

Failing failed states

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On the eve of a trip to West Africa in February of 2002, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, compared the intense international interest in helping Afghanistan rebuild a new state with the lack of interest in getting involved in helping the Congo. "If you allow a series of failed states to rise, then sooner or later you end up having to deal with them" (Reuters 11/2/02). He went on to compare our lack of interest in the failed states in Africa with our lack of interest in Afghanistan a decade ago.

Is it lack of interest in the media or lack of political will in governments that prevents help in reaching many failing states?

It is argued here that inconsistent policies towards failing states is the primary problem. Though there is much for which to blame the media the lack of political will among governments seems crucial.

The argument presented here has three elements. Firstly, it is argued that a review of the policy towards failing states reveals a high degree of policy inconsistency. Outside states will intervene in some cases, but not in others. Despite a strong collective state interest in maintaining order in international society, state policy has been situational and inconsistent.

Secondly, it is demonstrated that there is little continual coverage in the media of failing states.

Thirdly, it is argued that the infrequent media coverage of failing states is the combined result of two factors. One is the use of traditional news values in the selection of news. The other is the dominance of national foreign policy in framing the agenda of the news media.

Inconsistent state policies towards failing states

Since 1990, the world's dominant states have been trying to come to terms with the challenges presented by failed and failing states (Gibbs, 2000). A failed or failing state is one in which basic state functions are no longer carried out, groups of people or entire populations have no security, military and police forces fail to maintain order, and where chaos reigns. Communication breaks down, and with it, the apparatus of the state.¹

State failure has occurred with increasing frequency since 1990, and all over the world. There are a few cases in Latin America and Asia: Haiti, and East Timor. A

few, but spectacular, cases in Europe: Bosnia and Kosovo and a many cases in Africa: Sudan, Somalia, Congo, Rwanda, Angola, Sierra Leone, Liberia- to name but some. And then there is Afghanistan.ⁱⁱ

The list is long and the policy responses have been varied. In all cases, the failing of states and the manner in which they are failing has presented the stronger states and the UN with a new set of challenges. What should states do about failing states, and if something is to be done, who should do it? (Gurr 1993, 1998; Brahimi 2000) Two sets of answers have been propounded: 1: Failing states should be allowed to fail. 2: Failing states should be rescued - with outside intervention if necessary.

In the first case the arguments are that the problems are internal, having to do with lack of state capability and authority. The problems are beyond what outsiders can effectively help with. Additionally, there are legal and moral issues involved in violating the sovereignty of another state even if that state is crumbling. The Brahimi report argues that UN missions in failing states be restricted to where it is possible to be effective. (Brahimi 2000,p.10). The legal argument for doing nothing has been based on the UN charter art. 2(4) and 2(7) where both the use of force and intervention in the domestic matters of another state are ruled out (McWhinney 2000). From a theoretical perspective it has been pointed out that intervention runs the risk of destroying the foundation of an international order. The fundamental rule of coexistence demands the adherence to the principles of sovereignty and non/intervention (Bull 1977; Jackson 2000). Finally, governments may intervene to solve a humanitarian problem but end up discovering that “the cure may well be worse than the disease” (Wheeler 1992, p 487).

In the second case it is argued that failing states is a collective problem, and something must be done. A section of the so-called English School has argued that the legitimacy of states is built on a moral foundation. Vincent argues that the right to life is more important than sovereign borders. States have to respond to human suffering, thus there is an obligation to rescue failing states (Vincent and Wilson 1993). Human suffering places a moral burden on the international society. The fundamental norms of human rights define barriers that, if crossed, make it legitimate for other states to intervene.

Failing states is a problem for the entire international system, because the state system is there to provide both order and justice. Even if one is skeptical towards the solidarist argument of the English school there are stability concerns that should prompt states into action. Disintegration of states opens the way for expansion by other states or seething instability. It is in the interests of all states that states do not fail (Neack 1995).

Finally, the universality of the international system, as organized in the United Nations, is called into question if areas of the world are left to disintegrate. The UN

was set up both to serve states and to serve humanity. The UN Secretary General expressed this in his Millennium Report when he identified the three core functions of the UN: to serve the member states, to introduce new principles in relations between states and to “serve the needs and hopes of people everywhere” (Annan 2000, p.2)

In choosing which type of failed state policy to follow, states have drawn from both arguments. The actual policies of western countries towards failed and failing states have oscillated between these two. When arguing that nothing should be done in the face of the ongoing genocide in Rwanda, states argued that there was nothing they could do, because this was an internal matter in Rwanda (Burkhalter 1995, p. 46)ⁱⁱⁱ. The opposite arguments were used in the spring of 1999 in the face of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. Here it was claimed that we could not sit idly by while genocide was being committed.^{iv} Both cases were internal conflicts and intervening required a violation of the rules of non-intervention. In the first case western countries sat by and did nothing. In the latter case they sprang into action.

