

Digital Media in Conflict-Prone Societies
With Ivan Sigal, Executive Director of Global Voices
Minutes Prepared by MC Concentration Associate Lorena Ruiz
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Nina Khrushcheva, the Media and Culture Concentration Chair began the meeting by introducing Ivan Sigal. Ivan Sigal is the Executive Director of Global Voices, which is a citizen's media project. Before joining Global Voices, Ivan was a Fellow at the US Institute of Peace, and before that he worked for Internews, which is an international journal that fosters media independence around the world.

Ivan Sigal – First I will begin with a quick presentation of this paper (Digital Media in Conflict-Prone Societies that can be found here: <http://cima.ned.org/reports/digitalmedia-in-conflict-prone-societies-2.html>). Then we can launch into a discussion about digital media in conflict societies. This report began as a yearlong project with the Institute of Peace. Before that, I worked with Internews for almost 10 years, first in the Soviet Union, then with their Afghan program. After that I designed their China programs, and then became their Asia director.

While at Internews I was working with media development in the developing world, with local TV stations in the developing world, trying to help them design professional newsrooms and strategies to enter markets and making sustainable news operations and trying to get access to information for people. In the last decade it's been really compelling, with advances in technology. In the 90's they would teach small stations to shoot in super VHS and do analogue linear editing. We'd come in and train for 2 weeks. To train 15 people we'd need \$15,000 worth of equipment, at least. We went from that phase to a flip cam in a decade. It's totally changed the way that people engage information. What's curious about the developing world is you can go from no technology to a flip cam, just like that.

The project that I worked on in Afghanistan was creating a space for community nonstate radio stations. It started out with something complicated, we had to go to the Ministry of Information and Culture and say 'nonstate radio is currently illegal in Afghanistan, we need you to help us, we need to change the law.' And then going to the Ministry of Communications and saying 'we need to do spectrum analysis and we need to allocate spectrum for all these stations.' We built stations where there were none, and worked with 100 year old technology. At the same time in that 6-year period where we were able to build 40 radio stations in Afghanistan, people of their own accord went from 0 to 500,000 users of the Internet, mostly via satellite systems. At the same time large cell phone networks sprung up, mostly from private capital. Old technology is important but ultimately it's the new technology that's going to transform the way people communicate in Afghanistan. That dynamic made me ask: Why am I working in a space trying to build large institutional systems in the developing world that require high access to knowledge and skills, lots of capital, and a high risk of potential failure when there's so many interesting ways to do things on an incremental level with internet in the media space?

So I eventually wound up writing a paper which is specifically about how the effects of digital media, the many-to-many communications systems that we all know so well these days, can be used to create a different frame about how we think about the relationship of media to conflict.

The standard model that we've had for the past century through the industrialized media model is a one-to-many broadcast model with a largely propagandistic or authoritative voice to a largely passive audience. And the many-to-many networked media model is one which voices are diffuse, there's lots of speaking back and forth, there's as many different kinds of interactions as we can imagine. But the field that analyses the question of the relationship of mass media to conflict and if you look at the peace building field, still looks at Rwanda as the main example of what could go wrong with mass media in conflict situation. That's no longer the way the media work. It's arguable that while there will be violence, there certainly will be violence connected to the media, there's certainly a very complex set of relationships between them.

This paper devolved into two trends. The first trend is the change in the nature of warfare over the past 50 or 60 years. Throughout, through Vietnam, and through most of the Cold War most wars were between states and between standing armies, between legal combatants. Most people who died in war were soldiers. Even in World War II, it was roughly – maybe because of the genocide and the famine in Russia and in China, ultimately more civilians died in WWII than soldiers, but it was pretty close. But since that time, there's been a huge increase in the number of wars that are interstate, in which most combatants, one side of the combatants is made of up non-state actors, not legally identified or recognized as affiliated with the state. And now 90% of the people who die in wars are civilians. So there's been a pretty massive shift in the nature of war in the last 50 or 60 years. There's a whole school of theory that calls this 'new wars' but we don't need to get stuck on names. I don't know whether its new, and certainly there have been plenty of times in different parts of the world, especially when you say there's no such thing as a state, where all sorts of small and medium sized forces are fighting to define territory. So it's not really a useful lens of analysis say before Westphalia, the end of the 19th century, 1870's. But we have seen that happening, so when we see conflicts occurring now, and civil conflicts occurring, it's often in the midst of civilian populations. And it's often with at least one side of the people of the fight being a nonstate actor, and large numbers of victims that are not fighting. And at the same time, in the developing world, we can look across the world and we can see roughly 60 to 80 states that are chronically weak or failed, and have undergone cycles of violence, repeated cycles of violence around elections, civil violence, or other kinds of civil war, etc... Those states are all adopting digital media, quickly. Somalia and Afghanistan - the two states that usually top the list of failed states for most different indices, whether it's the World Bank or the Brookings Institute or the four or five other indices that track this - are great examples. Somalia has four or five cell phone networks, it has actively functioning Internet. Of course the cell phone networks cant talk to each other, because the regulators have no regulatory bodies, so for each separate network you have to get a different phone. If you look at the direction of digital vibe, you see that its narrowing, and we can recognize that there's a different class of states around the world where at the

same time they have these questions of chronic failure or weakness are all becoming rapidly wired, and rapidly creating digital access and creating a network sphere.

Pakistan is a great example. Pakistan is about to roll out a 3G phone network, and has adaptation of cell phones of about roughly 2 to 3 million per month and now has roughly 100 million cell phone users. That's in a country where 60% of the population is under 25. In contrast it has about a total circulation of all its newspapers at about a half a million, so where are people going to get their information in Pakistan in 10 years if not now? They're going to get it on their phones. At the same time Pakistan has had a boom both in satellite television, in Internet usage, and also in radio. So 5 years ago Pakistan had a national broadcaster that did news once a day, and now it has 50 satellite television channels, and about 10 of them are 24-hour news channels. That's a massive shift in the way that information is conveyed. That's the basic premise of the discussion. What is the mean for our understanding of the relationship between conflict and media? There isn't much empirical research on this actually, so we can speculate, but there are not a lot of well-crafted studies. For the people in the world who do development, who think about this relationship, looking at the paradigm of Rwanda as the model for how we think the media relates to conflict, where you have one voice affiliated with the government and no other sources of information is the wrong model. The right model today is something like what happened in Kenya in the beginning of 2008, end of 2007, where violence around an election occurred, the government tried to shut down and stifle live broadcasting on state radio and television, and people shifted to the internet and to cell phones. Or Pakistan in 2007 where the government shut down, stopped live broadcasting of live TV, and TV stations started streaming their programming on YouTube. And at the same time a network of students created a digital activism movement to organize demonstrations.

