

❖ **An Argument for Stronger UN Image Promotion and Protection:  
Examining Programming through Media/Opinion Monitoring and Issue-  
Based/Image-Based Achievements**

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**Abstract**

*The United Nations may stand to benefit greatly from more robust image promotion and protection. In the last decade, the UN image has been significantly damaged by allegations and innuendos regarding the Oil-for-Food Programme. More systematic and rapid responses to criticism may be of value and may be achievable after the recent Department of Information restructuring. If possible, reserving an hour of primetime radio and television airspace for an annual message from the Secretary-General to the peoples of the world, could be one method by which the organisation could increase control of its public image. A positive (or negative) UN image should tend to scale up (or diminish) support from national decision makers.*

**Introduction & Background**

The Secretary-General has stated that one of his priorities in revitalizing the United Nations is to restore public confidence in the Organisation by reaching out to new partners and by 'bringing the United Nations closer to the people'. His distinguished predecessor, Dag Hammarskjöld, understood the value of effective public information five decades ago, when he noted that 'to translate diplomacy into the language of the daily press and the headlines of the daily press is not only a very difficult job, it is also a highly responsible job because, as we know, public opinion is one of the decisive factors in the modern world — perhaps the most decisive factor in the creation of policies, international policies in particular ... (Former Under Secretary-General of the Department of Public Information, Shashi Tharoor, 2003, UN Doc. A/58/21, 2003: Annex II, paragraph 53)

The UN image has suffered mightily over the last several years, largely due to exaggerations/inaccuracies in media coverage and public misunderstanding, along with UN imperfections. This paper is written with the view that it is better to be too outspoken in image promotion/protection, than to be too cautious. The UN should fight vigorously for the few minutes most modestly informed citizens can spare to hear about the organisation, rather than abandon such perceptions to explanations from national and local media. As an operational first step, it is proposed that the UN attempt to annually reserve an hour of primetime air space for

the Secretary-General across the globe.

## **Background**

In his 2002 report on strengthening the United Nations, the Secretary-General outlined his vision for a renewed Department of Information.

Evaluation will be given considerably greater emphasis in the Department so that programmes are better matched with the needs of target audiences. A comprehensive evaluation of the impact of the Department's activities has never been conducted. A thorough review will take place within the next two to three years, and further decisions on departmental restructuring and resource redeployment may be required afterwards. (UN Doc. A/57/37, 2002: paragraph 65) 1

By 2006 the 'results-based evaluation and monitoring approach ... now forms a cornerstone of the Department's work programme ... (UN Doc. A/61/216, 2006: paragraph 3)' and 'the Department is more aware than ever before of its strengths and weaknesses, thanks in large part to its emphasis on a culture of evaluation.'(Ibid., paragraph 66) The evaluation report notes that '[t]hrough the Department has no illusions about its capacity to counteract much of the negative coverage of the Organisation, it has reinforced its media outreach capacity to better tell the United Nations story, to respond to criticism and to promote awareness ...' (UN Doc. A/AC.198/2006/4, 2006: paragraph 62). A new mission statement was adopted as well: 'The Department of Public Information's mission is to help fulfill the substantive purposes of the United Nations by strategically communicating the activities and concerns of the Organisation to achieve the greatest public impact.'(UN Doc. A/58/175, 2003: paragraph 6)

Structurally, the proposed strategic framework for 2008-9 (UN Doc. A/61/6/REV.1 (SUPP), 2007: Prog. 23) examines DPI divisional goals and indicators of success. The budget programme proposed for 2006-7 (UN Doc. A/60/6 (SECT. 27), 2005) includes a detailed breakdown of goals, indicators, costs, and personnel analysis. The Department now consists of the strategic communications, news services, and outreach divisions. For its part the General Assembly has supported the DPI focus on evaluation, such as in this 2006 resolution:

[The General Assembly] (f)urther reaffirms that the Department of Public Information must prioritize its work programme ... to focus its message and better concentrate its efforts and, as a function of performance management, to match its programmes with the needs of its target audiences, on the basis of improved feedback and evaluation mechanisms ... (UN Doc. A/Res/61/121, 2006: Part B, paragraph 14)

## **Using Media and Public Opinion Analyses Strategically**

The Committee and the Department of Public Information can play a most useful role in being not only the voice of the global Organisation to the peoples of the world, but also a conduit to the Organisation of the views of the peoples from all the regions of the world. This would thus be a two-way street. (Chairman of the Committee on Information, Ambassador Chowdhury, 2003, UN Doc. A/58/21, 2003: Annex I, paragraph 5)

## **Overview**

In this section we address why analysis of media treatment towards & public opinion of the UN

is an invaluable tool in planning and executing informational output, fitting nicely with the 'culture of evaluation' DPI has implemented to ensure programme efficacy. Every DPI programme is now expected to have precise pick-up and/or satisfaction goals. 2 Such reforms may spark a more robust and efficient information policy at headquarters and in the field. We concentrate not on evaluation of UN programming, but on general media coverage and the public's opinion regarding the organisation.<sup>3</sup> Consider this 'taking the temperature' of what people are thinking (public opinion) and hearing (media coverage).