The problem of how international order can best be maintained is demonstrated in the differing choices that states have made when confronted with demands to intervene in failing states (Bull 1977, p. 69).^v New justifications have been advanced to make intervention acceptable. It is argued, for instance, that the immunity states have from outside intervention is not absolute. When states fail to satisfy the basic preconditions of the right to state autonomy they also lose their immunity (Parekh 1997, p.51). When states lose civil authority, degenerate into civil war or commit acts of genocide, other states have the right to intervene. Others argue that the moral community of values is of a higher order than the community of states and intervention is therefore defensible (Walzer 1995). Wheeler argues for a “moral transformation” that would make governments accept that intervention in cases of supreme humanitarian emergency is “both morally permitted and morally required”(Wheeler 2000, p.310).

Non-interventionists argue, conversely, that the risks to international order posed by intervention are too great, and that some sort of international consensus and legitimacy are necessary for intervention. International order is based on the states upholding common rules. Intervention runs the risk of destroying the order that benefits all states, and opens the way for the misuse or abuse of power by the stronger states against the weaker states (Wheeler 1997, Jackson 1999).

State policies towards failed states have picked liberally from these arguments as justifications for the desired action. The dilemma of when, if and how states should react to state failures seems to have led to a proliferation of “solutions” Within each set of solutions a specific set of rules is constituted. In a sense new rules of coexistence are created within each set of circumstances. In Kosovo direct rule has been introduced over foreign territory. In East Timor a new state is being constructed. It has been called derisively the “The UN Kingdom of East Timor” (Chopra 2000, p.

17). In Kabila's Congo, the existing state is being protected by some neighbouring states and torn apart by others. The present policy towards failed states is playing itself out in a plurality of ways.

Tony Blair's comments that we ignore state failure at our peril echo the argument that something must be done. In the public debate the finger is often pointed at the lack of concern in the industrialized North. The development problems and the breakdown of fundamental state structures in parts of the Third World are rarely at the top of the political agenda.^{vi}

When state failure rises to crisis proportions there has been a brief period of political interest. Somalia was the big concern in 1993, Bosnia in 1998, Kosovo in 1999 etc. The political interest has in all cases been short-lived.

The lack of political interest and will is demonstrable. Where does this lack of interest come from? Several explanations have been given.

Firstly, from a traditional foreign policy perspective these countries are unimportant to the central foreign policy concerns of the dominant powers in the international systems. There are no real interests at stake here. (Wheeler, 2000)

Secondly, it has been argued that nothing can really be done. The problems are inherently so difficult to solve that there is, in fact, little effective action that can be undertaken from the outside. Robert Jackson notes that "There is some basis for believing that by intervening (in Kosovo) NATO may have made the humanitarian disaster worse rather than better" (Jackson, 2000, p.293).

Finally, most failing states like the Congo are perceived as geographically and culturally distant. The publics in Europe and America find little to identify with. Many of the failing countries are not democracies, but various forms of authoritarian regimes. There is little inclination to politically back such regimes with troops, funds or expertise. Failing states often present situations where there are no clear foreign policy interests. Often there are no clear effective tools to solve the problems, and the failing states are in areas where there is little cultural identification. The lack of political interest is understandable.

Alternatively, one could ask why anything has been done at all from the outside in situations of state failure. External political action has been undertaken towards helping failing states since 1990 in situations where public or political interests have been aroused. Humanitarian and moral values have provided the impetus for action.

Tony Blair, speaking in April 1999 during the Kosovo conflict pointed out that Bismarck was wrong when he had said that the Balkans were not worth the "bones of one Pomeranian Grenadier".

"Anyone who has seen the tear stained faces of the hundreds of thousands of refugees streaming across the border, heard their heart-rendering tales of cruelty or contemplated the unknown fates of those left behind knows that Bismarck was wrong. This is a just war, based not on territorial ambitions but on values." (Blair Speech April 23, 1999)

Public and political interest has been spurred by images of suffering and evil. In Somalia, the inability to deliver food to the starving prompted international action. In Sierra Leone, brutality and hostage taking provoked action. In East Timor, systematic expulsion of large groups of the population stirred the international community.

But two fundamental problems remain. First of all there are cases of failing states where little or no international action has been undertaken. Rwanda, with more than 800,000 victims, stands as the primary example. Secondly, even when international action has been undertaken there is little public interest in the results. The long-range action of rebuilding and reconstructing failed states has attracted little attention and insufficient action. The events in Somalia are clear examples of this. More examples of the lack of political interest in state failure are evidenced in the Congo, in Angola and in the Sudan.