Some of the takeaways are that media no longer has a functional relationship to conflict; it doesn't report on conflict anymore, it's actually a part of it. Just as terror acts are, in some ways designed for a media audience. The theater of the real. Without the ability to amplify a terror act, a lot of terror acts wouldn't happen. Because the point of a terror act is maximum impact for minimum effort. You want scare the hell out of people but you don't really want to spend much. Without the ability for people to film and distribute the cutting off of heads there would be no cutting off of heads, or it would be much more localized. If we look at what happened in the Swat Valley in Northern Pakistan earlier this year, the Taliban as they took over that territory from the summer of 2007, they had a couple of acts that were quite horrific, they killed a woman and they cut off her head and they threw her corpse in the street, and somebody filmed it, and took a picture of it. In Pakistan you can get a multi media phone that's a knockoff of a Nokia for \$40, that's made in China. Or you can get a Blockberry, as they're called, or a Noqia, spelled with a q. This picture went around, people spread it around, and this was the one way people learned how the Taliban were acting in the Swat Valley. And that's the future of how people are going to get information about news and conflict.

I'm going to run through a presentation quickly and then we can have a conversation. I'm going to show you a few slides, and talk to you about a couple of ways that specifically citizen media are being used in conflict zones.

This is a Twitter feed from Madagascar, and about the conflict in Madagascar that occurred earlier this year. A conflict occurred that led to a coup from the mayor of the capital city, and was sparked by a South Korean company's attempt to – in collusion with the standing government – purchase 1/3 of the arable land in the country. It was a case of massive corruption. Journalists were bought by both sides of the conflict, so getting accurate information was quite difficult. There's a small community of bloggers that my organizations Global Voices had been working with -one of the things we do at Global Voices is we seed small grants, \$3000 - \$5000 to communities in the developing world who have chronically underrepresented voices – we gave a grant to a small community of environmental bloggers to write about the environment in Madagascar in Malagasian French. And these guys during this conflict turned out to be the primary source of information for the world for the first two weeks of the conflict because there was only one foreign correspondent there from AFP who showed up after a week. And so by virtue of the fact that they were not affiliated with existing mass media and newspapers and weren't captured by a political system and had access to a set of distribution paths that people in the country weren't initially paying attention to, they were out there filming the conflict on their phones, simple cameras and Twittering about it. Those guys went from doing that to being interviewed by Radio France International, CNN and the BBC. It's an example of the kind of incidental nature of people who are living amidst violence and amidst conflict who become witnesses, and then reporters, and then journalists. This is the community, Foco Madagascar, and after they did this act, they set back and started reflecting on what it was that they had done. They came together and held a bar camp a few months later, and analyzed the effects of running a project like this. They tried to see what they did well, what they did poorly, and if there was something that they learned from this that they could use in another context. This slide is a story about it from the BBC.

This slide is a page from Global Voices, and one of the things that Global Voices does is we analyze blogospheres that come from all over the world. We have an A-list of blogs here in this country, and that's true of every country in different languages, so we have a community of people who write about, aggregate and translate, and analyze the best of citizen media from all over the world. When an issue occurs that is really compelling or interesting we create a special coverage page for it, so we can bring more resources to it, and try to pull together a larger story and set a frame for it. So this community Foco I was telling you about, because they were linked to our network, has been a source of information. And our site, because we aggregate so many sources from around the world we have a pretty large audience, so we're pretty much the only citizen media with a development focus blog that's frequently in the top 100 of Technorati blog ranking. This is an example of how we would take a story that's regional and try to give it a global context. And you can see here, its been translated into French, Chinese, and Malagasy. Our site is translated into about 20 languages through a community of volunteer translators.

This is an example of a similar aggregation from the Gaza bombings and conflict that occurred late last year. And we have a pretty large community of bloggers from the Arab world and this was a very very big issue in the Arab blogosphere. We had probably

within a month period 50 articles on the subject. People writing in, telling us what the Syrians think, what the Lebanese think, what the Jordanians think, and then beyond that, what the Venezuelans think about the conflict, and what people think about it in South East Asia. So the effect of this is also to say not just what do the Western countries think, but what we think about an issue from the capitals, from Washington, from London, but what does somebody from Vietnam understand about the conflict in Gaza. It gives you a different perspective of how the world talks to itself.

This is a snapshot from an image from Al-Jazeera's online laboratory, and it's an installation of a project called Ushahiri. Ushahiri means witness in Swahili. It's a project that was created to crowd source conflict information by a group of Kenyan bloggers and technologists around the 2008 elections conflict. They built a platform that allowed people to phone in violent incidents and map them, so they mapped them, and created a simple verification system. They asked where does this information come from, how accurate is it, and what's the story, and then they tracked it over a timeline. Once they built it they realized that this was a technical tool that anybody could use to track a whole range of incidents and issues, and in this case Al-Jazeera took it and installed it on their site to track crowd sourced information about specific incidents during the Gaza crisis. And you can see here the kinds of categories that they're looking at, so there's deaths, the presence of Israeli ground forces, attacks against civilians, whether there's international aid, air strikes, rocket attacks, and so on and so forth. This is a project that with each iteration has become more sophisticated, so the first effort in Kenya was rather primitive actually, none of the guys who did it had any experience in conflict, and now they're creating these sites for UN agencies. And that happened in a year and a half. Now there's been 300 - 400 installations of it, and two dozen which are really interesting. It's one of the most interesting installations these days, a lot of people are using it to track elections, in India, Mexico, and other places.

