



# Time to move on: new media realities – new vulnerabilities of power

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Recycling talk and assumptions of a so-called CNN effect between media reporting and policy making can now be both misleading and unhelpful. By and large, as a concept, it is a hangover from past times that distracts from understanding the profound impact of the sweeping new ubiquity of information flows in the fast-changing, almost infinite media space.

The new public information space, especially in times of tension and crisis, is being turned on its head by the profound new realities of all aspects of social media. The often overwhelming nature of this new asymmetric information space means its relationship to both governance and policy making has now moved on. While the framework and landscape for analysis have changed considerably, the institutional willingness to accept them has not.

The catchy attraction of a so-called ‘CNN effect’ was challenged in the 1990s as over-assumed and over-stated (Gowing, 1994). Not only was evidence of a ‘something-must-be-done’ causal relationship between real-time news coverage and foreign policy changes often both patchy and unconvincing but there were examples of cause and effect (Bahador, 2007) that should never have been taken to signal an automaticity. After all, policy makers would often make a decision, but one to do as little as possible, and frequently nothing of any note (Gowing, 1997, 1998; Robinson, 2002).

The apparent and assumed relevance of the ‘effect’ became self-perpetuating, despite a growing number of evidence-based challenges. Its life and presumed accuracy was prolonged both by the news organization itself for reasons of commercial branding, and also academic literature that too often seemed to feed somewhat unquestioningly on its own assumed rectitude. Often, analysis was flawed because it was based on ill-founded or incomplete assumptions about the practicalities of both how newsroom decisions were made and government policy was decided.

Now it should be argued that the idea of a CNN effect is little more than a distraction rooted in vested interests that in many respects have yet to move on. Not only is it of little

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help but it is downright misleading when the core challenge is to identify the profound impact on institutional power and governance from social media and the four billion mobile phones in the new infinite landscape of largely non-professional 'information doers'.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the CNN effect was assumed to be related only to foreign policy decisions. Now the relevant space for analysis is spatially ubiquitous, both horizontally and vertically. It now relates to both foreign and domestic policy without distinction. Usually this is down to the most micro of levels.

Embedded in the phrase 'CNN effect' is the explicit assumption of an over-arching impact on policy making from what is reported by one omnipotent global media organization or its peers. This is not just misplaced. It is now a misrepresentation of the new real-time information dynamics of increasingly bottom-up empowerment and revelation. As the impact of a new proliferation of platforms like YouTube or Facebook frequently confirms, it no longer requires transmission by a traditional, high-profile media brand, name or platform. This is the case during moments of acute crisis and tension. At these moments, the almost instant public perceptions and expectations generated by what they see in real time on the digital 'infopods and pads' in their hands are both at their sharpest and most demanding. The time lines are increasingly out of sync with the new realities of real-time information diffusion. There is a tyranny not just of real time (Gowing, 1994) but of the time line as well.

Yet the reaction of those with direct responsibility in the corporate or government worlds is frequently wanting, and usually worse. This leaves ever greater suspicion from a public that must now be assumed to be well connected itself via these digital handsets. In almost every corner of the world, whether rich or poor, this public now believes itself to be incredibly well informed because of its own, smart, digital perceptive space. But many of those officials and executives embedded in institutional systems seem reluctant to understand or appreciate both the speed and enormity of change in the digital information landscape, and the fact that it requires an equally smart fundamental generational transformation of both their attitudes and those systems.

The critical question now is how far the mindsets in political and corporate institutions of power will see the new light and allow themselves to be recalibrated to embrace these new realities. The current evidence suggests the answer is 'not far enough'. Most remain in denial. This is largely because of that institutional reluctance to accept the enormity of change in the converging information and media landscape. This is due to both active resistance and the inherent conservatism rooted in any organization of power.

All of this is way beyond just 'CNN' and its so-called 'effect'. So why is that?

The CNN brand no longer has the unique brand dominance to justify that description, whether domestically in the US or internationally. There is now a proliferation of 24/7 trans-national and trans-cultural multi-media platforms each pumping out a massive flow of 'bearer of witness' reporting that is often of dramatically variable quality. CNN's pioneering reputational domination of the global TV airways is not only long gone but has been radically diluted by a host of new global players that broadcast from a multitude of locations with a new rainbow of cheap lightweight technology along with a great variety of editorial interpretations and styles.<sup>3</sup> While largely well known, none of them can legitimately claim a monopoly of brand, reputation or loyalty in the way originally implied by a 'CNN effect'.

Television alone does not dominate either. Media organizations – whether large or small, longstanding or feisty new players – are now digital information umbrellas under which reside an ever evolving bouquet of multiple content platforms. Television is merely one part, albeit still significant. On one side of the spectrum, TV news organizations have moved into the digital text and multi-media 24/7 business. On the other side, so too have print newspaper organizations. Financial and technological challenges were the main catalyst for this dramatic realignment. But of greatest importance is that the enforced technological re-engineering that has resulted is imposing profound implications for even the survival of a cause-and-effect concept like the CNN effect. Together they have incubated a host of innovative content offerings. They are on websites with text and time-shifted video, or live online with linear streaming via new cutting edge technologies like mobile smartphones which increasingly can receive a 3G signal almost anywhere.