Media failure?

Is Tony Blair right in pointing the finger at the media for this lack of concern over failing states?

In both public and political debate the media is often seen as the main culprit. It is claimed that the lack of media coverage of events in these countries results in lack of political interest and in low public awareness.

Often the media is blamed for not providing enough information about these countries or for providing only spotlight coverage.

It is even argued that the media shows untimely interest in certain dramatic events and thereby forces the politicians into unwarranted rash and unprepared action.

This has been called "the CNN effect". The idea is that the media sets the agenda and when they do, political action follows. The argument is that when television shows up and broadcasts images then both the public and the politicians and governments are stirred into action.

Tony Blair again: " We are continually fending off the danger of letting wherever CNN roves, be the cattle prod to take global conflict seriously" (Blair, April 23, 1999)

Studies of the CNN effect reveal a more complex story. The international media's role in setting the agenda is often exaggerated. CNN's role in the US intervention in Somalia is often cited as the prime evidence for the existence of the CNN effect. However, an analysis of the CNN coverage showed that "it started with the government manipulating the press, and then changed to the press manipulating the government". (See Strobel, 1996, p. 364). The CNN interest in Somalia was first created by presidential announcements of the problems there, and the coverage followed US actions. CNN did not initiate the placing of Somalia on the agenda. "The idea that critical and emotive media coverage forced policy makers to "do something" in Somalia is at odds with actual events." (Robinson 2000, p. 3). In a review of different aspects of the CNN effect Steven Livingston defines the CNN-effect as 1. A political *agenda setting* agent. 2. An *impediment* to the achievement of desired policy goals, and 3. An *accelerant* to policy decisionmaking.

The independent *agenda setting* effect of the media is often overrated by politicians. To a large extent the media follows the political agenda. The reason that Reuters has sent out the story about West Africa that is quoted in the beginning of this article is that Tony Blair is going there. It is not because of inherent interest in West Africa that Reuters carried reports from that part of the world. An analysis of the coverage of 13 severe humanitarian emergencies in the period January 1995- May 1996 revealed that the major American quality media (Print, radio and TV) showed a highly uneven coverage. Bosnia was the dominant story. The events in Afghanistan or the Sudan were rarely mentioned (Livingston 1997, p. 9).

Studies of the international coverage in the media reveal that the primary framing of international news comes from the worldview of the home country of the media. The British media develops an interest in Sierra Leone when the British government gets involved. Not before and not after.

The media would safely, almost ignore Afghanistan for many years under the Taliban regime, because there was little or no foreign policy interest in the country.

The instant media coverage, when it is there, has had the effect of shortening response time for decisionmakers. This is the media serving as an *accelerant* in the policy process. This effect reduces decision time and the weighing of options. A response has to come quickly. On the other hand it also serves as a power enhancer in allowing governments to send signals quickly to both the adversarial government and directly to the world community (Livingston 1997).

Finally the CNN-effect may be seen as an *impediment* of two types: TV images of death and suffering can work directly on public opinion and thereby restrict governmental freedom of action. Secondly TV and the media can be seen as threats to the operational security of the forces. In Afghanistan in 2001 and 2002 this was used as an effective argument to limit media coverage of the war on terror.

The media coverage of Sierra Leone and the Congo

The claim is that the media ignores failing states. To examine the validity of that claim, an analysis has been done of the coverage of Sierra Leone and the Congo in the period January 2001 to March 2002.

The analysis shows that both news agencies and national media outlets do not provide detailed coverage of failing states except in relatively brief moments of crises. Sustained coverage of failing states is not provided. There is little coverage of developments in failing states per se or coverage of international efforts to rebuild and reconstruct these failing states.

The study here is based on the coverage in *Reuters*, the international news agency, *Ritzau*, the national Danish news agency and in the leading Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten*.^{vii} Coverage is primarily limited to a short period of interest and after that, little sustained coverage.

Table 1: 14 months of coverage (2001- 2002) in the media of Congo and the Sierra Leone

N= number of ref.	Reuters. Int newsag ^{viii}	Ritzau Nat. newsag	Jyllands-Posten	Articles on "failing"
Congo	3335	284	139	66
Sierra Leone	1440	78	49	10

A review of the published articles on the two countries show that 73 (53%) were related to sports, biographies or general articles of wildlife, weather patterns etc. 66 (47%) articles dealt with the political situation in the country. A sizeable part of these were focussed on Danish aid policy in general, with a passing reference to the Congo. The coverage was clustered in several time periods: Jan. 17 – Jan 29, 15 articles, with a total of 481 lines, were published on the murder of Kabila on January 17th and on the new leader.