Here's a slightly different example of a citizens media effort to report on violence. This is a peace and conflict timeline, and it's a project that tracks and creates a living history of the Sri Lankan civil war. This page is interesting because it's from the day that Peramakan was finally killed by the Sri Lankan government. If you go in the site you'll see that it allows people to write articles in a communal space and tell the entire story of a 25 year conflict, whereby what's occurring today is linked back and is seamless with earlier acts, so it gives you a sense or a place to understand a very complex story by following links, and against most of it is crowd sourced, but it's vetted and closely curated.

Here's another example for how digital media technologies and tools are being used in tracking information in conflict zones, this is a cover of a report created by an organization called Humananet that is basically doing statistical data analysis to compare the official numbers of people disappeared in Sri Lanka to data sets of population size to look for discrepancies and then to try to verify on a data set who is actually disappeared through an extensive reporting of families. So its looking at 3 or 4 different sources of what's happened to people who've disappeared in war, and trying to verify or make the data consistent, and to point out where the data is not congruous.

I'll be staying with Sri Lanka for a few minutes, since I spent a lot of time there, and it's what I know. During the war the end of the war last year there was a lot of conflict about what was actually happening in a small piece of Northeastern Sri Lanka where a large group of refugees who were internally displaced were kind of caught together with the remnants of some Tamil Tigers. The assertion by the international monitors is that the Sri Lankan government was bombing populated centers of civilians, and the Sri Lankan government was denying it. Several commercial satellite operators in the UN leaked some visuals into the world to demonstrate that in fact there was bombing. This is an example of one of those leaks. This is an image of it taken from a press photographer of that space taken from a helicopter after the battle was over so it gives you a sense of what people were looking at.

The idea that we've been discussing is that anybody in a conflict zone can theoretically be a witness or reporter or a journalist and what this means for how we understand conflict, and how journalists can be combatants at the same time. And how every set of possible relationships of image to fighting are a variable that we can see. It's not really a new idea, actually, its just amplified by technology and accelerated by it. We've been documenting war for as long as we've been having war. This is a picture of a clip from Waltz with Bashir the film, and it's an example of how we used to do it. A man who was a fighter, a soldier 25 years ago reflects upon his experience, becomes an artist, and then recreates or re-imagines the space that he occupied when he was young.

And here's the last example. This is Tchin Wong, who is a Chinese artists who was a soldier in the Chinese military during Tiananmen Square, whose art is mostly images remembered from his time as a soldier.

Maybe we can open this up for questions.

Nina Khrushcheva – So half of the audience is actually from the media class, which is appropriate because we've been talking about covering war and international crises and how the media has been affected. There are also a lot of people from previous years in my media class.

Ivan Sigal – We can also get into what's happening to the international media world if you want to, the decimation of journalism from the American perspective, I've seen a lot of that so we can talk about it if you want to.

Student Question – I wanted to ask you, you mentioned the Madagascar project, you said they were evaluating on that afterwards. Do you know about the conclusions there?

Ivan Sigal – I do know some of it. A couple of things, the first was the need to start to consider people's security once they became known, and in some ways there was a catalyst around the issue of one guy who was photographing and was arrested for it, and there was a kind of reaction about how do you actually protect yourself. Suddenly these people who were normal citizens running their own little blogs are playing the role of war photographers, and in some ways are grossly underprepared for the consequences, so

really basic things, like data security, physical security, communications structures, so if you go somewhere, somebody knows you've gone. Other things such as verification of information, how do you demonstrate that the thing that you say is true is really true, how do you establish a reputation and how do you maintain it, and then also some technical issues such as, a lot of these guys were relatively inexperienced bloggers, so how do you design and maintain your site, and then also how do you relate to the stories you're trying to tell? And now that they've gained prominence, the question for them is how do they continue, or are they able to continue to relate to this conflict from a neutral position, or are they going to be captured by the same political forces that have captured the mass media. So what happens once you grow up? Do you become just like everything else, or are you able to maintain that first blush status?

Nina Khrushcheva – I have a question. Well you said you guys are global, which you are. How do you, I understand that you probably pick a country or a place where conflict is occurring, but how do you set up an infrastructure, and how do you find people to work for you?

Ivan Sigal – Who's you? As in Global Voices?

Nina Khrushcheva – As in Global Voices.

Ivan Sigal - We're a Dutch non-profit with no physical location, we have a mailbox and a trust fund in the Netherlands that deals with our taxes. We have a little bit of paperwork in Trinidad, which is where our accountant lives and our managing director lives as well. I live in Washington DC at the moment and our managing editor goes between here in New York, Berlin, and Copenhagen. She travels a lot. We recruit through communities, through social networks basically. And it's not perfect, so we don't always manage to cover every story equally. Iran, for instance, we covered the election, and we covered the actual campaign, so we were covering the story from the social media side for 6 weeks before the conflict actually occurred. We had plenty of stories and our Iranian author was also interviewed by the mass media 4 or 5 times a day during the height of this conflict, but we still only had one person. And we really wish we could find more, but we just didn't have any. We tried to set up a relationship with the BBC Iranian service, the Farsi service, and it didn't work out the way we wanted to, so it's hard. It's a volunteer network, and a community of editors that are part time and are not paid a lot of money so in certain places we do really well and in other places we don't.

Nina Khrushcheva – But the direction is still valuable then? You start with grassroots part time workers, or even just volunteers, but then you say that they were interviewed by the mainstream media so then it's still very important there is some direction. So the process goes up and then disseminates.

Ivan Sigal – Yes. And our relationship with the mass media is still very important. We don't think of this digital media space or the citizen media as something opposed to or separate from the mass media. It's really important to build those relationships. When CNN picks up one of our stories our ratings spike, and the same is true when we're on the

BBC. One of our French translation directors is interviewed weekly by Radio France International, where she talks about blogs, and so things like that make a difference.

Nina Khrushcheva – And it does help the cause. Ultimately.

Ivan Sigal – It helps the cause but it also helps the other cause, which is to try to make sure that the underrepresented voices and causes are more broadly disseminated. We're tool agnostic, as we like to say, people are using blogs right now, so we're doing that, but we recognize that in some places a lot of energy has gone out of individual blogs and people are using social networks, so how do you actually track conversations on closed social networks? It's a very different thing, and quite a bit more complicated.

