Documents without Borders

Beneath the Rubble

Dory Shaffer

In my first few columns exploring the intricacies of international governmental information, I focused primarily on information provided by nations with strong institutions and long established international governmental organizations (IGOs). While I briefly mentioned potential flaws in information and data related to cultural preferences[1] and willful misleading[2]—I stayed away from discussing finding and evaluating information from nations with weak institutions. Government information specialists are well aware of the complexity of navigating a labyrinth of bureaucratic information that varies in how accessible it is, but what happens without even the assurance of that imperfect system? Nations that are mired in ongoing conflict, corruption, or whose institutions have been threatened by financial or climate crises face unique challenges in sharing or even preserving information. This column will look at examples of these situations, and strategies for accessing information that feels as though it is buried beneath the rubble.

While full global warfare as was seen in the twentieth century is not dominant today, civil wars and simmering regional disputes continue to erupt and deeply affect standard governmental functions—including the creation and preservation of information. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic was an apparent contributor to increased chaos in conflict regions in recent years,[3] inflaming issues that were previously simmering. The current conflict between Russia and Ukraine is a good example of how conflict can impact information availability. For example, Michigan State University's Global EDGE portal contains a large warning at the top of its page that reads, "Due to the ongoing political unrest and current military action by Russia, the information on these pages may not reflect current conditions in the country,"[4] at the time of writing. Similarly, footnotes on UNData's report on Sudan note that there may be incongruities dating to the split with South Sudan in 2012 but are not current enough to note the current 2023 civil conflict in Sudan.[5] And Ukraine's Open Data Portal[6] (which receives a significant amount of funding from USAID) has been less robust since the Russian invasion, and according to the think tank Visegrad/Insight, researchers and reporters were denied access to DREAM, the country's digital state ecosystem until late summer 2023.[7] Even for countries with impressive open data resources, like Ukraine, security can override transparency during conflict.

Nations not in active conflict but who suffer under corrupt leadership pose potent challenges to accessing current, comprehensive, and accurate information. Freedom of information laws—like the Freedom of Information Act in the US[8]—allow press, researchers, and citizens to request government information and contribute to open government information portals. Such laws are often deeply limited or non-existent in nations with a high level of corruption. Venezuela is frequently listed as a country that not only lacks any freedom of information laws, but one that actively punishes dissenting views on the official line.[9] Information promoted by such governments and state-controlled media should be viewed with a substantial level of skepticism. Further hardships and unrest—including the above-mentioned armed conflict, financial instability, natural disasters, and diminishing public trust[10]—can further corruption and weaken institutions. The small nation of Haiti, with their long history of severe natural disasters, political corruption, and foreign interference, is a good example of how these interplaying factors can be damaging to quality and public trust in information. The US Government Accountability Office recently noted in a report that "government institutions in Haiti have been under-resourced,"[11] providing limited quality services to meet basic needs. When a nation is in crisis, maintaining and disseminating government information easily falls to the wayside.

So how can government information specialists, researchers, and media navigate an international information landscape when one or more of these factors are present? Information documented by IGOs and nations with strong information gathering apparatuses can be a good place to start. This is particularly true for topics where outside nations have a vested interest, including commerce, military, and in the case of international treaties. North Korea is notoriously one of the most secretive nations in modern history, so looking at reports like the US Defense Intelligence Agency's Military Power Publications[12] can give researchers a look at information collected via high tech surveillance, declassified documents, and corroboration with regional allies. Think tanks and NGOs like the Wilson Center's North Korea International Documentation Project[13] can also be excellent sources on nations that do not release their own quality information.

Unfortunately, these methods can still be flawed due to political influence and lack of interest or funds to research certain topics. Because there is intense interest in the potential threat North Korea poses to nations and organizations with ample resources, it will likely be easier to find reliable

information on their nuclear capabilities than their maternal mortality rate. When working to find information related to a nation with a weak information sharing system, it is crucial to check information across multiple sources. This is especially the case when utilizing information from an organization that is not well known to you or when the nation of interest has a combative relationship with the nation or organization whose information you are relying on.

Locating international government information is challenging enough without having to navigate nations that are unable or unwilling to share accurate information. However, if you know what to be on the look out for, there are still resources out there. The speed and ease of information sharing today may have many negative impacts including the spread of misinformation, but it also means that it is easier to monitor a conflict and more challenging for nations to cover up their faults.

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Notes

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