

Article

## Information Asymmetries and Their Challenge to International Broadcasting

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### Abstract

Dramatic symmetries in strategies and techniques of persuasion create challenges to the functioning of established actors in the global media ecology, including international broadcasters. This essay articulates an adaptation of the concept of asymmetric warfare to the field of propaganda, persuasion and recruitment. It examines the particular challenge of certain asymmetric entrants, including ISIS and categorizes how the more traditional entities and government institutions react to these new entrants in markets for loyalties.

### Keywords

asymmetry; broadcasting; global; journalism; market for loyalties; Russia today

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

At the moment, there is widespread and despairing astonishment at the effectiveness of ISIS in exploiting the information space, particularly in its capacity to use social media for purposes of recruitment.<sup>1</sup> These achievements, as sordid as they may be, give rise to self-examination among those long established as engaged in shifting or sustaining public opinion. The rise of ISIS and its impact on media ecology can be analyzed, in part, as a case of asymmetric information warfare. In this essay, I wish to do three things with ISIS as an object of interest: articulate the relation between asymmetric warfare and asymmetric *information* warfare; examine the particular challenge of the ISIS techniques to traditional players, especially international broadcasters; and, finally, discuss responses to the phenomenon. This is a study, too, of how innovation can catch, unawares, the established, the conventional,

namely entities that assume that the privileges of previous power will continue. Examples abound of the changing dynamics of information flow in a world of new media technologies and practices. In the very early days of the Syrian conflict, the *New York Times* reported how a dozen or two diasporic geeks were successful in capturing and shaping the way the narrative of the Syrian protests was being received in Western capitals. Syria could not control the narrative. Western broadcasters could not. And certainly the international broadcasters were unable to as well. For Joshua Landis, a professor of Middle East studies at the University of Oklahoma, this led to an interesting, not necessarily exaggerated, conclusion: “These activists have completely flipped the balance of power on the regime, and that’s all due to social media” (Price, 2014).

True, these young Syrian activists were early disrupters (and supporters of freedom of expression), but they fade into the shadows compared to the later capacity of ISIS to turn prior assumptions on their heads. And the Syrian dissenters ultimately relied on the megaphones of great conventional broadcasters and newspapers to get their word out. They are, however, ex-

<sup>1</sup> There are hundreds of articles on the subject. Compare Mark Mazzetti and Michael Gordon (2015) with Kathy Gilson (2015).

amples of sudden transformations and new concepts of capturing media for modes of change that require analysis: a perceived reversal of an existing distribution of power in the information sphere. States seek to determine aspects of a new epidemiology. They and ISIS are examples of a context in which the state had overarching control over how words and images, even thoughts and ideas, were diffused, it now frequently finds itself backfooted, even stutteringly impotent.

## 2. Asymmetric Information Conflicts

Asymmetry in the sense I use it here has its source and origin in the concept of “asymmetrical warfare,” a concept that has its own vagaries. One definition from the force-related context calls asymmetrical these conflicts where one opponent can take actions that are not available to its foe (Barnett, 2003). This is an asymmetry in the quiver of techniques, where the unavailability may stem from legal, ethical and pragmatic reasons: historic differences in access to information, differences in access to and control of the means of distribution and differences in the capacity to create and produce messages. In contemporary usage, warfare asymmetry often describes the circumstances where a conventionally powerful state is faced with a ragtag set of protestors or adversaries who are, at the outset, hardly worth dignifying as enemies. A final definition of warfare asymmetry is functional: it describes techniques that an adversary exercises to “undermine an opponent’s strengths while exploiting his weaknesses using methods that differ significantly from the opponent’s usual mode of operations” (Miles, 1999).

In recent decades, we have associated asymmetrical warfare with acts of terrorism, tactics like hostage taking, the use of biological warfare and the use of torture. Asymmetric warfare is contrasted with a conventional “ideal,” one where sides are evenly matched, use similar kinds of techniques, and where over centuries, rules (whether fully respected or not) have developed regarding the limits on what one side can do to the other. To put it simply, asymmetry in warfare occurs when parties to conflict seem mismatched in particular ways—with one combatant far stronger in terms of firepower and wealth than the other, or where the strategies of one combatant are radically different from the strategies of the other and from the norm.