Most recently, as a result of the training, the Department embarked on a pilot project to involve United Nations information centres in global systematic media monitoring and analysis. The results of the project will be used to improve the Department's communications planning, as well as to develop its analytic capacities in the area of international press coverage. (UN Doc. A/61/216, 2006: paragraph. 64)

A discussion of the substantial intrinsic value of such projects, as well as the manner in which this input might complement programme evaluation, follows. The reader is also referred to the Annex, in which media and opinion monitoring constitute 'inputs' from the public.

### **Public Opinion/Awareness Polling**

Optimally, the UN need only consider the wishes of the 191 member state governments, who in turn would consider the wishes of their constituents. Unfortunately member states may at times act contrary to the Charter and/or may not always act in the interest of their constituents. In these circumstances the UN finds itself in a difficult position indeed. Even when no explicit discrepancies exist between a member state's actions and either its constituents or the UN Charter, though the literal and figurative distance between UN headquarters and national citizens may inhibit its success.

One of the principle remedies to this has been the campaign to spread UN awareness — informational 'output' from New York. In 1946 the General Assembly established the Department of Public Information, asserting '[t]he United Nations cannot achieve its purposes unless the peoples of the world are fully aware of its aims and activities.' (UN Doc. A/Res/13I, 1946: part II) But outreach, and even evaluating the effectiveness of outreach, requires measurement of public opinion/awareness or 'input' from the public. This was not lost on the framers, who also declared DPI should be 'equipped to analyse trends of opinion throughout the world about the activities of the United Nations and the extent to which an informed understanding of the work of the United Nations is being secured.' (Ibid.: Annex I, paragraph 13) A 2006 Secretary-General report stated DPI impact 'cannot be addressed without tracking global public opinion on the Organisation as a whole ... The Department of Public Information developed a programme to conduct global public opinion surveys in the late 1980s, but owing to budget constraints, the programme was ended.' (UN Doc. A/AC.198/2006/4, 2006: paragraph 12)

### **Media Monitoring and Analysis**

It is advantageous to view the world through the eyes of the public, exposed to the UN mostly through local and national media. What coverage does the UN receive, and what level of favorability is presented? A fantastic 1953 article written by Robert H. Cory addressing UN public information, will be referenced several times in this paper. Regarding efforts in 'advanced nations,' Cory wrote, '... United Nations information must compete in a communications climate saturated with appeals of national and local interests.' (Cory, 1953:232) And that was 1953!

The importance of how the UN is depicted in the media must not be trivialized, as noted in a Secretary-General report:

The public perception of the United Nations, like the image of any public institution, is the sum total of views held in the public mind. In the past two years, the picture in many people's minds of the United Nations has acquired a negative cast, reflecting the way in which the Organisation has been portrayed in the international media. Public opinion polling results and media studies have shown the correlation between an awareness of negative news on the United Nations and poor ratings of the Organisation, whereas slightly more favourable opinions correspond with lower levels of negative press coverage (Zogby America, February 2005; Better World Campaign, October 2005). A number of polls conducted in the past two years show that support for the Organisation, and understanding about its global role have faltered around the world, particularly in countries in which negative media coverage has been prominent.' (UN Doc. A/AC.198/2006/4, 2006: paras. 60-61)

Section IV of this paper argues that more UN advocacy via the media is necessary to protect/enhance the UN image. To be effective, UN headquarters must first examine what image is being broadcast in national/local media prior to advocacy campaigns. Garnering support for and raising awareness of the UN will only work if DPI knows what 'channels are on the audiences' dials' and carefully considers this before creating programming. In short, media monitoring is a requisite precursor to strategic programming and dissemination.

#### **Mutual Reinforcement: Polling/Monitoring and DPI Programme Self-Evaluation**

As the UN becomes better informed about its target audiences, its programming can be molded for better efficiency. The Annex shows how this feedback loop might function. With some analysts evaluating the impact of UN programmes and others monitoring media outlets and public opinion, DPI not only identifies best practices for its own programming but also identifies mass media trends. The next section explores how headquarters might integrate these two sets of evaluations to match programming to appropriate audiences.

