



Educating the Public: The Role of Foundations, NGOs, and the Media

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I want to thank Bill Potter and the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies for inviting me to this anniversary celebration. Along with Provence, the Monterey Peninsula is one of the most beautiful places in the world. Since the south of France does not have a Center for Nonproliferation Studies, we are here.

I was asked to talk about educating the public—in particular about the role of new media and the opportunities to shape the public debate about nonproliferation. My remarks are based on my experience having founded and maintained a blog on arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation called ArmsControlWonk.com.

This is a really special moment: the public is interested in weapons of mass destruction, which I find surprising. The best illustration of how issues relating to weapons of mass destruction have entered the popular imagination concerns Hans Blix, the former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The first time I met Hans Blix was in an elevator. If you have Hans Blix trapped in an elevator and you are my age, there is really only one question: “Did you see *Team America*?”

For those of you who don’t know, *Team America: World Police* is the movie made by the same people who make *South Park*. The movie—in which all the characters are puppets—contains a very funny scene where Hans Blix visits Kim Jong-il to pressure him into providing the IAEA more access in North Korea. Kim Jong-il drops Hans Blix into a shark tank, unleashing a stream of obscenities.

I couldn’t resist asking Blix. I knew he had heard about the movie because a few years ago, at a luncheon hosted by the Arms Control Association, he indicated he knew about the scene, although he mistakenly thought his puppet was decapitated, rather than devoured by sharks.

I am amazed that a popular movie focused on our issues and, in particular, a specific person who worked on our issues. That is really special, for two reasons. First, so much of this field in the past has been secret. It has been secret because the information itself is classified, and it’s secret because many knowledgeable people can’t participate in public debates. To the extent that information is in the open, it is very technical, which is the nice way of saying that it’s

mind-numbingly boring. I find nonproliferation fascinating, but I can't explain to my parents what I do. So, to have a moment where the public is interested in our issues is very unusual.

Second, the dramatic changes in how our society trades in information has made information relating to nonproliferation more open and less arcane. We have a much easier time today carrying on conversations that are too boring to make the op-ed pages of the *Washington Post*, which brings me to new media and the rise of blogs.

If you are at all interested in politics, you can't avoid discussions about how blogs affected the last couple of elections. The changes are not so dramatic in our field, but the basic implication is the same. Blogs, social media, and other forms of new media are manifestations of the information revolution. Analysts today have access to tools that intelligence agencies thirty years ago would have drooled over. Commercial satellite photographs are much better than the images available in the 1960s, and so is our ability to model with computers. I recently asked an intern to use Google SketchUp to turn photographs of a Chinese missile into a three-dimensional model. I showed it to a friend of mine in the intelligence community and his jaw dropped. He explained that it was better than the stuff he saw on a regular basis. That intern is now working in the intelligence community, for all I know using the same tools he started playing without on the outside. We have these amazing new tools that can help bring these arcane arguments out of the shadows. And we have a new way to create communities, via social media, that can keep these arguments alive. So how well can we do in the open-source world with these new tools?

Intelligence agencies will always have "national technical means" that will give them some special data that is unavailable to the rest of us. Still, it is surprising to me how much information we *do* have in the public domain. I will talk briefly now about some of the coverage that my friends and I have tried to produce on the blog with regard to Iran.

First and foremost, we have satellite images. David Albright at the Institute for Science and International Security and Frank Pabian at the Los Alamos National Laboratory have used commercial satellite images to demonstrate a wide variety of things about Iran's nuclear program. In cooperation with Bloomberg News, I acquired a number of satellite photographs of Iran's main uranium mine. The images demonstrated that after many years of operating this mine at very low capacity, the Iranians are now operating it at full capacity. The policy implication was that Iran now has a large source of domestically mined uranium.

Similarly—and this is more true for Iran than some other countries—I am often surprised at what information foreign countries will put online. I still remember walking home one night and getting a call from friend who told me to go to the president of Iran's website, where I was stunned to see dozens of photographs of the president of Iran walking through the centrifuge enrichment halls at Natanz. It was just a stunning amount of information. A colleague of mine called it an intelligence bonanza. The Iranians are also very fond of putting up videos of their missile launches. My colleague, Geoffrey Forden, noticed during one of the unsuccessful flights that a little piece of debris flew off. Forden concluded that it was probably a graphite jet vein

breaking off the missile and that suggested that the Iranians were having trouble making this particular piece of equipment. I won't say where, but I was subsequently visiting a US Embassy where I was thanked for Geoffrey's analysis because it was an unclassified way the US government could explain to a foreign government why it should stop a particular sale to Iran.

The internet has created a really different world. Now, some people do take this a bit too far. I have a colleague who was fascinated by the enigmatic facility in the Syrian desert that Israel bombed; the "Box on the Euphrates" was probably a nuclear reactor. My colleague noted that the former facility happened to be located next to an archeological site. So, while he was in Syria, he decided to take a field trip. This is terrible idea. I don't want to encourage anybody to do this. But with satellite photos, air travel, digital cameras, and the internet I somehow ended up with a trip report that clearly lays out the different ways in which the Syrians camouflaged the site and placed security around it.

Another important thing the internet provides is the opportunity for new forms of organization. Our field is interdisciplinary. One new opportunity we now have is to build a community of people from different disciplines who maybe don't work on these issues full time but nonetheless are interested in collaborating in an open way. If anything, what we have seen over the past two days has been a wonderful testament to a community that Bill Potter has built and the power of those kinds of communities in effecting real change. We have a very similar opportunity. The catchphrase for this is "crowdsourcing." The most famous example is Wikipedia. The method, however, is very old. If you are familiar with the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), you know it is a monumental achievement of human learning. No one person could ever read it all, let alone write it all. The OED was an early form of crowdsourcing in which volunteers sent in entries that were edited by teams—much like Wikipedia. What the internet allows us to do is the same thing, but with drastically lower costs.

I am modestly hopeful that these changes—both the new tools and new organizational structures—will improve the way that policy makers talk about these issues and will certainly improve media coverage. After I posted the photographs of the Iranian centrifuge facility, and various readers posted their comments, the *New York Times* published a feature story on the conversation and the information that was emerging. That makes me optimistic. Of course, tools can be used for good or for ill. I can't guarantee that better coverage or better policy making will materialize. But I do still think we're in a special moment. It's a special moment because we have a public that is interested in our issues, and we have new tools and better opportunities to organize. And, thanks to organizations like the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, we have a talented group of young people who can put it all together.