeeping*, Volume 11, Issue 4, Winter, pages 608 – 624

[10] Jacob, J.U. (2010) *Rethinking Information Intervention in Violently Divided Societies: MONUC's Public Information Operations and Conflict Transformation in the Democratic Republic of Congo.* Leeds: PhD Thesis, University of Leeds, United Kingdom.

nature of the UN's strategic communications support operations in Somalia, it is prudent to first consider the precarious information environment in the country.

The Precarious Information Space in Somalia

Somalia has a history of very vibrant media. However, since 2009 Islamist groups with known links to Al-Qaeda (Harakat Al-Shabaab Mujahideen and Hizbul Islam) have seized control of Radio Stations that have refused to be used as an agency for their propaganda. In addition to seizing radio stations, the Islamist groups have intensified their censorship of media organisations in greater parts of Somalia. For example Al-Shabaab has banned broadcasts of the BBC and Voice of America or any re-broadcasts by local FM stations. Hisbul Islam has also banned radio stations from playing 'un-Islamic' songs. Journalists that ignore the orders are either kidnapped or detained. In 2010 journalists from Radio Shabelle, Somali Broadcasting Corporation (SBC), Markabley Radio and Radio Somaliweyn were arrested and detained by the militants for flouting orders not to play music. In addition to banning music, Hisbul Islam also seeks to influence news contents on local radio stations. In April 2010 for example, they ordered radio stations to stop referring to foreign Islamic militants in Somalia as 'foreigners' but as 'Muhaajiriins' or Islamic emigrants. There have also been several cases of persecution of journalists. This precarious media environment in addition to general insecurity occasioned by continuous clashes between Islamic insurgents and the Somali Transitional Government forces and peacekeepers of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) have combined to create a very difficult environment for the media to fulfil its responsibility of informing the Somali population. Radio is a vital source of information for Somalis mainly because of the country's rich oral tradition, low literacy rates, poverty and poor infrastructure. Other mass media such as Television, Newspaper or the internet are underdeveloped. Further compounding the situation in Somalia is the expanding shadow internal and external Islamist and criminal networks that have effectively taken advantage of the failure of governance to control the country's territorial waters, seaports, airports, towns and trade routes from where they conduct pirate raids, smuggle and deal on an assortment of contraband goods as well as human and drug trafficking. The port of Kismayo, controlled by Alshabab militants for example has been the port of entry for weapons, cash and other key assets that sustain Islamic militancy in the country. These routes have increasingly provided the assets that Al-shabaab and Hizbul Islam require to sustain and extend their increasingly daring assault on the Somali Federal Transition Government and African Union Peacekeepers.

The UN's Information Intervention in Somalia

The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) is presently mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 1964 (2010) under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. However SCR 1964 is not explicit in its authorization of a coercive information intervention which may involve jamming of incendiary broadcasts. The resolution does emphasise "the importance of public information and communications operations to support the transitional federal government and AMISOM and consolidate the political process"[11]. Although this tacitly supports a form of reactionary information intervention which may include providing information to counter hate propaganda, it is silent on coercive information intervention when necessary. Disappointingly, the Resolution only expressed "serious concern at the continued attacks against journalists" but

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[11] United Nations Security Council (2010) Resolution 1964

did not take notice of the seizure of broadcast stations by Islamists for broadcast of hate campaigns.

In 2009 the UN Security Council Resolution 1863 set up the UN Support Office for AMISOM (UNSOA) with a mandate to deliver a logistics capacity support to AMISOM. In November 2009 UNSOA outsourced critical Public Information Operations to a consortium of communication consulting companies led by UK-based PR firm Bell Pottinger to plan and implement a large, complex public information operation in support of the AMISOM. The contract worth $7.25 Million a year brings together mostly Western PR firms including Bell Pottinger, Albany Associates and Okapi Consulting[12]. Key strategic goals of UNSOA's 'Information Intervention' includes creating a positive information environment to facilitate the cooperation of the parties to the peace process; garner support for the operation among the local population; promote local ownership of the Somali peace process; foster a culture of peace and non-violence in Somalia; and support national and local authorities in creating an environment conducive to the peace process. Part of the contract is a Radio component – Radio Bar-Kulan, run by Okapi Consulting. Another key element which are usually not embodied in UN's public information operations but included in the contract is audience research and media effects analysis. This indicates an increasing doctrinal shift in UN's PIO from only giving information to support its peace mission objectives to researching and understanding the nature of effects of its PIO. This shift is noteworthy because historically, the UN tends to associate audience research with 'Propaganda' – a word it would rather not be identified with. Indeed, the UN specifically instructs the DPI not to disseminate "propaganda". The UN Public Information policy, set out at its creation through a Technical Advisory committee's recommendation and adopted by the General Assembly resolution 13 (I), of February 1946, was explicit on its stand against "propaganda". Recommendation 2 out of 16 stated in part:

> The department of Public Information should not engage in "propaganda" (quotation marks theirs). It should on its own initiative engage in positive informational activities that will supplement the services of existing agencies of information.[13]

The committee did not however state what constituted or did not constitute propaganda which it specifically named within quotation marks. The advisory committee recommended the use of various media for its public information work and specifically proposed the use of radio. Including an audience research component in its outsourcing of strategic communications operations does suggest a radical doctrinal shift by the UN in its communication strategy. But even more curious, yet instructive is the UN's decision to outsource a key mission Strategic Communications function in a highly volatile state to private companies is curious. If anything, it suggests that the UN is becoming more confident with its new outsourcing of public information operations which started with the 'outsourcing' of Radio Okapi in the Democratic Republic of Congo to Swiss-based NGO Hirondelle Foundation in 2002. Whereas Radio Okapi was 'outsourced' to an NGO, Somalia's strategic communications mission is outsourced to a consortium of privately owned strategic communications consulting. It is the first time the UN would outsource a critical mission strategic communications function to a private consortium. Moreover in the DRC the UN only outsourced the Mission Radio - in Somalia, the entire strategic communications operations is outsourced. Jacob has examined the rationale

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[12] Okapi Consulting is based in South Africa.
[13](United Nations Document, 1946 A/RES/13(I), ANNEX I

of the UN's new outsourcing of strategic communications functions and notes that in addition to swift deployment, outsourcing enables the UN to get round some of its bureaucracies and avoid several questions of doctrine particularly relating to 'information-giving' strategies[14].

The problem with outsourcing the UN's Information Intervention operations to external, Western-based PR agency is that it runs the risk of being perceived as an external propaganda tool meant to serve the interests of the West. There is the danger of Information Intervention and its various appendages unwittingly becoming a part of the conflict. Moreover, any corresponding local media development effort by UNSOA would likely be viewed with a healthy suspicion.   Moreover, despite the efforts of UNSOA's Radio Bar-Kulan to provide objective information to Somalis, Islamist propaganda targeted against AMISOM, the UN and the internationally recognised government in Somalia remains ferocious. Insurgents' control of the local media in Somalia is extensive and well grounded.   Using local radio stations, they actively seek to generate local perceptions of Radio Bar-Kulan and its Western profit-seeking partners as anti-Islam and the Somali government as collaborators. Radio Bar-Kulan cannot possibly counter all the anti-UN, anti-Christian and anti-government invectives broadcast by insurgents. Moreover, by broadcasting from Kenya, there is a sense, that Bar-Kulan is out of touch with the everyday struggles of the ordinary Somali. Understandably, the security situation is too precarious for Radio Bar-Kulan to broadcast from Somalia. A workable option therefore is for the UN to take appropriate steps to restrict and where necessary proscribe incendiary broadcasts in Somalia.   An element of reactionary information intervention involving coercive action such as jamming of incendiary broadcasts is needful to prevent uncontrolled spread of Islamist propaganda and hate as well as the danger these pose to African Union peacekeepers.

Furthermore, taking coercive information intervention action to silence voices of hate radio, Islamists would likely be discouraged from taking over popular stations to broadcast their ideology. Unfortunately however, the UN is yet to develop a clear framework for coercive Information Intervention in crises states. Legally and normatively, the UN undoubtedly has the mechanisms to carry out coercive action which could include jamming of hate broadcasts in situations of public incitements to hatred and cases where the media is used as an instrument of violence. Indeed, Blinderman has argued that a Chapter VII mandate implies a tacit acceptance of the need for necessary forms of information intervention to deal with informational threats to international peace and security[15].

In the case of Somalia, it is needful for the UN to assert its authority over the information domain.   While Bar-Kulan is useful in broadcasting news of events and internationally backed governmental activities in Somalia, it is equally necessary for the UN to also take a firm stand against Islamists' increasing culture of seizing radio stations. Article 41 of the UN charter has the necessary legal components to empower the UN to jam signals of stations taken over by Islamists in Somalia for the spread of hate propaganda. It is an option the UN should seriously consider.

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[14] Jacob, J.U. (2010) *Rethinking Information Intervention in Violently Divided Societies: MONUC's Public Information Operations and Conflict Transformation in the Democratic Republic of Congo.* Leeds: PhD Thesis, University of Leeds, United Kingdom.

[15] Blinderman, Eric (2002) International Law and Information Intervention. In Price and Thompson, *Forging Peace: Intervention, Human Rights and Management of Media Space.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd.

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