#### **UN Public Information Programmes: Issue-Based and Image-Based Goals**

The General Assembly ... Calls upon the Secretary-General, in respect of United Nations public information policies and activities, to implement the following recommendations ... to ensure that the Department of Public Information ... Continues its efforts at promoting an informed understanding of the work and purposes of the United Nations system among the peoples of the world *AND* at strengthening the positive image of the system as a whole ...' (General Assembly Resolution, UN Doc. A/Res/48/44 part B, 1994: paragraph 2c –emphasis added)

The present section measures public information tools by their 'image-based' or 'issue-based' accomplishments. An image-based accomplishment would include strategic confidence building in audiences' perceptions of the UN. Issue-based accomplishments refer to public information efforts that are designed to raise awareness about or support for issues of importance to the UN. All DPI programmes contain both image-based and issue-based goals to some degree, of course. A skeletal policy possibility is as follows:

1. When media monitoring or audience polling suggest a lack of awareness of or especially hostility towards the United Nations, programmes emphasizing image-based goals should be favored.

2. When audiences are aware of or favorable to the UN, campaigns with stronger issue-based goals should be emphasized.
3. When audiences may be largely unaware of the UN but are especially affected by an issue on which the UN system focuses, campaigns should be chosen that have strong issue- and image-based goals.

Image-based initiatives tend to be measured more by impact on opinion, whereas issue-based ones measure success by increased awareness. Happily, 'studies have shown that the Department has the capacity to influence media coverage, both in terms of favorability and pick-up.' (UN Doc. A/AC/198/2006/4, 2006: paragraph 37) DPI efforts have tended to favor campaigns with issue-based goals, as noted by Haas and Ruggie. 'More frequently, information is gathered and organized to meet specific purposes: improving the purity of water, finding experts on desertification, collection data on supplies needed for disaster relief, establishing the physical and chemical properties of nuclear particles ...' 4 (Haas & Ruggie, 1982: 212) It is critical that the UN communicate with citizens regarding such thematic issues. Through the restructuring of DPI, it seems there is an excellent prospect that this sort of dialogue will continue and improve, maybe dramatically. Though not the focus of this paper, the quite impressive collection of accomplishments DPI has and continues to achieve regarding thematic issues, is thus duly noted.

Optimally, while some initiatives would principally raise issue awareness, others would concentrate on ensuring the UN image is never tarnished. The latter task might be as informed as possible by the monitoring of public opinion and media treatment of the UN, and culminate in strategic UN image campaigns — the subject of section IV.

### **Image-Based Initiatives**

The UN ... remained silent under a barrage of innuendo and abuse while the Volcker committee was at work ... The short- and long-term damage created by some of the press handling of the so-called 'Oil-for-Food scandal' is another matter ... During the months before the final conclusions of the Volcker inquiry were published, the scurrilous and prolonged political attack on the credibility and integrity of the secretary-general and the Secretariat, especially by neoconservative politicians and writers, *gained credibility with many reasonable people as well*. This kind of mud sticks. It didn't matter that the Volcker committee found ... Kofi Annan ... is a dedicated and generous contributor to charities and that he gave the entire financial award he received with the Nobel Peace Prize to the United Nations. The world organisation has been pictured as a morass of corruption, nepotism, and incompetence on the basis of charges that have now mostly been dismissed by the Volcker committee ...' (Sir Brian Urquhart. (Urquhart, 2006: parts 3&4 – emphasis added)

The previous section examined the subtle difference between raising awareness of UN issues and advocating for the UN. Here the concentration falls on the latter. 'The United Nations has a compelling story to tell. That story must be told well, because public support is essential for strengthening the Organisation.' 5 (UN Doc. A/57/387, 2002: paragraph 59 – emphasis added) Sub-sections analyze some lessons learned regarding image promotion/protection, lynchpin audiences of particular importance, and operational initiatives through which DPI might scale up capacity to improve the UN image.

### **The UN Image**

*Building and Protecting an Image*

Earlier it was emphasized that waiting for an official report to be published may be tantamount to admitting guilt in many courts of public opinion. On the contrary rapid response in defending the UN may at least make it clear that the organisation will not be a whipping boy incapable and/or unwilling to defend its name. From the three-year evaluation project report: 'These lessons fed into, and were strengthened by, the response to media criticism of the oil-for-food program. The Department strengthened its rapid response capacity to identify and ensure replies to criticism in the media. A daily communication meeting is now held ...' (UN Doc. A/AC.198/2006/4, 2006: paragraph 35). This more strategic and integrated approach to public criticism will hopefully yield results.