Student Question – I have a question, a little more about subjectivity and neutrality. For instance if you get pictures or films, how do you fact check? Where they're coming from, who they are, etc?

Ivan Sigal – Well, we rely on trusted networks. Covering Video online is difficult because you have to spend a lot of time looking at stories and you've got to watch every video to the very end to make sure that there's something there... But generally we verify through trusted networks of people, and then we say what we know, and I think in the citizen media space or on the online space in general the word to substitute for the idea of transparency as a goal or as an aspirational value over objectivity because we can't know whether the source of the thing isn't necessarily what it says it is, all we can say is where we got it. What's important is to establish an epistemological level, well this is what we know, this is what we don't know, and to be really clear about that. If you get a piece of information that you're able to partially verify then you have to be able to say that this is partially verified, take it with a pillar of salt. Video is even more complicated. This is a typical story of how we'll do a video project. We'll show an image, analyze how people are talking about it, then we post it. Again, I should say that video is also hard because of copyright issues. Everything we do goes out on a creative commons license, unless we get exclusive or special permission. When it comes to photos, we're using mostly photos that have been cleared using a creative commons license, or an individual user has contributed it. Video is even harder so we mostly cannot use broadcast material. Am I answering your question?

Student Question continued – Yes you are. I'm just wondering if you can even be objective, I mean, its as you say, its people who are volunteers, people who seem to have a cause and want to bring this somewhere.

Ivan Sigal – When people write for us we have an editorial process so our authors, of which there are approximately 300 authors, don't have access to the site directly, only the editors do. They work with an editor, and the editor can upload their story, and the author's job is to analyze and present the blogs and the conversations that they find in the world. If everybody in the Arab blogosphere says Israel sucks, then the story will be one side, which is that everybody in the Arabic blogosphere says that Israel sucks. Then probably to balance that we wouldn't go and try to find the one Arab blogger that says

‘well, actually I kind of like Israel’ because that’s not really representative if 95% of people are saying the opposite. But we would go and look at what the Israeli blogospheres are saying. The author’s job is supposed to be balanced and neutral in the journalistic fashion. We don’t always succeed, but that is our stated goal.

Student Question – You talked about your relationship with major news networks, but what about your relationship with state controlled communications?

Ivan Sigal – We don’t take any government funding. We are a nonprofit, so that’s the first thing. Maybe in the future for a development project or an advocacy project we might. There are four major components to Global Voices. The first is the main site. The second is Global Voices Advocacy, which is about online freedom of expression, the third is our translation site Lingua, and the fourth is a project called Rising Voices, its an outreach and development project that gives micro grants, training, networks and learning for developing world media.

Student Question – Have you ever seen your site blocked?

Ivan Sigal – In China. It’s been blocked from time to time. But not persistently.

Nina Khrushcheva – Is it blocked when you post something very sensitive...

Ivan Sigal – It’s hard to know. We make a lot of presumptions but it’s really hard to say exactly why something is blocked.

Nina Khrushcheva – So you can’t just say it’s blocked as response to something you’ve posted?

Ivan Sigal – Sometimes its even hard to verify that its been blocked. The way that China blocks the Internet is pretty complex. Its blocked at the ISP level, and there are several dozen different ISPs in China, and the Chinese government issues a general set of protocols and directions, to the information bureau, but then each ISP interprets them somewhat differently. It may be blocked in one place but not in another, or in one ISP but not in another, so it’s quite complicated to say that something is definitively blocked.

Student Question – Do you see this model, how you’re modeling Global Voices as something that should be picked up generally, maybe something that the larger mass media should incorporate and open up towards?

Ivan Sigal – They’re already doing it. To some extent. If they really do it, they’d kill us. We really noticed during the Iran conflict, because suddenly, I remember going on the BBC website and looking at a BBC story and it was built just like a Global Voices story, because they couldn’t get their reporters in there because they were locked in their hotel rooms, and I though ‘Oh! We’re done. They figured it out! It’s not hard.’ But what happened is we still turned out to be valuable. At first we were kind of worried about that but the story ended for the mass media really quickly and at the end of the day we had a 3

month complete tale, that followed it and followed it accurately. The BBC also misreported the story, so the BBC television they brought in an expert that said that Iran has the largest blogosphere in the world. And so people picked up that, and for days afterwards, it was reported again and again. Iran has a blogosphere of about 80,000 active bloggers, it's a pretty big blogosphere, but it is not the largest.

Nina Khrushcheva – What is the largest?

Ivan Sigal – China. Followed by the US and Japan.

Student Question – Back on China, during the riots this summer, were you able to find any information from those blogs and social networks?

Ivan Sigal – We certainly covered it, absolutely. And we've covered China. The Szechuan coverage was really interesting in that regard, the Tibet riots were too. The riots in the West you mean? Yeah, we did a couple of stories on that. And especially on the prevalence of the myth of the needle stabbing, which was an interesting story because it turns out that it is a persistent urban myth in China and it had been around for years. Then they arrested a couple of people for it. So the question is, were they just copycatting the urban myth? Or did it not happen? Or is this actually an urban myth that was true? It's quite complex.

Student Question – My question is about this idea of citizen journalism. It just seems to me that in citizen journalism the content doesn't get a lot of publicity unless it's taken on by an organization or by mainstream media. Like you said about the BBC reporting on the twittering of the Iranian election.

Ivan Sigal – Or misreporting, because they totally misreported it.

Student Question continued – Yeah, or that. I'm just wondering about that process. There are so many blogs, so many tweets. How are those sifted through to make it into mainstream media?