The notion here is to ask what the concept of asymmetric warfare has to offer us, if anything, in terms of strategic insight into current modes of information conflict.<sup>2</sup> Like asymmetry in war, asymmetry in the battle for loyalties involves undermining an enemy’s strengths and exploiting its weaknesses. Gains are

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<sup>2</sup> For insight into the general concept, see U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Manual. A thorough explanation is contained in McCauley and Moskalenko (2010).

achieved through the pioneering use of techniques not immediately available to the other side—either because it has not discovered them, has not mastered them or is otherwise disdainful of their adoption. Asymmetry in communications techniques often involves significant disruption of the status quo, initiated by entities that are often scorned as disempowered or substantially weaker (Srebreny & Mohammadi, 1994). Underestimation is a characteristic byproduct of asymmetry. The lack of conventional equality masks the resourcefulness of desperation.

## 3. Asymmetric Entrants in a Market for Loyalties

I start with an approach I developed over the years, first in an article in the Yale Law Journal, then in an earlier book, *Television, the Public Sphere, and National Identity* (Monroe, 1995), in *Media and Sovereignty*, and finally in *Free Expression, Globalism and the New Strategic Communication*. In these works I sought to define a “market for loyalties,” in which large-scale competitors for power, in a shuffle for allegiances, use the regulation of communications to organize a cartel of imagery and identity among themselves.

“The ‘sellers’ in this market are all those for whom myths and dreams and history can somehow be converted into power and wealth—classically states, governments, interest groups, businesses, and others. The ‘buyers’ are the citizens, subjects, nationals, consumers—recipients of the packages of information, propaganda, advertisements, drama, and news propounded by the media. The consumer ‘pays’ for one set of identities or another in several ways that, together, we call ‘loyalty’ or ‘citizenship.’ Payment, however, is not expressed in the ordinary coin of the realm: It includes not only compliance with tax obligations, but also obedience to laws, readiness to fight in the armed services, or even continued residence within the country. The buyer also pays with his or her own sense of identity.” (Monroe, 1994)

Government I argued, is usually the mechanism that allows the cartel to operate and is often part of the cartel itself. But among the many points that are intriguing is this: what we mean by “government,” or what levers of power should be included, changes and means different things in different contexts. Indeed, it is hardly ever a single government that makes these decisions. What I emphasize is the way in which the market for loyalties within any state or in a different definition of target audience is often the product of multiple interests—other states, transnational religious entities, NGOs, and others. Some of these are members of the cartel, formally or not. And it is difficult to determine which players are most effective in the cartel: the state

agencies, the multinational corporations, religious groups, international organizations, governmental and non-governmental. Some cartels are stable—having the same members with the same relevant strengths, for years; some are unstable, ever changing, with varying capacities to police participant behavior and the entry of competitors.

Those who seek to enter the market, particularly those who are for many reasons forcefully excluded are the asymmetric pioneers. This is hardly always the case, but in the instance of ISIS, asymmetries of anticipated exclusion were met with affirmative invention. Asymmetry prodded creativity; but asymmetry may also have provided time and cover for efforts to take hold and experimentation to go below the radar. ISIS did not spring forth full blown, but much had been put in place in terms of communications strategy when it came to major public attention.

Markets for loyalties are, by definition, ubiquitous and have existed at all times in their wide variety of forms. We like to think that the current environment is different, in terms of how these markets function: the opening impact of technology, the range of participants, the sophistication of players, the porousness of boundaries, and the changing power of regulatory bodies in terms of establishing and enforcing rules for participation and exclusion. All these factors have always been present; it is in terms of their relative importance that markets change over time.