Such responses should be strong, vocal, and appeal not just to intellectuals but also to the general public; detailed analysis of public information carriers and audiences should therefore be prepared a priori. Criticism, (particularly unwarranted criticism), could then be addressed using the improved framework for rapid response mentioned in the evaluation report.

Image building affords the organisation a chance to be proactive. Interviews and discussions with public broadcasting stations (PBS in the United States, for example) are valuable but may tend to capture an elite audience. Dealing with less sophisticated media outlets requires different tactics — simpler messages are of greater importance than longer lines of logical reasoning. Greater attention to such media outlets may bring substantial results. Some creative initiatives have been undertaken in the last few years to reach a more diverse audience. 6 It may be advisable to spend as much time as possible focusing on the largest and most popular networks. 'The 'voice of the United Nations' can not compete with the 'voices' of individual governments ... It may, however inject into the stream of communications information which may be strategically influential.' (Cory, 1953: 230)

We fully believe that the UN has the mandate and legitimacy to request full global media attention for an hour annually. United States citizens are accustomed to primetime presidential speeches being aired several times a year; many nations hear from their highest-ranking official directly. It might be a step forward for the SG to address the peoples (as opposed to the diplomats) of the world. This speech would have to be different from the typical speech coming from the 38th floor — delivered in a very simple yet intelligent manner. It would offer people a chance to 'meet' the SG, could become a unifying global hour each year, and might make anti-UN rhetoric less palatable. 'Overall, the studies showed that proactive media outreach efforts by the Department staff led to a decrease in negative media coverage.' (UN Doc. A/AC.198/2006/4, 2006: paragraph 37) UN Day or an evening just before the September GA debates might be the right time for such an address.

#### *Dealing with Anti-UN Media Stories: When To Ignore and When to React*

Reacting to criticism is a difficult task. No one-size-fits-all approach can be used and each critique must be taken in its context for its merit (or lack thereof), and with due consideration of its audience. Overreaction may bring more attention to criticism than it would garner on its own — this is the danger in 'lashing out' without consideration. On the other hand, a lack of rebuttal may allow the critics unopposed access to an audience. If no media outlets reflect the UN position, the public may only observe the 'anti-UN' viewpoint and adopt it by default — this is the danger of an overly cautious approach. At times the UN may make mistakes, but this does not mean it should retreat from image protection. Consider a corporation that must recall defective products — its public relations department must work quickly to soften the blow as much as possible.

Presenting one's side of the story to the court of public opinion requires great skill and need

not be pursued in every situation — but an organisation must be prepared to do so when necessary. For the UN, the landmark example is the so-called oil-for-food scandal. As in most situations, culpability was not a black and white issue. But in hindsight few would disagree that the UN saw its reputation unfairly besmirched. Could a stronger UN response, strategically disseminated, have elicited a different reaction?

#### *Oil-for-Food in the Media*

'The political action undertaken during the [Iraq] crisis resulted in intense media and public scrutiny of the Organisation and the need to respond to that scrutiny presented a major challenge ... The Department used every means at its disposal ...' (UN Doc. A/58/175, 2003: paragraph 14) It is apparent that these means fell short of what is and will be necessary to defend the organisation.

'The so-called Volcker report on the Iraq Oil-for-Food Program, and especially the overwhelming interest of the press in the more gossipy aspects of it, hung over the year of UN reform like a recurrent thunderstorm at a community picnic,' (Urquhart, 2006: part 1) noted Sir Brian Urquhart. Efforts to present the UN's case to the public seem to have been no match for '(n)eoconservative journalists and politicians in particular, [who] doubtless recalling the UN's and Kofi Annan's lack of enthusiasm for the invasion of Iraq and the Security Council's refusal to endorse the US invasion of 2003, indulged in furious accusation and exaggeration ...' (Ibid.)