Ivan Sigal – Well I think the future of mainstream media is in some ways the people who can figure out how to take that mass of information and make it useful. In a world where the cost of the production of a story is less than the transaction cost of getting it around the world in some cases, what's really important is figuring out how to make a coherent narrative out of everything that's available in the world. I think the winners in this space are going to be people who figure out how to do that. By all rights that should be existing mass media outlets because their resources are so much bigger than everyone else's, and if they understand that idea they should be able to do it. They already have a trusted brand, etc... But that's not necessarily the case. I've talked to people at AFP, Reuters, AP, and the BBC about Iran and all of them were just shattered by the idea that they had to report stuff that they couldn't independently verify. They couldn't functionally get their minds around something that was quite basic, which is that you need to create a separate space for stuff you don't verify. This is a stream of information that we're

seeing, and we're going to trust our audience enough to actually know that they have the capacity to understand that that is the case, and we're going to frame it in such a way that people get that. That concept was difficult, and it remains difficult. In some cases the culture of mainstream media mitigate against them working well in the citizen media space, and those cultures include the idea of a closed hierarchical news stream. What's great about traditional mass media is that it's edited by many layers. What's bad is that if there is a mistake in that system, as a reader you'll never know it unless they decide to admit it. If there's a bias within that news frame, you won't know it. You don't ever see the warts unless someone catches them out. Citizen media is one big wart, well some people think so. It isn't, but when mistakes are made in that space, there are lots of people to see those errors, and that's why it's a lot more of a conversation. And so online in the citizen media space, news becomes a process. In the traditional media news is a product. So that's the difference. People who understand that it's a process and that what you're trying to do in the citizen media space is help people participate in a process, and come to an understanding about a set of issues, will ultimately win. Think for a second about the structure of a traditional journalism story from a foreign correspondent. There's a piece of news in the first three or four paragraphs. And then for just about any publication in the world – maybe in something like the New York Times you won't have to do this because you assume your audience is at a level of sophistication – the rest of the story is trying to frame it for a general reader. If you actually know something about that story, you don't need to read more than the first three paragraphs, because the rest of it is written for somebody who you have to assume doesn't know anything. It's a tremendously inefficient way of delivering information if you consider news as a process because you only need those first three paragraphs if you're following the story on a regular basis. That small example is one small way that the traditional news production system is tremendously inefficient from the point of view of trying to get information that adds to your individual collective knowledge based on where you are starting and where you want to go.

Student Question – The whole idea of Global Voices is also about getting to read about people who don't often get the opportunity to speak up. It seems that in citizen media then the citizen would have to have access to the Internet.

Ivan Sigal – There's clearly digital divide issues. Obviously when you're online you're only reaching people that are online. That's one reason why we focus on the translation side, and why we focus on the development side as well. Online communities gel once there are enough people writing. So first, let's look at the Arab blogosphere for instance. Today there are 35,000 bloggers in the Arab blogosphere roughly. 6 or 7 years ago there were a much smaller number of people in the Arabic world blogging. And a lot of people, if they had the capacity, wrote in English because the audience online was mostly in English. Now most Arabic bloggers even if they speak English write in Arabic. Or more and more do. We noticed that trend, and that's because there's a large enough audience. It's a magnet effect; it's a catalyst effect. People are drawn to it when there's a reason to go to it. You have to reach a threshold or something. Our hope is that projects like this will actually catalyze people to want to use these technologies in developing communities to create and share information.

Student Question – I'm interested in climate change and in how people all over the world are being affected in different ways, different communities, etc. So how do you think something like this community generated information can be applied to a totally different problem such as climate change?

Ivan Sigal – It is being applied to a pretty considerable degree actually. Certainly we're doing a fair amount, but there's a pretty large bloggers movement to support climate change efforts, it's a combination of activism and information dissemination. The larger question here is, does online activism equal real world change? There's no straight line in that. There's lots of noise about what this is but I think in general we are all still trying to learn how to make online communities relevant in the real world, and how they develop and what their relationship is. So Moveon.org really figured it out, right? They figured out how to get money, build a membership organization that drives change in a political context or in a policy context. Can you do that around a specific social issue? Certainly a lot of people think you can, but we'll see. Behavior change is slow and difficult in the best of times. In other words, I have no idea.

Student Question – Global Voices is a nonprofit. Besides your summits, so you have any real world activity?

Ivan Sigal – Besides our summits? Our next one is in Chile, in Santiago, if we can raise the money for it. The best we can do is when people travel, they can do meet ups in other countries. Or we find conferences that we like and we try to populate them. We all went to a translation tools seminar in Amsterdam, there were 30 people from Global Voices out of 100, and suddenly it was a Global Voices meeting. It's the only way we can do it. But those face-to-face meetings are actually really important because it creates a lot of energy and I think a purely virtual community is really hard.

Nina Khrushcheva – So you do know all of your 300 people?

Ivan Sigal – Oh no. I don't. I don't think any of us know all 300, but some people who've been in it for a long time know many of them. I wish I did.

Student Question – I have a couple of questions. First, is about when you talked about mainstream media not comprehending having a section of information that they cannot independently verify. The fear of that though, is if you're going to have a whole stream of news and information that you really cannot verify, you're completely trusting your audience, and then that expands and you put an attention sign asking readers to view it with a grain of salt, but isn't there a fear that then all of the audience will then look at everything in the news with a grain of salt?

Ivan Sigal – Here's a question for you. What's the public opinion about people's level of trust in American journalism today?

Student Question continued – Exactly, it's already not that high.

Ivan Sigal – It's terrible. 25%, it's really really low.

Student Question continued – Exactly. Would that raise it or would it make it lower?

