

# Embassy Magazine

## Media's promise to prevent mass atrocities

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We are living in a revolutionary era. For the first time in the history of the human race, mass murder is widely condemned and courts of law are holding a growing number of perpetrators accountable for the crimes they committed against civilians in the midst of civil conflicts.

NATO's intervention in Libya in February was authorized by two landmark resolutions of the UN Security Council highlighting the Libyan government's "responsibility to protect its population." For many UN delegates, these resolutions on Libya marked a major advance towards implementing the responsibility of states to protect their own people and initiating intercession by the Security Council when states have failed to satisfy that responsibility.

The Responsibility to Protect doctrine is beginning to gain traction among the permanent members of the Security Council. The new United States National Security Strategy promulgated in May 2010 recognizes for the first time that "the primary responsibility for preventing genocide and mass atrocity rests with sovereign governments, but that this responsibility passes to the broader international community when sovereign governments themselves commit genocide or mass atrocities, or when they prove unable or unwilling to take necessary action to prevent or respond to such crimes inside their borders."

In the words of the strategy, the United States has committed itself to "working with our allies, and to strengthening our own internal capabilities, in order to ensure that the United States and the international community are proactively engaged in a strategic effort to prevent mass atrocities and genocide. In the event that prevention fails, the United States will work both multilaterally and bilaterally to mobilize diplomatic, humanitarian, financial, and—in certain instances—military means to prevent and respond to genocide and mass atrocities."

The media, too, are changing. Today's potential victims of mass atrocities are empowered by electronic tools that allow them to communicate their plight in real time with the hope that they might cooperate to save themselves or be saved by others. Joined with traditional media to expose looming mass atrocities and political leaders willing to rally against them, the unprecedented new media offer exciting possibilities for prevention.

Yet we still have much to learn. Innovative media technologies pose new problems that call for ingenious solutions. SMS text messaging, Tweets, Facebook pages, and blogs have opened the floodgates, swamping analysts with tsunamis of information. Verifying social media messages requires advances in "information forensics," including software tools and cross checking techniques to distinguish facts from rumors and to ensure the authenticity and accuracy of messages.

Ultimately, the combination of new technology and old media will combat the isolation of victims, while radio and television broadcasts of serial media dramas will help to establish common ground between groups in conflict, but our old enemies, censorship and repression, will still need to be confronted. And, even more subtly, if media coverage and public pressure are to galvanize into action the political leadership needed to prevent mass atrocities, reporting will have to become more anticipatory, sustained, rooted in a deeper understanding of processes more than immediate events, offer a knowledgeable framework of interpretation, and move consumers of news away from efforts to drag them towards extreme nationalism, sensationalism, very narrow sources of information, hyper-emotionalism, strongly biased and inaccurate stories, and other instruments of psychological manipulation.

Achieving those goals is a tall order to fulfill, especially at a time when shrinking budgets and dwindling foreign bureaus threaten massive cuts in international news coverage, but fulfill them we must. Towards these ends, the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies of Concordia University is convening a conference Oct. 20-21 to aid the media to fulfill its promise in halting mass atrocities and to help us achieve the goals of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine.

Our keynote speakers and expert panel members will raise and address key questions about media's ability to prevent mass atrocities, the most effective ways to harness the power of the new social media, the role the media can play in peace building and mobilizing government leaders, and critique the current state of reporting on sites of mass atrocities, including Libya, Syria and Sudan.

We invite readers of Embassy to attend our conference to explore the role of the media with Paul Martin, Roméo Dallaire, Carol Off, Rick MacInnes-Rae, Allan Thompson, André Pratte, Sarah Sewall, Gordon Smith, Mona Eltahawy, Andrew Potter and other distinguished journalists, scholars, practitioners, and political leaders. For more information on the conference and registration, please go to [migrs2pconference.com](http://migrs2pconference.com).

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