

Project Proposal: Reproducing in a shared online portal early warnings, risk analyses and policy recommendations of key NGOs for prevention of mass atrocities

Background

A key cause behind repeated failures by the international community to prevent or halt domestically perpetrated mass atrocities, is that despite the strong moral imperative to act, no government has ever been held politically accountable by its citizens for failing to do so. A recent US-focused study (by this author) shows that principled majority support in the American citizenry for strong action was never translated into meaningful political costs for inaction for the Executive branch. In particular, the results indicated that deliberate official framing of information about crises in the US media had played important role in securing public acquiescence to, or passivity in the face of, weak policies. For example, in the case of Rwanda in 1994, the American public was misinformed for weeks about the political nature of the massacres, their genocidal nature, and crucially, was led to believe that not much could be done from the outside to stop them. In Darfur 2004, whilst being more active than others in trying to build international pressure on Sudan's government, the Bush Administration still shied away from investing the diplomatic/economic resources required for effective action – successfully pretending that it was doing all that could be done.

In sum, by controlling (at different times and to varying degrees of success) public perceptions of the causes of crises, the reasons behind international failures to act, the extent of America's responsibility and/or obligations, available courses of action, prospects for success, and/or risks of failures – US policymakers were able to manage and mitigate domestic reactions to their weak policies, without having to bear the expected costs and risks of strong action.

This is not to say that other perspectives – including risk analyses and policy recommendations – did not exist in the public domain. In many cases (famously in Rwanda and Darfur) leading human rights NGOs did try, but generally failed, to warn the public, the media and the politicians, ahead of, or early in, the violence, and offer policy advice. *At least part of their failure could be attributed to weaknesses in getting their messages across to the public through the media, and thus to challenge official frames.*

Problem Definition

Governments' officials tend to have strong advantages in influencing how mainstream media outlets frame the nature, significance, imperatives / constraints, and proposed ways of action

in response to faraway crises. Alternative sources of information, some of which may be less politically skewed, do not get much exposure in the media and/or in the political debate over action (if the latter takes place at all). By controlling the frames and terms of debate over responses to threatened, impending or already ongoing situations of mass atrocities, governments can potentially manoeuvre domestic deliberations to suit their policies. While such practices are common to all political actors and in all walks of the political process, they stand to have particularly strong impacts on discussions of responses to mass atrocities, given the potentially charged normative underpinning of these events.

Proposed response

It is argued here that convergences of certain social and technological developments – most visibly (but not only), the exponential growth in social media, and the emergence of online grassroots advocacy campaigns and viral ‘*youtube*’ movie clips – effectively positions moral norms in better position than in the past, to actively influence governments’ policy decisions about responses to mass atrocities. In such a scenario, the quality, timeliness, and framing of the information available to publics – from early warning, to risk analyses, to policy recommendations – stand to become ever more important.

The idea is to create a single point of entry to data – a dedicated website (online portal) – where media outlets, decision-makers, politicians, and concerned citizens could access high level summaries of relevant information from leading NGOs, concerning looming or ongoing crises. The portal will not replace the websites of individual NGOs, but will automatically ‘shadow’ (reproduce) relevant information, while providing also links to more detailed information on these sites.¹

Arguably, the more exposed the citizenry in real time to quality information through the media, the harder it will be for governments to exclude normative considerations from policy debates, by controlling the framing of crises in support of ‘harder’ interests.

Of course, normative considerations may influence policy decisions either in favour or against particular courses of action. The about-turn of the UK and US governments in relation to

¹ One possible technical solution is that designated areas in the websites of credible agreed upon NGOs will contain high level summaries, updated by them, that will be updated automatically into the portal, with links to the more detailed information on the original websites.

bombing Syria,² purportedly following strong objections by their respective citizenries, is a testimony to the growing power of the public – in this case to restrain (due to fears of casualties, and, likely, because of not knowing what else to push for), but in other times to possibly encourage, action.

Past experience has shown that getting NGOs to cooperate with each other in the context of their public interactions could be difficult. However, if research can show that reproducing alerts, analyses and recommendations from key NGOs through a collaborative online data repository (i.e., the proposed portal) could increase both their public exposure and their political influence – without increasing their workload – then some of them may agree to join such an initiative.

Research proposal – responding to knowledge gaps

Based on recent studies, traditional mainstream news media outlets continue to lead as main sources of information for the public about distant crises. The question is then how to improve media and public access to the sometimes critical information collected in the field and analysed by human rights and humanitarian NGOs. To learn more about this hypothesised gap between NGO output and media reporting, the proposed research will undertake the following tasks:

1. Identifying dominant discursive items (pieces of information) in media's coverage of mass atrocities, which may have affected the policymaking process in key countries – most commonly, through public opinion – in favour, or against, strong action to prevent (or halt) the violence. Based on past studies (by GPANet members and others), such influences were related often to the ways in which these information items were framed in, or by, the media. Examples include: how a conflict was explained (i.e. framing the underlying causes behind an impending, or already ongoing, violence); the framing of the nature of threats ('genocide', 'war crimes', etc.); framing the probability of escalation of threats; framing what needs to happen for the conflict to escalate; assigning blame (e.g. offering explanations for the failure to prevent or stop the violence, up to that point in time); framing policy recommendations (i.e. which policy option(s) were highlighted in, or omitted from, the media coverage/reporting); how justifications for policy recommendations were framed; framing the prospects of

² In response to alleged uses of chemical weapons by the Syrian government.

success for alternative policy recommendations; framing the risks of failure, or casualties (i.e. casualties among interveners or affected population).

2. In its second phase, the study will look for presences or absences of the information items, which were identified as important, in the coverage of a number of crises (to be determined). The results will then be used to compare the coverage of the crises in leading news media outlets (e.g., in the US, *the New York Times* and *the Washington Post*, but also others) against information (i.e., media releases, country reports) published by leading human rights or humanitarian NGOs (for example, ICG, Human Rights Watch, Refugees International, Amnesty International).

The objective of this phase will be to learn how the relevant information appeared in, or was missing from, the outputs of the NGOs and/or the media, at different phases of the crises. In particular, we would like to be able to answer two questions:

- How timely and accurate were the information and policy proposals issued by the NGOs?
- How successful were the NGOs in ‘pushing’ their findings and proposals to leading media outlets, presumably, in the hope of influencing policymakers, directly, or indirectly through public opinion?

If (as hypothesised) the findings will show that important information from the NGOs had failed to appear in the media accurately, prominently, and/or in a timely manner, this should make a strong, better informed case for working to improve the methods of pushing information to the media.

3. The project’s third objective will thus be to develop the ‘one stop online shop’ – a website or portal – that will ‘shadow’ and automatically update relevant information (i.e. the information items identified earlier) from websites of major NGOs – *creating an easier access point to a more comprehensive and inclusive information repository, for media outlets, state officials, politicians, and even the public*. For this purpose, the project will research and develop strategies for maintaining such a portal without creating additional work (i.e. duplicating updating work) for the NGOs.

The main hurdle in this phase will likely be to ensure that the NGOs agree to display relevant information on their websites in a format consistent enough to allow its easy extraction to, and presentation on, the portal.