In terms of this “market for loyalties” analysis, the successful surmounting of asymmetrical weaknesses can be said to occur when a group, excluded from the cartel of entrants eligible to shape national identity (or other similar constructs), breaks through and uses the breakthrough to substantially change the distribution of allegiances in a target audience. Asymmetry can be a function of technology, or profound differences, as mentioned, in what tools and approaches are considered available. Beheadings and the showing of beheadings—as a mode of expression—is an example of ethical availability: it can be a mode so repugnant that it is prized by some and abhorred by others. Asymmetry becomes a guide to how rude entrants use technology or force or subsidy or other mechanisms to break into cartels.

#### **4. International Broadcasting and the Market for Loyalties**

The history of international broadcasting—here principally meaning state-sponsored broadcasters reaching across borders—could be written from the perspective of asymmetry. These broadcasters, including the BBC World Service and aspects of the Broadcasting Board of Governors in the US, could see themselves as once historic innovators—entering tightly closed ideological markets to bring in new voices, new approaches. Inter-

national broadcasters were short-wave innovators, technical pioneers, adventurers with new satellite technologies. They emerged often from colonial communicators to their own diaspora, or local bureaucracies to redefine themselves as instruments of potential political change. They thought about how to give voice to those without any and to project credible news account. How “white,” “grey” or clandestine they or their colleagues were might be a gauge to the asymmetry of their condition.

There are still innovators among the international broadcasters, but they are extensively challenged by the asymmetric entrants, principally, at the moment, ISIS.

In Iran, the mullahs may think of international broadcasters from the West as powerful interlopers, while the international broadcasters themselves may self-perceive as struggling to break through in a difficult environment. To put it another way, the international broadcasters, for the most part, are elements of what is delicately called the “legacy media,” a category of entities that have felt power and privilege, that crested in their corporate life-cycle, and where the question of future and future role looms large. This position means that asymmetry takes a different profile. International broadcasters are in a culture of extending existing arrangements, when they prod they can be painted not as the creative, brave outsider, but rather as an instrument of a hegemonic West.

International broadcasters conform to this model because of their measured performances and expectations. While the practitioners sometimes make large claims as to the potential for regime change and historic effectiveness in “bringing down the Wall,” tolerance of these entities as contributors to discourse can be often attributed to some idea of limit either on their goals or their impact. Censorship, filtering, other modes of aggressive behavior are indications that the international broadcaster is crossing some vague line of accepted behavior. In the US, under this analysis, the international broadcasters may have to assert some goals to satisfy their donors—primarily the US Congress—realizing that in practice they must behave, in large part, under cartel rules.

A decade ago, before ISIS, before the Arab Spring, The challenge of understanding and appreciating asymmetries in the battles for hearts and minds was highlighted for me by a now somewhat-forgotten 2006 speech given by Donald Rumsfeld, then Secretary of Defense, to the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. The talk, labeled “New Realities in a Media Age,” was a candid discussion by a person of immense power who was perplexed by what seemed to be the sudden and unexpected diminution of that power (Rumsfeld, 2006). The premise of the talk was that “Our enemies have skillfully adapted to fighting wars in today’s media age, but for the most part we, our country, our government, have not adapted.” For Rumsfeld, this asym-

metry of adaptation meant that “violent extremists” had gained an edge in “manipulating the opinion elites of the world.” In addition, “They plan and design their headline-grabbing attacks using every means of communication to intimidate and break the collective will of free people.” These individuals were not bound, Rumsfeld argued, by the standards of legality and ethics that bound the United States. But Rumsfeld also recognized that this was not just a question of tactics or purpose, but one, in part, of superior practical application. “They’re able to act quickly. They have relatively few people. They have modest resources compared to the vast and expensive bureaucracies of Western governments.” In spite of these qualities, or perhaps because of them, these groups had, in Rumsfeld’s view, prevailed in the media sphere. Rumsfeld summarized this asymmetry with a metaphor that demonstrates the irony and tragedy of power—the turn from strength to weakness, from dominance to something closer to cluelessness: “Our federal government is really only beginning to adapt our operations to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For the most part, the U.S. government still functions as a five and dime store in an eBay world.” But Rumsfeld saw only part of the problem: the asymmetry was not only because the U.S. government had not modernized. It also hadn’t seen the potential for asymmetrical, terrifying and sometimes pre-modern modes of shifting allegiances and turning weaknesses into strengths.