Ivan Sigal – I think that it's setting expectations in according with reality of what the information actually is. Look, the larger point there is that those flows of unverified information on the Internet already exist. That's what YouTube is. The mainstream media outlets need to figure out some functional way of relating to this information other than running scared. That's the mindset right now. We'll try to use it but really we're just afraid of it because we have built an entire system, which is based on ownership and control of information. Things that are tied to that are libel, there's a strong side to copyright which is that you own it, and you spend lots of money and you make lots of copies so that you can sell it cheaply. That's the mainstream media model. And you own it, but if you get it wrong, the somebody's going to sue you. The citizen media model is somewhat different. It's that a piece of information doesn't necessarily cost a lot to make, and is not necessarily complete, but the more interesting it is, the more attention it attracts and the more value it gains. And the more attention it attracts, more people start to pay attention to whether or not it's real, and a whole conversation occurs around it. And then a verification process takes places post facto. I don't mean to say those things are absolutely opposed, I just think that this is a rich and fertile space for people to be paying attention to, and clearly it is, lots of people are paying attention to it. If news outlets want to survive, they need to, because it's competition for eyeballs, if nothing else. They can't just say that its out there and denigrate it, it's actually a real data stream. It just needs to be sorted and analyzed and understood. Let me give you an example of how people are trying to do that. Ushahiri, which we talked about before, has created a project called Swift River. And the purpose of this project is to create an algorithm that takes a massive amount of information during a conflict and sorts it through a series of categories through a filter, basically a data filter that says verified, not verified, mass media source, unverified source, one witness, GPS location, time, etc... So pick 20 filters and based on your information and then build an algorithm, and create a probability weight for its accuracy. That's one way that this particular organization is saying we can actually automate a lot of questions of verification. We can use the wisdom of the crowds, dump that knowledge into a set of calculations and come up with a weighted probability of what's likely to be true, that will allow us to spend time thinking about and directing our energies to see whether or not we should be verifying the stuff that seems more likely than stuff that seems less likely. That's a creative way of trying to deal with a project. It's not like the old story of the mule and the lion; I just pretend that the lion is not there by closing my eyes, that's how I hide.

Student Question continued – I'm not sure it's exactly like that though. It seems like what you're talking about is pretty much like the comment section on the BBC under the stories where you have people saying their comments, like 'I was there, and this is what I saw happen'. The BBC will leave it there, but at least its not their...

Ivan Sigal – It's not the comment section, the people who have done this in the most sophisticated way is probably CNN with their iReporting. They basically created a

separate newsroom, and the stuff that goes out on iReport is not verified, and maybe its crap, but what they do is the stories that seem most interesting they kick over to the newsroom, and the newsroom then takes them and does real research on those stories. They verify the sources by calling people, it requires real interaction. If it's a real story it goes into the main news stream. I think that's smart way of dealing with them.

Student Question continued – But it's also a very small portion of what they're getting.

Ivan Sigal – But at the end of the day it creates an energy around it, the goal is to say 'come participate in the production of news,' and that's something we can sell. If you think that there is a value to the commercial model of media, satellite and cable television is losing upwards of a million viewers a year on average, so this is not sustainable ultimately. If people are going to participate anyway, and you're hoping to maintain an institutional presence, you need to engage that participation in a creative way. That's my point.

Nina Khrushcheva – I think there is also a difference because when BBC posts things online, its BBC created content, and everybody knows its just yes or no, but it is stays there. But the iReporting one, in this model people are creating their own content, and then it's horizontal versus the traditional formula, which is probably more successful today.

Ivan Sigal – We're probably about to do a series of co productions with the BBC and I'm really excited about it because hopefully it will be something like this. We'll be able to say 'what are your real concerns, we can help answer them.' And see if we can do something successful on a small level. I'm not sure if it will be, but we're going to try. Reuters was the main sponsor of Global Voices for 3 years, so they certainly did try. They had the right to re-publish all of our content when they were our sponsor, and they didn't actually use very much of it. It just kind of disappeared into their stream, and was indistinguishable from the rest of their stories, but it was there. They took it, they used it, but they never figured out how to publicize it as a different way of thinking about storytelling. Not that we're perfect, because we're really not. We make tons of mistakes and some of our writing is crap, and lot of people who write for us English is their second or third language, a lot of editing work, and some of the stories are great, but they're edited by volunteer communities, so we certainly have no monopoly on great storytelling. But our point is that it's a process, and that there's a lot of learning involved. That's why I find it interesting.

Student Question – Regarding the editing, is there feedback between the editors and the writers so that the writers are getting sort of an informal training and maybe improving as they write?

Ivan Sigal – Absolutely, though I would love to get an editor coach in, one person who's a kickass copy editor who could just come in and sit on people's stories and give people coaching. That would be great, but it costs money.

Student Questions – If the authors are not journalists, do you know who these people are?

Ivan Sigal – Yeah, everybody’s known, we know who they are. Some people write synonymously, but we know who they really are, and some of them are journalists, most people are journalists, academics, graduate students, teachers, a lot of different professionals, a lot of geeks, a lot of translators, word geeks.

Student Question – I just had a question about the conflict aspect of this talk. Given the fact that everything is so informal, its “power to the people” in a certain sense, how aware are you in that filtering process of stories that might just be hyperbole or trying to whip people up into some sort of frenzy. How aware are you of that fact that media can be used in pre conflict settings?

Ivan Sigal – I think that we need to be hyper aware, in some ways I’d argue that mass media have been used that way for a long time, and I’d say the difference is that mass media have the pretense of authority. Going back to the Rwanda story, the reason that people attribute the radio as a source or a reason for the genocide is that it was sanctioned impunity. It was sanctioned violence; it appeared to be sanctioned violence. And so when people acted they felt that the government had their back in some way. I think it behooves everybody to be extremely skeptical of the information that you receive in any case. In one of my first jobs in the media was as a researcher and a fact checker and a research assistant for long form PBS documentaries at WNET. We took 6 months to make an hour-long policy film. It was a real luxury. In the fact checking job we would often use newspaper stories as a point of origin for a story, but if we actually used the material we had to go back not just to the story but to the people interviewed for the story, and call them up and say ‘the New York Times wrote this about you, is it true?’ And I found that almost 50% of the time it wasn’t. People disputed it, they said ‘no, that wasn’t the way that it was.’ Once you do that kind of fact checking on the daily press, or you start working in a newsroom and you realize that day that the copy goes out, that it still has to go out, you realize that the level of what we assume to be accurate is really quite questionable. So when you’re doing research, you should not rely on a newspaper article as telling you the truth, because you have no idea. It’s a closed editorial system, so you have no idea. A couple of years later I was an editor for an academic journal while I was in graduate school, and professors used to submit articles - political scientists especially, they were bad at this - using news sources as the logic for their stories, and I would reject their stories and they would say “but I’m a professor!” And I would tell them ‘But you have no idea if this is true!’

Student Question – I was just curious about how this is made by citizens, and as you said citizens are often not very satisfied with how the mainstream media journalists write about the world and such. Do you think this is very different from what the mainstream media would choose to cover in terms of these conflicts? Are the citizens better at choosing subjects that are important?