This fast-shifting reality due to the new empowering nature of media technologies ‘for all’ has changed beyond recognition the prism of how the new real-time information flows impact on institutional power, governance and therefore policy making or responses. This is especially the case in those unexpected shock moments of acute crisis or tension.

In this new information world, any ‘motivated amateur’ or ‘born digital’ is now effectively a member of the newly defined media. In China, a staggering 800 million currently have that new status, with until now a rate of increase of tens of millions each year.<sup>4</sup> In the year to early 2010, 150 million new subscribers in India became members. By late 2010, there were more than 12 million new subscribers in India each month. The power that each of them then acquires via the tiny camera, keypad or microphone of their mobile phone can be extraordinary. Most importantly, this new proliferation of digital eyes is both diluting and undermining many assumptions about the nature of any ‘CNN effect’. That is why it is now radically different.

This new ad hoc breed of ‘information doers’, ‘born digitals’ or ‘motivated amateurs’ has turned much of the landscape on its head. It must be assumed that their single digital eye on a mobile phone often has as much influence as a traditional, corporate media platform, and often more. They bear witness when the unexpected is unfolding around them, often in the most violent and unpleasant forms. They record video or impressions digitally. Then they upload, often from obscure corners where no traditional media are present. And they do so within ever tighter time frames. Finally, there is the transmission via websites, ISPs and bandwidth; this frequently rivals or bypasses traditional media platforms, but it can have just as much visibility.

The dominance of one form of linear real-time transmission by a single, near monopolistic broadcaster has been replaced by a transparency that instantly catches unaware and surprises with what it reveals. Almost without exception, the result is profound and of a wholly different nature to the narrow, ageing construct of what any ‘CNN effect’ is assumed to be.

Overall, this new wave of democratization and accountability is shifting and redefining the nature of power (Gowing, 2009). This, in turn, is creating a deficit of legitimacy for the institutions of power.<sup>5</sup> Citizens are disillusioned with the traditionally rigid structures and information flows that influence their lives in their names. They find the structures no longer deliver and match what their own personalized digital delivery systems are telling them almost instantly. The new information space has flattened the

power and the influence of the modest handful of CNN-type traditional media brands. In its place, it has allowed citizens to create their own new networks of power and oversight. When institutions of power are under greatest pressure during a crisis, this generates conditions for an ever growing gulf between instant public perceptions and the ability or preparedness of institutions to respond. Those inside reluctantly confirm an acute sense of 'subversion' for a system and personnel simply not prepared to shift thinking, attitudes and processes (Gowing, 2009).

This new matrix of real-time information flows does not force policy reaction or changes in the way that is assumed (usually erroneously these days) by claims of a CNN effect. It does something different. Instead, it challenges the inadequacy of the structures of power to respond both with effective, credible impact and in a timely way.

It must therefore now be assumed that the impact on political and corporate governance of the multitude of social media platforms epitomized by Facebook, YouTube, Twitter or Flickr is far more troubling to institutions of power than what are now the narrow, ageing tram-line assumptions of a so-called CNN effect.

It will be asked: surely this is all obvious, especially to the officials and servants in the institutions of power who rely personally on this cutting edge technology that they themselves have in their pockets and make use of liberally like most other people? Remarkably, the answer remains 'no!' (Gowing, 2009: 9). In this relentless, uncompromising and often brutal new real-time information environment, the most obvious remains the most elusive. Mindsets rarely shift comfortably and willingly. Their institutional systems are no longer equipped to embrace the ferocious new real-time realities of what is effectively now an infinite, almost four-dimensional media landscape. Many assume that, *ex-officio*, they retain the power and status to counter the merciless nature of the new media dynamics. They do not. Increasingly, the time lines of essentially instant real-time information availability and the ability of power systems to respond credibly are out of sync. Hence the view of this author that no longer is there just a Tyranny of Real Time.<sup>6</sup> Rather it is now a Tyranny of the Time Line as well.

This explains why there is this new vulnerability, fragility and brittleness of institutional power generated by the rapid developments in the information revolution (Gowing, 2009). Some insiders are at least willing to concede this is a new reality while struggling to handle crises in particular. There are not many, however. Some will be more frank about this policy brittleness after they leave office than when still in harness. One described a new challenge to policy making that is almost 'subversive'. A senior official confirmed: 'We are in trouble. Those working in government are very much living in a different age.' Another said: 'Officials are living on a different planet if they think they control all the levers of policy now and in the future during a major crisis' (Gowing, 2009: 9).

Until early 2010, this author experienced and recorded repeatedly the active institutional reluctance to first appreciate then embrace this fast unfolding dynamic that was irreversible, despite its impact on power. Few were ever prepared to even concede there might be a new fast-looming issue for them to confront, let alone a new principle to understand. The visceral response of the Burmese Government in October 2007 to dismiss as a 'Skyful of Lies' the social media coverage of the public protests led by monks that swept the country is not unique to that country.<sup>7</sup> Indeed it was a typical instinctive and rejectionist response that is repeated time and time again in a multitude of

institutions, whether by authoritarian governments or the largest and most democratically accountable. It illustrates vividly the visceral instincts of how problematic it remains for almost all institutional mindsets to 'get it'.