In some ways much has changed since Rumsfeld’s speech, and many governments have sought, not always successfully, to avoid the shock of surprise that leads to crises in communications. The Obama State Department, especially under Hillary Clinton, persistently devoted itself to changing the culture of the institution to remedy the deficit that Rumsfeld pinpointed. Whiz kids surrounding Secretary Clinton became transfixed with the task of transformation—with, for example, the creation of what they called a doctrine of “21<sup>st</sup> Century Statecraft” meant partly to obviate elements of adverse information asymmetry.<sup>3</sup> Technical updating—becoming more fluent in social media, for example—offers a relatively easy area for catching up. Far more difficult are those circumstances where the asymmetric advantage of a foe comes from their more sophisticated understanding of customs engrained in the cultures of the societies where allegiances are being shifted—for example, better knowledge of family and educational structure or familiarity with language—or where ethical or other similar differences lead to the inability of one party to use effective approaches open to another.

In analyzing asymmetric contexts, rather than ask

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<sup>3</sup> See Department of State (2013), and Drezner (2011). The ambiguous results of this ongoing effort have been captured by critics. For instance, see Morozov (2010).

who has the most weaponry, one could ask which agents have the most sophisticated sense of using the information tools they have, including marketing or use of social media. This could be sophistication in presentation or insight into potential effect. Rumsfeld (2006), in his talk discussed above, suggested asymmetries in moral expectations, with the “weaker,” non-state actor willing to use communicative techniques with lower ethical standards. There also may be an “asymmetry of patience:” citizens of a Western democracy may tire of persisting in a conflict while the asymmetrical opponent can maintain its slow and dogged approach. Writing about asymmetrical warfare, Uroš Svete (2009) has argued that the “essential point of asymmetry thus lies in pursuing...[approaches] that are contrary to realistic ideas of the balance of power in the quantitative/conventional sense.” Strategists of communication recognize a historical jujitsu, reversing the power context so that the weak appear to become strong, and the strong become weak.<sup>4</sup> The counter-strategist recognizes the vulnerabilities that may lead to this kind of reversal of fortune. The protestor and his or her supporters internalize the existence of new means to break a wall of access; the state and existing authority will seek new ways to compensate for the weakness of old defenses.

Participants in a competition for allegiances who have been in a position of dominance are often blighted by the illusion of their presumptive power. Conventional international broadcasters may suffer from this phenomenon. These dominant players are almost always faced with the danger of unanticipated openings by new entrants: mere shadows on the horizon that suddenly loom as potential or real threats. ISIS’ media team, otherwise barred from the communications landscape, turn to new and viral forms of communication as they seek to break formal and informal modes of control. International broadcasters and those behind them may not be well prepared for the consequences of asymmetry. They have broader targets, less well defined. They are constrained in their behavior. The impulse, often justified, is to strike out at the asymmetric innovators. Much of what occurs in terms of censorship, control and, increasingly, the use of violence, constitutes a blunderbuss of responses of the powerful in this paradigm-shifting asymmetric world.

There have been many examples of technological innovations that help to break broadcasting-related cartels. Radio stations that broadcast, unlicensed, from the sea (so-called pirate ships) caused turmoil in the radio sphere of the 1960s. In the 1990s, the brashly competitive introduction of satellite technology over existing transponders broke the illusion of total control over the information space, but even then, for the most part, weak players were not able to take ad-

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<sup>4</sup> See McCauley and Moskalenko (2011).

vantage of the apertures because of inexperience or prohibitive costs or gateway barriers. What is significant about ISIS is the replacement of a cartel by a monopolist, and a ruthless and effective one at that.

## 5. Patterns of Reaction

This then goes to questions of how international broadcasters or their governments react. Many modern debates deal with ways of reacting to the disruptions and asymmetries these technological changes have created. Asymmetry is significant, for example, if the characteristics of “weakness” result in one player being more innovative and responsive than another in a way that is destructive of existing institutions. The important variable is how these opportunities are seized and by whom. In *The Cultural Industries*, David Hesmondhalgh (2007) distinguished (in a very different context) between large commercial, corporate bureaucracies and small network organizations. Bigger bureaucracies with all their resources and hierarchical structures find it hard to move quickly enough to address changes in the market, while smaller, more nimble, decentralized network organizations are often more successful, especially in early adoption of trends. A similar phenomenon is at work in the political context. Of course, large entities may use their scale and control to stifle innovation; and some large entities (companies and countries) have sought nevertheless to maintain an innovative edge.