The Wall Street Journal published articles entitled 'Kofi's Coverup' (11 May 2004: A18), 'U.N.'s Little Jest: Oil-for-Food is a Success' (6 May 2004: A19) and even 'Oil-for-Terror' (Rosett, 28 April 2004: A16). In the aftermath, the *Economist* noted the sensationalist manner in which *Wall Street Journal* editorials described the UN. (13 August 2005: 36) Discussion of supposed charges regarding Kofi Annan and Kojo Annan 'aired ad nauseam in the press, especially in the United States, were eventually dismissed as baseless by the inquiry committee, but not before Kofi Annan's and the UN's reputation had been seriously damaged.' (Urquhart, 2006: part 4) A 2006 Secretary-General report concluded: 'the image of the United Nations has been badly bruised largely owing to scandal-driven media coverage ...' (UN Doc. A/AC.198/2006/4, 2006: paragraph 62)

The UN might have done better by expressing rather than hiding its anger. Op-ed articles and press conferences may not suffice when faced with an assault of this magnitude — high-ranking officials may need to do more publicly. In the United States, for example, this may mean asking to appear on Meet the Press, Larry King Live, etc. 7 UN expressions of legitimate anger over unsubstantiated charges and exaggerations seem fitting retrospectively, in light of the Volcker Committee's findings — which concluded that the illicit activity was orchestrated almost entirely by Saddam Hussein in conjunction with opportunistic corporations and governments, and that the Security Council 'must shoulder their share of the blame in providing uneven and wavering direction in the implementation of the Programme.' (IIC Press Release, 7 Sept. 2005) The Volcker report explains that while the UN was guilty of poor oversight, other parties were guilty of much worse:

Oil smuggled outside of the Programme is estimated by the Committee to be nearly USD 11 billion as opposed to an estimated USD 1.8 billion of illicit revenue from Saddam Hussein's manipulation of transactions occurring under the Programme.' (IIC Press Release, 27 October 2005) Of the latter source of revenue, 'Iraq's largest source of illicit income from the Programme came from 'kickbacks' paid by companies ... available evidence indicates that Iraq derived more than

\$1.5 billion of income from these kickbacks ... The Committee calculates that more than 2,200 companies worldwide paid kickbacks to Iraq ...(Ibid.)

These staggering numbers make the thousands of dollars allegedly pocketed by UN officials quite minor in comparison. One might expect that those companies most egregiously violating UN regulations in cooperation with Saddam Hussein would be scrutinized in the media. The programme has instead been remembered as a scandal driven by corrupt UN officials. The sad epilogue is as follows.

The Inquiry Report frequently acknowledges that the Oil-for-Food Program did what it was supposed to do. It states, for example, in Vol.I, p. 13. 'The Committee also believes that the successes of the Programme, although not extensively chronicled here, should not be buried by the allegations of corruption that have enjoyed so much attention in the media and elsewhere.' Unfortunately, through no fault of the Volcker committee, that burial is exactly what did happen. Thus, instead of being welcomed as a significant and successful achievement of the UN as it deserves, the Oil-for-Food Program has come to be seen by many as a synonym for its disgrace.' (Urquhart, 2006: part 4)

In sum, those who wished to blacken the UN image succeeded mightily.

#### *The 2006 Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) Review Conference*

More recently effective DPI rapid response helped protect the integrity of the SALW Review Conference.

The Review Conference faced strong opposition from pro-gun lobbies in the United States, but the Department quickly responded to their criticisms. With explanatory messages and guidance for its spokespersons and field offices, as well as with robust rebuttals to misinformation, it dismissed charges that the United Nations was 'conspiring' to ban legal ownership of firearms by civilians. Letters to editors setting the record straight were published in *The Economist* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Key international press agencies, including the Associated Press, United Press International and Reuters, repeatedly pointed out that protests received from pro-gun citizens were based on erroneous information. (UN Doc. A/61/216, 2006: paragraph 9)

Though this conference was limited in scope, the successful rapid response may be a promising sign that DPI has indeed reinforced its capacity to react to criticism.

#### *Which States/Regions to Target*

If the United Nations is to achieve its lofty goals, it must be capable of speaking to people as well as diplomats. There are several audiences on which the UN might focus for strategic reasons. One group is the population of permanent members of the Security Council. Since these states have such overwhelming influence in the Security Council, since the Security Council is given the primary peace and security role, and since the UN can only make binding agreements through this organ, the populations of these states must be as informed as possible. It will later be argued that engendering support from the population of the United States is particularly critical.

Inhabitants of states where UN peacekeeping missions are deployed are also essential targets. If citizens do not understand the UN role while it conducts operations in their nations, the



mission may be greatly impaired. Constituents of states offering financial or troop contributions to the UN represent a third critical group. Keeping troop contributing populations informed is a display of appreciation that is fully warranted. Providing information for donor state populations is the least difficult task — state populations contributing large amounts to the UN likely want to know how their money is spent.

Finally, the needs of the developing world in terms of technical assistance and media support, present an opportunity for the UN to speak to the people who may benefit most directly from the organisation. 8 In the end, if citizens don't come to the UN for information, and national media do not provide a fair representation, the UN must go to them.