Ivan Sigal – I think that sometimes the frame is less ideological, more about what people themselves are talking about. The way we choose our news frame is we basically find

conversations that are very active and follow them that way. But of course they are part of the mainstream, they're part of the news cycle. People in every country are also getting their information through local news. It's not so easy to divorce one from the other, and different writers have different angles on this as well. I think the more the citizen media matures, the more we're going to start to see emerge communities of people who are interested in organizing knowledge around a particular topic. We're going to see more and more group blogs, more and more social networks organized around ordering a certain kind of information and pushing it out. Some of it is going to be really advocacy driven, some of it is going to be really ideological, and some of it is going to be journalistic in terms of its frame. What we've experienced in terms of citizen media in the last 10 years, what the mainstream media claims is a cacophony of voices, is going to start to organize itself, and it already is. There are more and more tools available. And Global Voices is just one example of a community organizing itself around a set of ideas. In answer to your question, I do think that there is going to be a maturing of this kind of process, and already in the U.S. we're starting to see that. The prediction is that nearly half of the daily newspapers in the United States are going to die in the next 10 years. So 1,500 dailies in the U.S. now, but the predictions are that 700 of them will die out in the next 5 to 10 years because of market failure. We're already – just in this year and last year – starting to see an emergence of purely online hyper local news functions. Some of them are separate in their identities, some incorporate a lot of citizen media, some of them are creative linkings of local journalism schools, public radio, and nonprofit community efforts; some of them are nonprofits with links to the mass media. For instance, the New York Times has just signed a contract with a small number of journalists that just left the Chicago Tribune, and started a nonprofit reporting operation. The MacArthur Foundation is funding them to do it. They're going to be producing 2 pages a week for the New York Times, but they're a little nonprofit shop. There a really interesting experiment in Oakland, there's another one in Berkeley that mixes Berkeley University J School together with the public radio station. More and more of these efforts are going to appear, and their going to have all sorts of organizational and institutional forms. Some will be commercial; some will be nonprofit, and so on. So it's actually a really fertile time to be in this space. Just don't necessarily expect a pension.

Student Question – That was kind of one of my questions. Are you able to see a citizen media organization or site that has developed a sustainable funding model, where they're actually able through their content to sustain themselves and pay a couple of salaries perhaps?

Ivan Sigal – Well, in the U.S. there actually have been a couple of investigative reporting centers that rely on nonprofit effort. The short answer is the [Huffington Post](#). Not very interesting, but that's the short answer. The most successful citizen media endeavor going is that. And there are lots of individual bloggers that make between \$5000 and \$20,000 a year selling advertising online. I don't think that's quite your question, I think it's something else. As a point of comparison, every journal of serious inquiry and comment in the United States is a nonprofit or a lost leader. The New Yorker is the only one that's not, and it's a lost leader. It made money for about 3 years in the mid 90's under Tina Brown. Under Conde Nast it's great but it's a money suck. Harpers, New Republic, The

National Review on the other side, The Nation, Atlantic, they're all nonprofits. They all blend a subscription revenue fee model with some – not much – advertising with grants and foundations. The AP is a nonprofit and National Public Radio is a nonprofit, so I'd argue that a massive amount of American news production is already in the civic noncommercial space. Much more than we like to acknowledge. I think that it depends on what your approach to information is. Do you think that journalism has a primarily civic function in the world or if it's primarily a commercial thing? If it's a commercial thing then it goes the way of Fox News, MSNBC and CNN, where it mixes news with entertainment, and it maximizes story about conflict and about sensation, and it builds news frames that are about horse races and competition because that's where the money is. For more serious kinds of information production, I think that some element of the civic and the nonprofit is really important. That's not necessarily a question of sustainability, but that's my own personal vision of how I would like information to play a role in the civic space. Most other countries have significant government funding and subsidies for the information production that makes bias; some of it makes actual good information.

Student Question continued – Quick follow-up, with this process of maturing, if a lot of the money for these projects in the future are going to come through grants and foundations, do you see an acknowledgement within those foundations, that they understand the agency and the dynamic of what's going on there?

Ivan Sigal – They're spending a lot of time and effort trying to understand it. So MacArthur 3 years ago basically did a massive overhaul of its funding stream. MacArthur foundation is a great example because they spend a ton of money on public media. In one of those foundations, all of their funding went into producing documentaries for PBS, and they totally revamped their giving. And now they're looking at funding journalism and digital media projects but now they're focusing down on information. The Ford foundation has changed its angle. And the new media, the new money that's come out of Silicon Valley, they understand this more than the money coming out of the traditional foundations. I think the real question for us is going to be 'Are we ready to accept the idea that public money can be used to produce information in the U.S.?' We already have mechanisms for creating it, we have National Public Broadcasting, we have the National Endowment for Humanities, the National Science Foundation, a national networked for arts, and 4 or 5 other agencies that have the capacity to give grants, local, regional, and national levels for information production. Not to mention state and municipalities. There are tons of nonprofit organizations and radio stations that in theory could be providing that kind of information for us, if we're willing to treat journalism as a civic function. But the U.S. has a funny relationship to that so I'm not sure it's going to happen.

Student Question – Since you seem very active in the areas of crises and conflict, do you get a lot of information or data or videos from what they call the 50-cent media, or the pro authoritarian regimes, from China or from Egypt?

Ivan Sigal – The 50-cent bloggers?

Student Question continued – Yeah the 50-cent bloggers or at the same time do you get information from what you mentioned earlier as the non state actors, for example the Taliban and a video of beheading encouraging violence, or anti-U.S. propaganda? And if you do, how do you deal with it? Do you put it out?