International broadcasters, and certainly the governments behind them, seek, in a certain sense, to “learn” from innovative competitors and adopt their techniques. But often this cannot work. What makes an asymmetrical competitor effective, as has been stated, is the resort to arguments that are not available to a conventional broadcaster. The fictive promise of an afterlife, cushioned with an abundance of conforming sexual partners of an idealized quality, is available to the ISIS propagandist, but not to the BBC or the Voice of America. There are areas of content differentiation which cannot be a zone for comparable access.

Institutional differences present themselves. If for example, the issue is battling the recruitment of young Britons for ISIS, the role of the World Service might be to help public understanding—around the world. It is not the vehicle for retail contestation for hearts and minds one at a time. Its focus is not on a domestic audience, even a segment of one. In some states, new entities are shaped to counter the work of the asymmetric entrant. In the US, an entity called the Center for Strategic Counter-Terrorism Communication was established in the Department of State, but it lacked the scale and fervor of its ISIS competitor. The tasks and skills required to perform new tasks in a new information environment may not be easily nourished in an existing environment.

States’ and other players’ responses to the new information asymmetries vary across categories. Adaptation to information asymmetry can mean adoption of the new or adaptation of the old. In response to the often stunning and surprising communications innovations by asymmetric opponents, governments—as we witness—fluctuate between repression and creative response. They extend the ordinary processes of control to modes and technologies by which the marginal or innovatively subversive express themselves. But that is often not enough. Harshness may be the initial impulse, but it is often ineffective in staunching the effects of the repression. Counter-strategies evolve.

Players in an asymmetric context have had both similar and differentiated categories of target audiences. ISIS has demonstrated the significance of potential recruits as a heavily analysed and exploited market. But usually the targets are populations in the zone of conflict (Afghanistan or Egypt of the Arab Spring) and a global audience as well. Furthermore, the entity, usually here the legacy media, may have a home market (the domestic audiences of the coalitions of the willing, the donor audiences of the NGOs, and so on).<sup>5</sup> In all of these there are allegiances to shift. Each audience requires a different strategy, and asymmetries have different implications for each audience and each strategy. There is a difference between the use of media, even asymmetrically, to persuade generally—to reach a large audience to change opinion—as opposed to its use to “recruit” a dedicated core of workers or supporters, or those who engage in acts of terror such as suicide bombers. And counter-strategies differ depending on cross-national support for asymmetric efforts.

## 6. Who is Weak and Who Is Strong?

Asymmetry in a strategic communication context generally features a narrative dimension; stories shift and are transformed by the specific asymmetric relation of a particular context. Incumbent governments, and their broadcasters, may for a time deem themselves (or be deemed by others) as categorically powerful even if in a particular setting or at particular time they are on the verge of becoming weaker and outmaneuvered. The putatively weak, often agents of subversion from the perspective of the established states, consciously look to the margins as modes for entering the market. If they gain a foothold, the response of the powerful can be one of sharp self-realization and complex reaction.

The model for asymmetry, then, should capture situations where a weak player has the potential for upending the status quo. Experts at the asymmetrical

<sup>5</sup> Consider Putnam’s well-known two-level game theory, where strategic communicators look to both “home” and “target” markets even as they engage with the asymmetry *within* the target market citation.

seek to protect their capacity to disturb, shielding action from the interventions of the established. They take risks and endure the possibility of arrest and death; they engage in hard to detect personal contact. They mask or cover their use of social media. They concentrate on the person-to-person.