### *Choosing Audiences Strategically*

One might argue that UN information is available. The website has become increasingly user-friendly, with daily statements and news reports. For a moment set aside those unaware of the UN, and examine people at least cognizant of the organisation's existence. Most fall into one of three categories: those who generally support the UN and its initiatives; those who firmly believe the UN is faulty; and the overwhelming majority who know little of the UN and make tentative judgments based on a few items of information. Individuals supportive of the UN should certainly be supplied information. Campaigns with issue-based goals may be most effective here. Firmly 'anti-UN' audiences will likely not be convinced by public information dissemination/education efforts. But the UN might benefit most from presenting a more robust image to the vast majority of less-informed citizens. We argue the UN should inject itself directly into the discourse if necessary — rather than risk abandoning the great majority of centrists without strong affinity or disdain for the organisation whose viewpoints may otherwise be determined by inaccurate/unfavorable coverage.

As former Deputy Secretary-General Mark Malloch Brown said, 'today ... the US is constructively engaged with the UN. But that is not well known or understood, in part because much of the public discourse that reaches the US heartland has been largely abandoned to its loudest detractors ...' (UN Doc. DSG/SM/287, 2006) This speech, in many ways a plea to the American media for a more fair portrayal of the UN, also illustrates the danger of being dependent upon national media for information dissemination. The next few paragraphs address the unique relationship between the UN and the United States.

### *A Special Case: the United States*

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the United States has become the clear economic and military superpower. So the United Nations must negotiate its relationship with the United States quite carefully. The UN must treat each member state equally, yet at the same time it cannot ignore the reality that US policy can have an overwhelming effect on the UN. The US is a special case for other reasons as well: it is the host nation of UN headquarters, and it is the home of perhaps the fiercest UN critics. The US population may be the single most important audience and most difficult challenge for DPI.

We are often shocked by the perception of the UN held by intelligent and otherwise well-informed Americans. For example, a generally well-informed man recently told us that the UN doesn't seem to be doing much. He was surprised when we told him how many peacekeeping missions were currently operating. It seems clear that the reality of the UN is simply not reaching US audiences. The effect of US support cannot be underestimated. If the UN can work to build greater public support in America, the organisation could become exponentially more effective. Alternatively, with the current American public's mistrust and

disdain for the UN, the organisation finds itself in a difficult position.

#### *DPKO & DPI: A Successful Collaboration*

As DPKO units enter a nation, public information dissemination is an obvious and necessary step. The methods by which information is transmitted from the UN to the public will be unique in DPKO mission settings. DPKO stories disseminated outside the area of deployment often cast a new image of the UN to public audiences. 'These efforts have begun to yield positive results. Media reports now increasingly speak of a robust presence of peacekeepers in some of the most difficult zones.' (UN Doc. A/AC.198/2006/5, 2006: paragraph 42) The UN effort in Sierra Leone was one of its greatest recent successes, despite all odds. 'The Department had strategised over the previous months, with the Mission and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, on how to bring maximum media attention to an operation that had achieved its mandate but had scant resources, personnel ...' (Ibid. paragraph 44) Since DPKO deployment is a major facet of UN operations, it has become an increasingly vital part of the UN story. As DPKO missions terminate, it may be equally important for DPI to engage with the newly formed Peacebuilding Commission to ensure that citizens understand the 'post-peacekeeping' role of the UN.

#### *The effect on policy-makers*

A subtle but powerful result of DPI efforts is their effect on national actors. As Cory explains, '... decision-makers may be influenced directly by information gained from mass media and indirectly by the assumption that citizens are 'listening' to his reasoning. High morale among policy makers can be maintained by a strong favorable press ...' (Cory, 1953: 239) Even if anti-UN arguments seem too weak/unsubstantiated to affect informed decision-makers, such actors must also react to their constituents' perceptions. Cory said UN information should be 'directed toward sustaining the morale of organized internationalist groups and toward establishing an atmosphere in which foreign offices could with a feeling of assurance adopt positive programs of international cooperation through the United Nations.' (Ibid. 240)

Mark Malloch Brown said '[t]oo much unchecked UN-bashing and stereotyping over too many years — manifest in a fear by politicians to be seen to be supporting better premises for overpaid, corrupt UN bureaucrats — makes even refurbishing a building a political hot potato.' (UN Doc. DSG/SM/287, 2006) When the UN is beleaguered in the media, political support for the UN becomes extremely untenable. Losing the media battle can mean more than losing public support — it can indirectly cause a loss of support in national capitals.