Ivan Sigal – If there's a wide spread phenomenon... What we do is analyze the blogosphere. So if there's a widespread of astro turfing – astro turfing is the parlance of the year for what you're describing, the fake grassroots effort, the seeding of fake stories in the blogosphere and claiming that they're viral. If it's occurring as a phenomenon we try to write about it and if we can document it we do. We try to rely on trusted networks, and trust comes through when someone is consistent over time. If you see a story that's really far off from the norm, than that's a really good reason to question it. So you just need to be extremely sensitive. It's just like a media literacy exercise in some ways. In some ways that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to help educate both ourselves and other people about how to read the digital media space. An interesting idea about the 50-cent bloggers – that's huge in the U.S. too – there was a survey that I read about 2 years ago that said that about 20% of PR firms in the U.S. said that they had successfully planted stories using those kinds of techniques. So there's tons of that going on in this country, it's not just in China or other authoritarian regimes, because it's really hard to track. The mass media is still a target, and also the viral space is a target. You've probably seen the FTC recent rules to try to create different standards fro bloggers in regards to the accepting of material goods. It's all part of that debate.

Student Question – In terms of making change, and this is a question for you and for Nina to address, I definitely see the power of citizen journalism in terms of building social movements and grassroots, but do you think there's also role for citizen journalism in terms of forming or feeding into the research process of those who write policy recommendations?

Ivan Sigal – Very much so. Looking in the policy world, the way that knowledge gets to policy makers today is also a very closed hierarchical system. You have the political parties, which have hierarchies, and then you have think-tanks, which in some ways are wings or approximations of them, and the way a policy debate will occur is you get a job for a fellowship or a think-tank and you write a paper like the one I wrote, and then you do a presentation to an elite crowd of policy makers, and then you go and you give closed door presentations of that same idea to policy makers, and you try to convince them of those ideas. And if I'm successful there won't be a Voice of America, as an example. But of course, I wont be. I guess Joe Biden likes Voice of America. But that's the way policy often gets made. That's why the Center for American Progress is so hugely important, and the Brookings Institution, and so on. But at the same time some of those organizations are recognizing that they are also media at this point. The Center of American Progress at this point has its own radio station, has its own online journals. The New America Foundation is populated with journalists that are also doing policy. There have to be ways to open up those spaces to larger audiences. One of the things that I do a little bit on this is make sure that those kinds of discussions are streamed, and that people

are in the room who represent citizen voices, and then you create chat rooms or Twitter feeds where people are actually communicating. If you can open up those processes in any way then it's really useful and really good. The other way is petition drives and things like that. Online voices that really have an effect on Washington. Moveon.org again is really good at that stuff.

Student Question continued – What do you think Nina?

Nina Khrushcheva – Well, I agree. And it's also a matter of trust because the higher up you go in the policy world, the harder it is for them to trust somebody who doesn't wear a suit and a certain haircut and a certain type of shoes. I was actually just telling Ivan I was at Harvard for a conference 2 weeks ago, and Harvard is a great university, as we know it's the best university in the world, supposedly.

Ivan Sigal – Except when it's not.

Nina Khrushcheva – Well, exactly. But they don't know that. And so, the stunning experience that I had, I was the only woman out of 25 speakers – shocking – and they didn't even notice. They didn't even know that they didn't have women either in the audience or on a panel. And so I gave my little spiel, and it's very policy oriented, and I keep saying, those who are in my class already know this, Russia doesn't matter, who gives a damn about Russia anymore. And yet there was a conference on Russia, and it was very policy oriented, not only think-tanks but also those grand universities have centers that do influence policy because they're so important. So there's a very old, very pompous professor who's been working on Russia for over 40 years, who said "Oh it's interesting, there are two issues that were mentioned in this presentation" which I mentioned, but I'm a girl so he said 'and Jack really made interesting points on xyz!' And Jack said 'I didn't talk about this, Nina did,' but of course, for that professor I'm a girl, what can I possibly offer? So I think it really is difficult, the higher up you go, though you have to have a certain... What I think Ivan is saying is true because ultimately they're going to shoot themselves in the foot. The more it disseminates, the better it is. I must say actually that Foreign Affairs actually do a better effort to try to incorporate their own pompous people but still incorporate the new story. But it's a long way to go though.

Ivan Sigal - The human rights community is really in crisis about this right now actually. I had a really interesting conversation with somebody at the Open Society Institute about it yesterday because they're trying to come up with a way – they fund traditional human rights institutions in Russia among other places, and the way a human rights institution organization tends to be structured is one charismatic leader who is highly trusted.

Nina Khrushcheva – Like Human Rights Watch, which is one of the greatest examples.

Ivan Sigal – Right. And they are the people giving the congressional testimony. But when you have that one charismatic leader model it's very fragile because that person has the magic dust to walk through those spaces and have the words that they say be given weight by lawyers, and so on and so forth. They often feel incredibly threatened by

people producing content with less verification, but they also are intensely aware that they need to engage it. At the same time there are emerging activists online who are basically normal people who are doing something and as a result of their actions are becoming politicized. And sometimes they have much more effect than the traditional Human Rights organizations do by virtue of the publicity. Have you guys heard of the story of a nail house in China? A story that happened last year of a – there's massive development in China right now – when those developments happen they often ignore existing leases and tear through neighborhoods. But the development companies who do that need to get their signatures, they need to basically buy that property. And one person in a development in central China refused to sell out, and that person's house was in a pillar of dirt in the middle of a development that was about 20 meters high completely surrounded by a pit, and that person happened to be a blogger. It just sparked a huge conversation and outrage around the issue of citizen rights to property in China. That's where a traditional advocacy path would get nowhere, but this image of the Nail House, it's just an example of how this can work and there's dozens of examples like that.

Nina Khrushcheva – And so if there's no more questions we're going to wrap it up. You can always find Ivan online, and he's also on Facebook, so now we're all going to become your friends.

Ivan Sigal – And if any of you are bilingual or multilingual, have a little spare time and feel like writing...

Nina Khrushcheva – They all are.

Ivan Sigal – Yeah, I would guess that. You know what we're really looking for now, is if any of you have a legal background, we've started a new site called Threatened Voices, which is a mapping of online activists by country who have been arrested, harassed, released, beaten, killed, etc... And their cases, and they're updated, and they're written by our advocacy director who is Tunisian, and speaks English as his 5th language. It's a really great project, but it's just one example of the kind of help that we need. We need people who can both help edit stuff like this and sort consistently whether or not something is a legal term, where there is enough verification or not. We're recruiting within our community to help out with stuff like this, but just to give you a sense of some of the difficulties a project like this has.

Nina Khrushcheva – Ok. Well thank you so much!