

# What use is the media when a country collapses? (guest blog)

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What is the role of the media after a state has been through a war or a disaster that leaves all the social and political structures weak and often destroyed? Henriette Von Klatenborn-Stachau and Shanthi Kalathil, are two consultants for the World Bank's Communication for Governance and Accountability Program ([CommGAP](#)). They spoke at a Polis meeting on the relationship between the media, the state and civil society in countries that have just experienced serious political upheaval, violent conflict or riots.

Polis Intern Alex Cacciatore reports.

Their research is, in large part, a response to their observation that media is treated as an “afterthought” by organizations or foreign governments helping to rebuild states that have just experienced some form of severe crisis. Von Klatenborn-Stachau and Kalathil began by trying to examine commonalities in post conflict states and after finding many, they have ultimately created what they believe to be a new, holistic model for organizing and rebuilding media and communications in fragile states.

Both argued in their presentations that a strong media that is both fair and technologically enabled creates a positive communication link between government and civil society. This link, in turn, helps to re-establish citizen's faith in their government and becomes one of the pivotal hinges upon which the re-stabilization of the state swings.



Von Klatenborn-Stachau's presentation focused on the importance of rebuilding the public sphere in a post-conflict environment where the positive connections between state institutions and civil society have imploded. She argued that the media is pivotal in helping recreate the relationship between the state and its citizenry especially in situations in which there are excess weapons, uncontrollable rumors and fear.

In order to help neutralize the threat of what she terms “peacespoilers”, or those who benefit from continued conflict, the state and the media must act with concordance with one another in order to get information through to citizens. However, she notes that in actual practice, organizations or donors focus on rebuilding state institutions **or** the media **or** society yet remain virtually unconnected if not disinterested in one another. Von Klatenborn-Stachau calls this “stove pipe thinking” which reflects a flawed policy which allows elements of chaos to pollute a fragile environment.

In Von Klatenborn-Stachau's published report “The Missing Link: Fostering Positive Citizen State Relations in Post conflict Environments”, she examines the cases of Timor, Liberia and Burundi in terms of successes and failures in the re-establishment of the public sphere.

Kalathil's addressed the issue of how media and communications are currently treated in post-conflict situations and made specific policy suggestions. She states that there are currently one or two people who are usually put in charge of rebuilding the media in post conflict zones which entails such tasks as getting information to citizens, getting information from citizens to government and communicating to donors, NGOs and other foreign governments.

Kalathil suggests that this is impossible for one or two people to do, so failures in the re-establishment of a media system and the public sphere are the norm which contributes to their relegation to the back burner of importance in policy decisions regarding how to rebuild a fragile state. She suggests these roles should be separated, but also be made to communicate with one another. Because in times of crisis, most governments do not want to share excessive amounts of information, she puts forth that it is crucial for the media to create a sense of voice and accountability.

Not only does this involve the training of journalists, but also the making sure all of the technical components of

disseminating information are present. Again, Kalathil, reiterated the idea that media is an essential part of state building that should be seen on par with reestablishing essential functions like rule of law.



While this suggests fascinating implications for how to use a public sphere to re-establish political order, both presentations were rooted in the abstract and many of the audience's questions had to do with wanting specific examples of where these practices have worked. It would seem that both women were saying that there is no real "proof" of these public sphere tactics working because theirs is a completely new approach.

However, there were also questions regarding whether Kalathil and Von Klatenborn-Stachau saw their new model as a template for solving the communications problems of post-conflict countries (by the way, "template" is a dirty word in discussing the issues of developing countries). Also, there is the issue of the using the term "public sphere" which gets academics in a Habermasian twist of fury, but causes nary a ripple in the consciousness of policy makers. And of course, who could forget that this is research published by the World Bank, whom even if you have no buttons, chances are the World Bank has somehow managed to push them.

It was also striking that their ideas and suggestions had more in common with information management of complex organizations- rather than traditional notions of state-building and public sphere-ing. But when listening to Kalathil and Von Klatenborn-Stachau's arguments it is important to bear in mind that this is complex information that is being shown to policy makers, NGOs and students around the UK and the EU and they are trying to make media and communications a part of the conversation in the process of state building under the worst of circumstances.



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