### **The Role of DPI as Public Image Advocate**

#### *Assuring Image Evaluation, Promotion, and Defense: Implementation*

Daily meetings now occur in which DPI formulates the UN public position for official use in public discussions and media encounters. This paper considers such meetings necessary and of great value in forming a coherent UN voice. The 2008–9 strategic framework also discusses an integrated media strategy. 'A cohesive promotional and distribution strategy will build more innovative partnerships with major broadcasters. These collaborations will help meet the needs of a global audience by offering radio and television networks ... quality programmes.' (UN Doc. A/61/6/REV.1 (SUPP), 2007: Prog. 23, paragraph 23.12) UN Radio for example, is a cost-effective campaign reaching millions of listeners with exciting, inspiring stories in 14 languages. The value of such initiatives, beyond discussing the UN and pertinent issues, is that it allows the organisation a proactive image-building forum. An indirect benefit is that media outlets may be less willing to broadcast unsubstantiated 'UN-bashing.'

The UN might adopt a more vigilant *attitude* in protecting how its image is received — this requires no additional resources but rather quick, bold and energetic reaction from DPI. Creativity in terms of how, when, and where to react is essential to maximize impact, in line with the new DPI mission statement. Developing a stronger image defense policy may be a question of will and boldness as much as one of resources.

#### *United Nations Information Centres (UNICs)*

New DPI approaches involving substantial UNIC contributions were tested in 2005 communications campaigns, where 'media analysis of coverage of the Summit has shown that proactive interaction between United Nations officials or spokespersons and the media helped generate more positive coverage than otherwise would have been the case.' (UN Doc. A/AC.198/2006/1, 2006: paragraph 19)

Some UNICs organised football tournaments or brought citizens together to watch games in celebration of the 2006 World Cup. (UN Doc. A/61/216, 2006: paragraph 21) Other UNICs 'organised briefings and public discussions among key stakeholders ... some of them aired on television and on national and local radio stations.' (Ibid.: paragraph 22) There is no substitute for this sort of creativity in connecting a global organisation to local citizens. Perhaps the greatest testament to the value of the UNICs comes from member states themselves. 'One speaker described the role of the information centre in Ouagadougou as 'irreplaceable' and suggested that ... it had a strategic position in terms of public information and initiatives to restore peace and handle related humanitarian issues.'(UN Doc. A/58/21, 2003: paragraph 41) It is the position of this paper that the intimacy UNICs can afford local populations is of immeasurable value. A Secretary-General report noted:

The United Nations information centres have a vital role to play in communicating the United Nations message around the world, countering misperceptions, and functioning as points of access to United Nations material and data. Often, United Nations information centres are also the eyes and ears of the Organisation, reporting back news about, and sentiments towards, the Organisation. (UN Doc. A/57/387, 2002: paragraph 67)

This rightly assigns UNICs a critical responsibility. We support UNIC strategic involvement in image protection and promotion (see the relationship between UN headquarters and UNIC offices in the Annex). After receiving UNIC monitoring reports, headquarters could determine how to recalibrate its media efforts in that region if necessary. In response to negative coverage, headquarters might choose to send UNICs some form of rebuttal for strategic placement in various media. From headquarters, DPI could analyze global media coverage of the UN based on the UNIC reports and send instructions to the UNICs with little time lag.

#### *Message Style & Medium*

Determining the best approach by which to disseminate information, is an essential facet of DPI strategy. DPI must constantly strive to improve message coherence and media output choices. Suggestions from SG reports seem to point DPI in the right direction.

Based on clippings culled from 71 publications judged to be among the most influential at regional and global levels, the Department, with the help of an independent consultant, has reviewed the quantitative and qualitative value of its work with the media ... The review shows that when United Nations' spokespersons were provided the opportunity to speak directly to the media on

substantive issues, the organisation was depicted in a more positive light. (UN Doc. A/AC.198/2006/5, 2006: Figure 1)

Further, '[f]eedback from journalists, as well as results of media analyses, have shown that simple and concrete messages have the greatest impact.' (UN Doc. A/AC.198/2006/4, 2006: paragraph 14) So direct communications from UN officials reaching the public with clear and simple messages may be the best way to efficiently access greater attention and build more support for the organisation.

Strategic placement of op-ed articles has been a common practice. It is important that the distribution of such articles is not limited to 'elite' papers but also reaches general audiences when possible. An example was the article written by the Secretary-General at the opening of the 2006 World Cup. (UN Doc. A/61/216, 2006: paragraph 33) Though, (or perhaps because), this article was more light-hearted than others, it reached a wide and varied audience. Efforts such as these may do more for the UN image than one might anticipate — and reach — audiences that otherwise might not connect with the organisation. The importance of leadership addressing the public directly should not be underestimated. Consider the following analysis of US presidential public relations policy.