Eventually, though, a regrettably small number of the more far-sighted officials and policy makers have started to take the bold professional step of showing the first enlightened signs to embrace the issues raised by the Skyful of Lies findings. The myopia and heavily entrenched resistance to the issue have started to clear, but often with neither sweeping decisiveness nor significant, self-confident institutional buy-in. Even acceptance by the highest levels does not guarantee full institutional embracing of the issue. The realities are usually so counter intuitive that even wavering converts remain sceptical and nervous about making what is essentially a policy handbrake U-turn that experience shows can even affect their career prospects.

Encouraged by over-the-horizon thinking from her Policy Planning Department, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was among the first to confirm officially the price to be paid for clinging to retro attitudes.<sup>8</sup> The new instant information realities defined what she called 'the new nervous system for our planet'. She confirmed in public this author's earlier analysis that this new nervous system of a rapidly changing media landscape was forcing the institutions of power, especially governments, to be – as she confirmed explicitly – 'more accountable'. The analysis of this author is that this new nervous system can no longer be considered to be dominated in any way by either CNN or its 'effect'.

At the same time as Secretary Clinton offered her recalibrated view, Britain's Armed Forces Minister Bill Rammell<sup>9</sup> offered a parallel and important change of perspective. In what he decided should be public remarks, he confided that he viewed himself as taking a professional risk when he decided to identify this same growing chasm in credibility and perceptions. He warned civilian colleagues and military personnel in the Ministry of Defence of the 'small "c" conservatism' they upheld in their work. But he told them that must change. Routinely, a reputational price was being paid for failing to understand how the 'ferocious pace and incredible volume' of information flows was 'changing people's expectations' and leading to a 'growing mistrust of government'. Therefore, he said, there must be 'cultural change' in the ministry to 'embrace more readily and more rapidly the new dynamics of transparency'.

Just five days later, that civilian analysis was further reinforced by the Head of the British Army, General Sir David Richards.<sup>10</sup> The future Head of the British Armed Forces chose to focus a speech on 'Future conflict and its prevention: people and the information age' to warn specifically how the 'internet and linked technology like mobile phones and mini cameras allow communications that are way beyond the state's ability to control.' Government institutions, the General underlined, are 'way behind our opponents in understanding and exploiting this aspect of the battle for people's minds'.

Similarly, a very senior source at the heart of security policy later both accepted and confided that, because of the new dramatic implications of new information technologies and social media, 'the power of the state to control citizens has declined.' The source went on: 'Citizens now believe they have a right to be told the truth.' But any state's 'room for manoeuvre is declining' because the 'relationship of the people and state is changing.'

Walk into any government or government crisis centre these days and on any screen there is no longer one dominating image of the output from CNN. There is now usually

a matrix of outputs from many broadcast channels, both local, regional and global. No one channel has a monopoly. In addition, there will be a proliferation of laptop and PC screens with shortcuts and favourites tuned to a multitude of web, blog and Twitter sites. In any crisis centre worth its name, every single digital tentacle will be tuned into a vast electronic, multi-dimensional landscape of images, video and text from a vast array of sources of all kinds.

What officials once frequently described and cursed as the CNN effect has now been replaced by an overwhelming and exciting proliferation of digital data flows from an almost infinite multitude of digital sources. Graphically and dramatically, they reveal what is unfolding. And they usually do so instantly. The current challenge is no longer a fashionable misplaced dread of the CNN effect. It is whether government and corporate systems are both adequate and in place to handle the new tyranny of real-time information on a time line that most remain ill-prepared for. The answer in many cases is: not yet. But they should be.

For journalism – even in its new, multiple and fast evolving incarnations – the prospects have never been richer when it comes to generating, collating, mediating and ‘publishing’ data in real time. But, for the institutions of power, the prospects have never been so daunting in the way their core assumptions of how they make decisions about exercising that power are being challenged.

## Notes

1. Nik Gowing is a Main Presenter, BBC World News. This commentary is written in a personal capacity.
2. For full peer-reviewed analysis, see Gowing (2009).
3. In the interests of full disclosure, it must be recorded that this author is a Main Presenter for BBC World News, part of the BBC Global News division which currently has a weekly audience of 73 million across all its global content platforms.
4. Data were correct in late 2010.
5. Building on Professor Mary Kaldor’s work at the Centre for Global Governance (LSE) on the deficits of legitimacy, and presented in ‘Skyful of Lies’, a TV documentary hosted by Nik Gowing, broadcast on BBC World News on 27/28 March 2010.
6. First identified and predicted in Gowing (1994).
7. See many examples highlighting such *Skyful of Lies* instincts in Gowing (2009).
8. 21 January 2010. Available at: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135519.htm>
9. 13 January 2010. Available at: <http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/AboutDefence/People/Speeches/MinAF/20100113GenerationWhyUnderstandingTheArmedForcesInModernSociety.htm>
10. 18 January 2010. Available at: <http://www.iiss.org/recent-key-addresses/general-sir-david-richards-address/>

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