Strategies of innovation and response depend on understanding patterns of information flow. A first look at the Arab Spring cases suggests that the reverberation from street protest to international or regional press to Al Jazeera beaming back into Egypt was a formula that wreaked havoc with existing patterns of state control over information. And—certainly this was the case in Egypt—the major global attention created a second relevant audience, one that was meaningful not only within the state but also internationally. In the international market for loyalties, elements of asymmetry were almost reversed as weaker entities could find points of access more readily than official spokespersons. Whatever “cartel” affects large elements of the international market, ease of entry for proponents of reform, civil society or “change” may be greater in over-ripe regimes with aging leaders and increasingly unpopular agendas. Looking across the sweep of instances—from Tunisia to Libya—one could seek to determine how the once-weak and asymmetrically positioned overcame or exploited that status, in what markets (domestic elite, domestic popular, international officialdom, international public opinion), and what combination of external coverage and internal growth could be held accountable for change.

## 7. How the David and Goliath Metaphor Dissolves

Weak players have certain tropes that they may push to gain sensational and immediate entry to an audience’s attention. Terrorist acts have this quality. One response is to determine ways to neutralize such tropes. During the worst days in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush administration sought to deny its enemy, comparatively “weak” proponents of powerful images—such as the Taliban and Al Qaeda—such external amplification. This was done, for example, seeking, sometimes in vain, the assent of broadcasters not to diffuse photographs of dismembered heads or flag-draped coffins of returning American military.

In the annals of strategic communication, then, the most notable cases will be the ones where seemingly disadvantaged asymmetric entrants become strong and influential (if not dominant), moving from exclusion or subordinate status to being effective participants in key markets for loyalties. It is this success that becomes the study text for innovative asymmetries and for consequent countermeasures. This is not only the (possibly temporary) drama of ISIS, but also of the isolated, distant Ayatollah, distributing audiocassettes in the Shah’s Iran and overwhelming the advantages of

state control and the sophistications of modern public relations (Srebreny & Mohammadi, 1994). Shudderingly threatening to some, but romantic to others, is the idea of the excluded becoming the prevailing figure, almost as if being an outsider becomes a talisman for entry. Some combination of exclusion, striking of a sympathetic cord, and a capacity to play the instruments of communication leads to an unexpected triumph. In the aftermath, the world searches for hidden signs that elements of asymmetry were a façade—that those who appeared weak were heavily financed, that there were powerful players in league with the seemingly powerless. Conspiracy theories, not always unfounded, crop up to shift the characterization of the enterprise from one of weak to strong, to one of strong to strong, or strong to weak.

The sympathy is often, though less in the case of ISIS, with the seemingly weaker player—the hunger striker, the initial protestors, the proto-Gandhis of the world. But there is a curious question about the very semantics of the asymmetric. Take the ubiquitous David and Goliath metaphor, so firmly in our mind—the mythically unstoppable, powerful figure attacked by a nonentity armed with a seemingly inconsequential weapon. In retrospect, that is an illusion. The match is asymmetric if the two are fighting in different worlds with different rules, different technologies, even different strategic capacities. But as time passes and circumstances shift, balances may change, and the clash is no longer so asymmetric. Innovators use asymmetries in the commercial field to bring down media giants; the frequency and bases for that become the stuff of military and political analysis. The lesson has been established and the lesson should be learned, whether David triumphs because of skill or fortune (or divine blessing). Information asymmetries are thus time-bound, though the learning curve and repair phase could be long. Finally, asymmetry fatigue may set in, as the insistent message of a proponent, too steadfastly portraying its David-like status, loses credibility. For these reasons, asymmetries are inherently unstable.

In the case of ISIS, the metric for success is complex: it is a matter of measuring fear and following within the physical area it controls; or the extent to which it terrorizes civilian populations around the world; or the extent to which it proceeds to gain recruits from a diverse geographical source of target groups. In the case of ISIS, as with most asymmetric entrants, the question then becomes disturbing the effectiveness of those techniques? One question is whether any asymmetric innovator long relies exclusively on its own capacity or, rather, must rely on voluntarily or involuntarily allies who amplify their messages. For example, the anti-Mubarak Tahrir Square protestors, at the beginning, fit within the category of the weak against the strong. But it was not the technique of protest and grassroots mobilization alone that led to the success of

the protestors and their emergence as effective asymmetric actors. It is hard to determine what gave rise to the international support for Tahrir Square or to assess the exact balance of forces that led to change, but it is clear that that additional support was crucial. In terms of control of information flows, protestors faced a substantial fortress—the government of Egypt—yet proved extraordinarily successful in an international market for the validation of ideas and the obtaining of support. Face time on channels in the United States and Europe could and did influence coverage in Cairo. However they are portrayed, ISIS messages are often amplified.