In fact, there has arisen a conventional wisdom which asserts that televised speeches and foreign travel by the president (1) have increased over time, (2) exert a uniformly positive impact on public evaluations of the president's performance, and (3) can therefore be used as a strategy for influencing the president's approval ratings ...' (Simon & Ostrom, 1989: 58)

The Secretary-General, of course, should not consider personal popularity in determining DPI policy. But he might consider the effect his public image has on the organisation. The suggestion made earlier — to globally 'reserve' a primetime media hour each year for an S-G speech — could put a face to the organisation and connect the UN with the people of the world, if only briefly. This seems to be what national leaders accomplish with their addresses, and the UN might benefit from adopting the same practice.

## **Summary**

Sometimes the UN might be best suited to stay removed from public debate/discussion altogether. But in light of press coverage of the organisation in the last several years, it seems foolish to ignore the possibility of sensationalist stories spun through the media in order to embarrass the organisation. We believe the UN should defend itself vigorously in these cases.

## **Conclusion**

This paper concentrates on the need to defend and promote the UN image strategically. Skeptical audiences, especially those barraged by negative UN stories, require different treatment than a public favorable or neutral to the UN. Studies abound regarding general/topical awareness outreach, but little has been seen until recently regarding how the UN should respond to criticism or mold its information campaigns based on audience viewpoints and media behavior. Operational possibilities mentioned above are summarized as follows.

1. Monitoring of national media and public opinion regarding the UN might be used heavily to inform programming decisions. Audiences with positive opinions of the UN and observing fair media coverage could be presented campaigns with largely issue-based goals, whereas campaigns with image-based goals could be directed towards audiences skeptical of the UN and/or subjected to negative media coverage of the organisation.

2. Criticism could be met with vigor, particularly unfair or unsubstantiated criticism, in consideration of audiences that may otherwise hear only negative characterisations. Rapid response will be a key facet to any image protection campaign. Greater television and radio visibility could assist senior officials in promoting the organisation's image more broadly and publicly. As a bold step and possible leap forward for the UN image, the S-G could attempt to reserve an hour of primetime television/radio across the world once a year for a global address to put a face to the UN and communicate directly to the peoples of the world.
3. Within target audiences, citizens without firm pro- or anti-UN viewpoints might receive the bulk of DPI attention, as this is where campaigns may have the greatest impact. Evidence shows that information delivered via UN officials communicating a clear, succinct message has the strongest effect on the public. A strong (weak) UN image can impact policy-makers and politicians considerably, making their support dependable (untenable).

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### Footnotes

1. See also paragraph 60. Back

2. See for example expected accomplishments and their indicators. (UN Doc. A/61/6/REV.1 (SUPP), 2007: Prog. 23) Back

3. One SG report addresses in detail the need for media monitoring to examine the effectiveness of DPI programmes in terms of pick-up and favorability (UN Doc. A/61/6/REV.1 (SUPP), 2007: Prog. 23), and another delineates division budgets for monitoring and evaluation (UN Doc. A/60/6 (SECT. 27), 2005: paragraph 27.11). But no mention is made in these operational reports of monitoring general media coverage/favorability – that is, in the absence of DPI initiatives – perhaps even more essential. Back

4. Though a somewhat dated article, this observation still seems accurate. Back

5. See also A/61/216, paragraph 67. Back

6. For instance the partnership with MTV (discussed in UN Doc. A/61/216, 2006: paragraph 49) and the innovative campaign for New York City residents and visitors (discussed in UN Doc. A/AC.198/2006/5, 2006: paragraph 8). Back

7. UN officials were interviewed by Larry King only twice between 1 January 2000 and early 2007 (see <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/lkl.html>). One show focused on the Baghdad bombing of UN personnel, where DPI USG Shashi Tharoor spoke (see <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0308/19/lkl.00.html>); the other a discussion of post-tsunami relief efforts, and SG Kofi Annan and OCHA USG Jan Egeland spoke (see <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0412/28/lkl.01.html>). To the author's knowledge no UN official spoke to rebut the exaggerations and claims regarding the Oil-for-Food program. Back

8. For an interesting (if dated) discussion of how information can be of great benefit to the developing world, see Haas & Ruggie, 1982: 190-219.

UN Doc. A/61/6/REV.1 (SUPP) (2007) 'Biennial Programme Plan and Priorities for the Period 2008-2009.' Back

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