



MATCHING:POINTS

Assessing UN Media Relations and Revitalizing Dialogue among Diverse Stakeholders

SUMMARY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Global Action to Prevent War (GAPW)

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I. Introduction

The following summary has been distilled from a longer policy piece written by Lia Petridis Maiello, a distinguished professional journalist from Germany working in association with Global Action to Prevent War and Armed Conflict (GAPW). Lia has capably developed our media initiative entitled 'Matching:Points' which is intended as an introduction to a United Nations-based media system that is often characterized by information access and sharing that is beset with professional miscalculations and miscommunications on the parts of various stakeholders.

We know that this media system has much to do with how the global public understands the structure and activities of the United Nations (UN), including its programmatic successes and political compromises. But this system is often bogged down by limited trust across sectors and insufficient commitment to ensure that the global public has the best possible information about this leading global body. These and other obstacles have undermined the ability of the UN to share its stories in a way that maintains and even enhances its important role in the world; but equally they have undermined the ability of journalists to properly investigate the ways in which the UN might more effectively live up to its lofty objectives.

GAPW reminds readers that the UN has plenty to celebrate in the implementation of its mission, much of which remains virtually unknown to wide segments of the global public and even to governments. A fair and transparent engagement with working journalists at all levels of the UN, including promoting wider access for journalists to UN officials, can do much to broaden this appreciation. Such transparent engagement can also motivate structural and programmatic improvements in the UN that can, in turn, bring about more efficient and cost-effective work on

core security and development issues. A robust media presence, in our view, can purify and clarify as well as instigate improvements.

GAPW's view is that the UN media community, for all its diverse expectations, economy-driven compromises and communications challenges, retains the capacity to serve global governance in at least two ways: First, in helping to make the policy options and discussions at the UN more transparent to a global audience. And second, in providing opportunities to highlight issues and leadership opportunities that are most relevant to smaller and 'middle' powers. This latter concern is one that we wholeheartedly endorse and that we hope larger numbers of UN-based media will see fit to take up. We believe providing information and insights, particularly for those missions that lack capacity to fully cover the diverse set of issues taken up at the UN, is an indispensable contribution that journalists can provide to various UN stakeholders.

GAPW is housed in a small office with three core, cross-cutting programs in disarmament, atrocity crime prevention and Women, Peace and Security. At the same time, our commitment to an active, complementary engagement with the UN media system is firm. We are convinced that a media system which is fair, energetic and comprehensive can better serve the interests of all stakeholders (including GAPW and our program partners) involved on a daily basis with some of the most challenging issues of our age.

I. GAPW's Media Initiative – Matching:Points

Objectives and Methodology of the Study

GAPW started its media initiative in 2011 with the goals of assessing media coverage of the UN by diverse outlets, evaluating the state of UN press corps/UN Secretariat relations, identifying problems and challenges in communication, and providing timely and relevant recommendations to improve practice. Our initiative starts from the premise that both traditional and social media offer effective opportunities to spread and support the intentions and work of the UN globally. GAPW's media initiative is somewhat unusual in its structure and intention as we not only contribute to coverage of diverse events within the UN system but also attempt to revitalize dialogue between media stakeholders who, seemingly by design, follow mostly divergent interests.

Little research or analysis has focused on UN media relations; thus there was an opportunity for us to prepare a study based on a number of interviews with press and UN representatives in order to create a reasonably objective frame of reference on which to base recommendations for improvement. The number of interviews with UN officials (past and present) and UN correspondents conducted to date is still too small (32 in total) to provide quantifiable results of high confidence; but the number is large enough to communicate qualitative insights on UN media practices as well as generate a number of appropriate recommendations. It is important to present a balanced argument that accurately reflects obstacles impacting all media stakeholders in order to establish pertinent recommendations that can further the work and close existing gaps. As stakeholders are intertwined mostly in an inharmonious fashion, it is also important to understand the problems that media representatives are facing, as well as obstacles confronting UN officials in order to address these issues fairly and with proper context. Additionally, it is not the responsibility

or within the range of the capability of any one stakeholder to solve issues that result from the interaction of many forces and factors. In addition, our results may be skewed by an over-representation of press correspondents relative to UN staff, primarily because correspondents initially demonstrated more interest in this study.

GAPW seeks to implement this initiative keeping in mind long-term implications for standards of journalism as well as for promoting a better understanding of current media tools and priorities by diverse UN stakeholders. In terms of specific programmatic priorities, GAPW has sought over the past ten years to be an honest broker of diplomat-focused analysis on disarmament, women, peace and security, the protection of civilians/genocide prevention and now media. GAPW attempts to serve a conduit for broad-based conversations that can improve the UN's effectiveness. In the case of media, GAPW offers recommendations with the goal of creating new impulses within the UN system to generate long-term, productive changes to improve both journalistic access and reporting standards. We know that our own impact is limited, but we also recognize that key UN problems cannot be solved by any one stakeholder.