### **8. Communication Strategy and Asymmetry: Consequences**

Strategies of contemporary wars have been revolutionized by thinking about asymmetric conflict.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, asymmetric warfare studies created a new and dynamic taxonomy for military approaches. The asymmetries in battles for hearts and minds can and have led to similar transformations. First, there is a transformation in attention to technologies of information access. The United States was obliged to overhaul its understanding of the relationship between new technologies (including social media) and opinion formation. Surveying asymmetric movements in the Arab Spring, studying the opposition in Iran, and reviewing the building of civil society in China, another lesson learned by the United States may have been that those who seek to support seemingly weak players can best do so by increasing access to information and seeing the uses of social media for mobilization increase.

Battling to maintain primacy in contexts of information asymmetry is an ongoing effort for all competing actors. Certainly, the dissidents of the world use current events as a text from which to learn for the future. ISIS has been significantly creative, even if dangerously and immorally so, in its information policies. It has learned and it has through its learning innovated. Those in authority struggle to do so as well, analyzing modes of affecting a market for loyalties, seeing how apertures are exploited, determining how defenses can be buttressed. The main condition for understanding asymmetry in information exchanges is that circumstances change as participants learn and adjust to previously exposed weaknesses.

Perhaps this is the primary lesson in understanding information asymmetries: authorities adjust or they are doomed (or certainly disadvantaged). Similarly, if the “protestors” or destabilizers cannot adjust to change, cannot learn sufficiently from prior processes of dynamic adjustment, or cannot forge alliances with strong players who enable them, they too are rendered

less successful. What works in terms of use of media to mobilize an internal target audience one day may not work the next.

From the perspective of the state, gaps in technological development are particularly difficult to surmount. Bureaucracies, particularly sclerotic bureaucracies in authoritarian regimes or bureaucracies that have been nepotistic, as opposed to meritocratic, attempt to buy external expertise at high cost and have a delayed capacity to respond to the use of new technologies and social media. What this has meant is that there is a new race to learn what was not learned before, to overcome the deficiencies Rumsfeld noted, to eliminate the weakness of social-media tone-deafness. It is important to remember the key mantra of asymmetry: exploit your opponent’s weaknesses, and avoid their strengths. The implication is to anticipate weaknesses and convert them in advance to strengths. This was a central tenet of the Petraeus counter-insurgency strategies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I have suggested that asymmetry also occurs if one side considers itself empowered to use techniques that are denied to the other, whether this denial is for ethical or legal reasons. As a way of evening out the playing field, “adjustments” in these legal and ethical barriers may occur. Consider the United States and its rolling, shifting effort to compete in the market of effective techniques that asymmetry has produced. Principles—even constitutional principles—that limit surveillance, hamper eavesdropping or restrain coercion are modified so that the capacity to interrupt or monitor flows of information is increased. Governments overcome reluctances to subsidize messages, or to co-opt journalists, if they consider that techniques useful to them, or undertaken by their foes, should be enlisted. Perhaps the most notorious example of this process is the drone-based killing of Anwar Al-Awlaki and Samir Khan, both American citizens who were deeply engaged in effective messaging on behalf of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) as well as in certain acts of terrorism. Khan occupied a unique position as editor of the online terrorist magazine, *Inspire*, said to be a vital recruiting tool for AQAP as well an effective way of advancing its beliefs in English; it was *Inspire* that was said, later, to be the source of information for the Boston Marathon brothers. Conceptual barriers to targeting killings of American citizens were effaced; though the information-related justifications may not have been at the forefront, they were a possible element of the decision. The implication is this: where barriers exist because of domestic limitations, seemingly hamstringing transnational efforts, those barriers will be under pressure, and will sometimes be torn down.

