How Can an Information Campaign Win Support for Peacekeeping? The Case of UNTAC in Cambodia, 1992-93

Geoffrey Cain*
geoffrey.cain@gmail.com

Abstract
As peacekeeping operations become more ethically complex in countries such as Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the need for assertive “information operations” is becoming more necessary to gain public support. Yet peacekeeping information operations remain underutilized, scantly understood, and poorly funded. In the past two decades, well planned and strategically targeted information campaigns have helped stabilize volatile political situations. This paper argues that, in countries where the UN needs to reach out to poor and illiterate populations amid sectarian violence, the UN should model information operations after that of the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). This campaign lasted from 1992 to 1993 and had a mandate to directly administer state institutions, including organizing the first free and fair elections in the country. UNTAC’s Information Division broadcasted a popular radio program, Radio UNTAC, and espoused intervention in political “hate media.” It also imparted Cambodia with an independent press and contributed to a high voter turn-out, despite threats of violence.

Keywords
Cambodia; UNTAC; information operations; hate media; MONUC; Somalia

* Geoffrey Cain (http://www.geoffreycain.net/) was a Fulbright scholar in Vietnam from 2010 to 2011, and a journalist who has covered Asia for TIME Magazine, The Economist, The Wall Street Journal, Washington Monthly and others. He was also a consultant to Voice of Democracy Radio in Cambodia for a European Union-funded media training project. He holds a BA in international relations from The George Washington University and is completing an MA in Southeast Asian Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. This paper is a thesis for a training certificate in peace support operations at the Peace Operations Training Institute in Alexandria, VA.
Introduction

After the Cold War ended in 1991, a new style of “protectorate” peacekeeping operations in countries like Cambodia and Namibia began relying on large information campaigns as a tool of soft power. Because peacekeeping forces during this period stepped beyond their traditional role acting as neutral military observers to also administer elections, the UN needed to convince local people that they could vote without fear of retribution. The body, as such, resorted to information operations that reached large swathes of populations and took control of local partisan-based news broadcasting services. UN information officers created expansive radio, television and leaflet campaigns, and sent “mobile information teams” around these countries to educate people about voting.

One successful information campaign was in the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) from March 1992 to September 1993, which had a protectorate mandate to oversee the existing Cambodian civil administration, hold general elections, and enforce laws in the country. Unlike Cold War-era peacekeeping operations, UNTAC sought to completely transform the Soviet-dominated, one-party dictatorship of the 1980s into a self-governing democracy within 18 months. It was the largest and most expensive peacekeeping operation at the time, costing $2 billion and consisting of 23,000 military and civilian personnel.1 As part of the UN’s new strategy to accomplish its electoral goals, officials announced early on that information operations would be a centerpiece in the mission.

Although information operations in Cambodia proved advantageous, UNTAC as a whole was marginally successful. The operation commenced after 17 years of genocide and civil war, causing many Cambodians to be skeptical about the UN’s and Cambodian government’s ability to bring about civil rights, a responsible press, and a multi-party democracy. Many regular Cambodians and civil society actors were also frustrated to be left out of the UN’s top-down decision making process, which they felt catered too much to political elites from armed factions.2 Their grievances were mostly justified: UNTAC did not bring lasting peace to Cambodia primarily because it failed

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2) Sophal Ear (Associate Professor of National Security Affairs, Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA) and Angel Ryono (War Crimes Studies Center at the University of California, Berkeley), in discussion with the author, September 21, 2010.