II. Key Elements in the Longer Study

A. Social Media

The impact of social media on coverage of important news events can hardly be overestimated. Even in a more traditional setting such as the UN, a variety of groups from NGOs to UN treaty bodies employ social media to 'push' information and images to an eager global audience. Bloggers have now been accepted, at least in theory, in to the UN media community. At the same time, NGOs, UN agencies and diplomatic missions are using an ever wider variety of social media tools to connect with broad constituencies, including in capitals, about key UN events and issues, often in real time.



Of course there are issues with social media, many of which have been amply articulated elsewhere. It is imperative that the norms and standards which have evolved to govern media practice play an evaluative role in assessing the value of these new media tools. The Society for Professional Journalists (SPJ), founded in the US in 1909, is one of the organizations that have upheld admittedly traditional, but still valid ethical standards for the journalistic profession.

For GAPW, the responsibility is to maintain high levels of integrity in our own social media tools, but also to provide guidance for those diplomatic missions and other stakeholders that might not yet be sufficiently savvy where social media is concerned. It is critical that all segments of the media community have access to and a working knowledge of these tools, understanding both their great potential to expand policy outreach but also their potential to manipulate opinion and 'sell' ideas that have not been properly tested in public forums.

B. Balancing and Expanding Coverage

For the past several months, GAPW has been approaching UN journalists, UN departments, country missions and the public with this initiative because we believe that the viability of the UN system depends in part on a healthy, balanced, energetic UN media system. More judgments about the UN are surely influenced by journalists, traditional as well as social, than by media generated by the UN itself. There is a need for more professional journalists within the UN system who both represent diverse global regions and possess a sound understanding of their responsibility to promote balanced and thorough UN coverage.

Trust building between media stakeholders is both essential and inherently difficult since the press has a monitoring role to fulfill in any institution it covers and should (ideally) operate as both a clarifying and correcting force to overly simplistic or biased policy remarks by officials. The reality of the matter, including at the UN, is that unbiased reporting which includes critical reflection/assessment is too much the exception rather than the rule. Some news outlets vigorously go after any irregularity or 'scandal' within the UN system as it serves their political purposes to do so, rather than helping to communicate UN matters in a balanced fashion, which surely entails a multi-faceted approach to issues, government policies and personalities.

One final issue that has come up in this context through interviews has to do with strategies for making coverage of the UN more interesting to media consumers. One interviewee noted sarcastically that his colleagues would rather cover 'school board meetings' than UN meetings. Editors looking for content that is both relevant and broadly engaging need more input from the UN, specifically more access to stories that clearly reflect the benefits of resolutions and treaties. If the UN is not 'interesting' to media consumers, changes of expanding coverage are compromised.

C. Improving and Pursuing Access

One of the most often repeated statements from journalists covering the UN has to do with an over-reliance on the office of the Secretary General and the Security Council as the source of valid UN news. With few exceptions, UN-based journalists are rarely on the floor of important UN events, including treaty negotiations or the forthcoming work of the Treaty Bodies.

Improving access is clearly a multi-dimensional problem. It includes more direct receptivity to media by a wider range of UN officials, but also requires an understanding of institutional contexts by journalists, a broader knowledge by the UN of what media professionals need in order to meet their deadlines more effectively, and an ability to cultivate trust across sectors – including diverse spokespersons in the Secretariat, among NGOs, and in diplomatic missions. In other words, access is in part about relationship building, and thus it is more complex than developing relevant policy questions (journalists) and having more officials at the UN making time to answer them.

III. Findings

The following quotations represent summaries of the main ‘takeaways’ from the interviews conducted. They are not exhaustive nor do they seek to make categorical claims. Nevertheless, they do help to illustrate some of the primary obstacles that impede the full and transparent functioning of the UN media system.