Similarly, all societies, and particularly democratic ones, are at an asymmetrical disadvantage if their capacity to fashion an effective transnational information campaign is hampered by domestic politics and that of

<sup>6</sup> See Van Baarda and Verweij (2009).

their opponents is less restrained. As an example, American international broadcasting investments such as the Voice of America and Radio Marti could reflect foreign relations needs and necessities, but also pressures created by internal domestic politics. Resources for international broadcasting may be aimed at Cuba for reasons of local political pressure rather than otherwise assessed national preferences, and effective diaspora groups can hijack the process for their parochial needs.

Table 1 may assist in understanding. This chart seeks to demonstrate certain of the distinctions discussed in this essay as between asymmetric entrants more traditional communications entities, including international broadcasters. This is hardly a complete discussion of differences; it is stylized to emphasize distinctions.

**Table 1.** Distinction between asymmetric innovators and legacy broadcasters.

	Purpose	Medium	Narrative Message	Constraint
<b>Asymmetric Innovator</b>	Short term mobilization	Internet, Personal influence	Urgency	Few
<b>Legacy Broadcaster</b>	Longer term shift or reinforcement	Broadcasting, Satellite	Present or future Stability	Many

A curious and important asymmetry—relevant to strategic communication—involves the different capacity of the government and dissenters to control whether individuals in society can sense the changing political mood of the community. It is one thing for individual citizens to wish a change in government. It is another if these same individuals are aware that their views are widely or pervasively held—an awareness that could eventually lead to efforts for change. By controlling information, the state has been traditionally in a position to reinforce a view of what the public generally believes, even if that is inconsistent with rampant private beliefs. In this sense, Elihu Katz (1981) has linked asymmetric strategies to concepts of “pluralistic ignorance” and the “spiral of silence.” Pluralistic ignorance, a term introduced by Floyd H. Allport in 1931, describes “a situation where a majority of group members privately reject a norm, but assume (incorrectly) that most others accept it” (Katz, Allport, & Jenness, 1931). The spiral of silence, a concept developed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neuman, asserts that a person is less likely to voice an opinion on a topic if he or she feels in the minority and therefore is in fear of reprisal or isolation from the society. Situations of asymmetric communication usually involve efforts by the state to maintain pluralistic ignorance and spirals of silence, and by agents of change to reduce or end them. ISIS creates its own silos to encourage shifting loyalties among recruitable youth.

Finally, an emerging area of information asymmetry—increasingly related to governance and the power of the state—is cyberwarfare and cyberterrorism. This is not information asymmetry of the kind most discussed in this chapter (asymmetry in access to markets of allegiances). It is rather the use of innovative (if immoral and illegal) approaches to hampering or disabling the capacity of states to function by attacking their infrastructure. Destructive hacking may be the action of individuals demonstrating their prowess, or it may be in the service of other states, their militaries or organized groups. Cyberwarfare raises the ethical and moral questions often raised in asymmetric conflict, including the very permissibility of the tool in conflict. It emphasizes the innovative, and as such, has the quality of rapidly changing circumstances of strength and weakness.<sup>7</sup>

What is emerging is a context of new technological and institutional arrangements where responses to asymmetries yield ever greater unpredictability. Asymmetries have always existed. But new media technologies, coupled with aggressive use of them by increasingly sophisticated players (those invoking the power of the protesting streets to the hackers of Anonymous and WikiLeaks), upend traditional arrangements and traditional doctrines. An increase in information asymmetry leads to weakened confidence in the existing institutions and accommodations. In this environment, understanding the dynamics of interplay between entrants and existing cartels of communication becomes more and more urgent.

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The author declares no conflict of interests.

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<sup>7</sup> For indications of U.S. concerns about cyberwarfare vis-à-vis asymmetric war and communication, see Clarke and Knake (2010), and Libicki (2009). The first is written by a former Special Advisor to the President on cybersecurity, the second commissioned by the US Air Force.

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