- 1. Member state and Secretariat hierarchies within the UN system impact (and sometimes impede) press access*
- 2. Diplomats are perceived to be more accessible to media than Secretariat staff*
- 3. Northern-Southern hemisphere imbalances in reporting exist, both in terms of content and of the cultural/national backgrounds of working journalists at the UN*
- 4. US strategic interests greatly impact UN media coverage*
- 5. There is a lack of individual responsibility on behalf of many UN journalists to pursue stories fully and accurately*
- 6. Representatives of western media outlets tend to dominate discussion at press meetings*
- 7. The female-to-male ratio (among UN-based journalists) indicates a serious gender imbalance*
- 8. Reporting has to be ‘sexy’ nowadays to get approval from editors*
- 9. Many colleagues lack sufficient training in journalistic ethics, including actively seeking out diverse perspectives on policies before attempting to ‘air’ stories about them*
- 10. Information gathering is often dependent on personal relations which can lead to good stories but also to potential conflicts of interest, including an over-reliance on familiar sources*
- 11. UN News Centre information is “often incomplete” and “challenging to access”*
- 12. The majority of Americans simply don’t like the UN and have little interest in stories that seek to balance the UN’s failures with its many life-saving activities*
- 13. One of our main goals must be to promote greater public understanding of UN issues*
- 14. UN language is “opaque” with insufficient references to concrete, positive actions stemming from resolutions and treaties*

15. *UN press releases are often missing the link to real world events as well as to the faces of hope and change that can help journalists “personalize” a story.*
16. *The department of peacekeeping operations is extremely media savvy but not all departments have thought through their media policy with seriousness*

IV. Recommendations

The following recommendations are divided according to their intended audience: the UN Press corps or the UN Secretariat.

a. PRESS

Immediate attention:

- Actively seek niche stories and underreported issues related to smaller, non-Security Council member states and then ‘sell’ those topics to editors
- Acknowledge that the Secretary-General is often not the expert on core issues or policy and become familiar with the entire UN system well enough to know who to talk to and whose perspectives to seek out in order to complete a balanced story
- Actively pitch stories to more independent outlets in order to better secure more balanced coverage with a stronger focus on smaller member states
- Initiate stronger collaboration with UN staff in preparation for interviews
- To the extent possible, reduce reliance on prepared speeches by UN officials to be replaced by more interviews with diplomat and other stakeholders, and have a more visible presence in General Assembly conference rooms, UN common spaces, etc.

Longer term attention:

- Urge a more concerted effort throughout the UN system (including missions) to hire more correspondents from developing nations (perhaps through the Dag Hammerskjold program)

b. UN SECRETARIAT

Immediate attention:

- Institute more balanced footage from UN headquarters and the field for the TV section on the UN News Centre website
- Make available media-related resources managed by the UN more widely known in the journalistic community
- Provide expert lists and media contact names for the respective UN departments on the UN website so that the focus on the Secretary-General as the only ‘relevant’ voice can shift
- Provide introductory seminars on the UN system for new press members, accompanied by resources and literature recommendations such as “Insider Guide to the UN,” by Linda Fasulo (available at <http://www.amazon.com/Insiders-Guide-Linda-Fasulo/dp/0300101554>)

- Offer regular updates for journalists on the work the UN does globally and in particular at headquarters
- Offer better and more concise “packaging” of UN information and material in a press- friendly manner
- Make press releases more regularly available in order to provide additional information on the practical input UN negotiations and resolutions have for every-day people around the globe. Links to footage for humanitarian stories included in the press release might accomplish this
- Optimize the content and accessibility of the Department of Public Information (DPI) website
- Ensure that planning for any high profile UN event make accommodation for a team of press savvy staff
- Simplify the system in place that provides day passes for non-permanent correspondents

Longer-term attention:

- Promote better understanding of the ways in which journalists are confronted with the daunting task of turning abstract subjects, often without obvious practical relevance, into stories of far-reaching, enticing human interest
- To access countries (whole or in part) where neither the internet nor TV is readily accessible, we must rethink ways to use radio more effectively as a primary means of communicating UN and related matters
- Since the UN is a global body representing diverse social and political contexts, an interest in balanced reporting to help form balanced public opinion regarding the activities of the UN should be of vital concern; in this light journalistic participation from smaller countries should be strongly and actively encouraged

V. Conclusion

This summary brief focused on the media community within and around the UN system is meant to provide suggestions for various media stakeholders interested in a more effective communication of the far-reaching work of the UN. Ultimately, the goal of the media initiative is to evaluate existing relationships between UN Correspondents, UN departments and member states, and to modify and possibly improve those relationships. Although these recommendations might well seem insufficient in light of the complexities and power dynamics of the UN system, it is nevertheless important to underscore short and longer term benefits to revitalizing dialogue among UN-based stakeholders.

Global information structures are changing quickly, not only based on interactions of states with each other, but also between states and other stakeholders, including corporations and civil society organizations. It is more important than ever that the United Nations and its member states embrace this internet-inspired, fast-paced change within information and news distribution, ensuring that a blend of new and traditional media maintains high professional standards but also allows for a more flexible, rapid response to shifting events. Going forward, GAPW will be organizing a number of discussion-related events for various UN stakeholders in order to address

these matters and looks forward to contributing to the implementation of many of these aforementioned recommendations.

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