In the period from Feb. 23 to April 11, 11 articles were published on the peace process and the UN process. In all 458 lines.

The Congo then reappears in the news in January 2002 when the eruption of a volcano leads to the evacuation of a number of villages and to a major international aid effort.

The majority of the articles are short notes that give brief highlights of developments. Very few articles try to analyze causes and consequences of action/inaction and war in the Congo, in this period of 14 months.

The articles on Sierra Leone in the same period show an even more pronounced pattern. Of the 49 articles published in the period of 14 months, only 10 (20%) were on political developments and reconstruction efforts in the country. In the period January 19 to March 3rd 2002, there were seven articles on the so-called declaration of peace from Jan. 19th. In total 682 lines.

Some of the biggest articles were on the charges of sex abuse by UN employees and an article on Sierra Leone as the new "Bounty country" highlighting the potential for tourism in the future. In the preceding 12-month period there was no coverage of events in Sierra Leone.

In these cases of state failure it is scant coverage that actually reaches the readers of Denmark's largest and most internationally oriented daily newspaper. Despite UN actions on in this period, despite the continuing war in the country, despite the heavy involvement of the EU and NATO partner Great Britain, there is virtually nothing about events in Sierra Leone.

The somewhat larger coverage of the Congo exhibits the same pattern. A murder brings out a certain brief coverage, but there is no sustained coverage of events in this prototypical failing state.

As the data show there is more information available, especially through the international news agencies, but most of this information never reaches the readers. The coverage provided by Reuters however is also focussed on reporting events, and there is little attempt to report causes of failure and efforts of reconstruction.

The media today seem to disagree with Pliny the Elder when he said "*Ex Africa semper aliquid novi*" (There is always something new out of Africa).

Why does the media fail to provide coverage?

1. News values

The most straightforward answer is that failing states do not meet enough of the traditional news criteria.

The classical news values emerged with the advent of newspapers and have proved remarkably resilient to technological change. Radio, TV and the Internet have all reused the classical values.

News values provide answers to questions such as:

Timeliness: Did the event just happen?

Importance: Who and how many will be affected by the events?

Conflict: Is there controversy or drama?

Sensation: Is it an unusual event?

Identification: Is the event psychologically close?

Studies have shown that over time “Identification” has become more and more important as a criterion, and that for newspapers timeliness is of less importance (Kabel 1999). The importance of newspapers in informing readers about the news has been reduced. The electronic media and the internet are today the most important sources for breaking news to the public. Newspapers have adopted a role as the news medium that provides more in depth coverage.

The relative importance of the newsvalues has changed, but in total they provide the selection criteria for what becomes news. Some stories will satisfy only some of the criteria, but rarely will stories be published that do not.

The news values are determined culturally, historically and ideologically, but within the dominant western media they have been remarkable resilient to change.

The journalists and editors that are placed in gatekeeper functions in the media apply them. Gatekeepers have the function of applying the news values to the events of the day.

Studies of the gatekeeper function demonstrates that the gatekeepers tend to choose stories from the news agencies in ways that have changed surprisingly little from the first study done in 1949 to the second in 1989. (5)

“Newspaper gatekeepers read and assess about 1000 stories a week. They are usually experienced journalists who have spent many years reading news stories sent by the wire services, which in turn have gatekeepers with similar experiences. Gatekeepers tend to select news by being gatekeepers. As a group gatekeepers – to do and keep their job- share high exposure, acceptance, and comprehension of the same media messages every day.”(Bleske 1991, p. 92)

News is selected in very predictable ways.

A study of the criteria of American newspaper editors used in selecting foreign news revealed that “most editors appear to focus more on factors having significant impact or consequences, especially when American security and national interest are involved.” (Chang and Lee 1992, p. 554-561).

In a classical study of the structure of foreign news, Galtung and Ruge studied how the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus crises of the sixties had been reported in Norwegian newspapers. Their study showed that cultural proximity was an important variable. In addition, elite nations and elite persons had more chance of being reported on. They also placed “clarity” on the list of factors. ” The less ambiguity, the more an event will be noticed” (Galtung and Ruge 1965)

A comprehensive study of news values in Danish newsrooms in 1998 revealed that the traditional news values were the most common editorial arguments for selecting or rejecting a story (See table 1). In the selection process for foreign news, “timeliness” and “importance” received the highest scores (together they accounted for 40 percent of the arguments).

When we look at stories from Sierra Leone and the Congo how do they meet these traditional news values?

Though they may rate high on the criteria of drama, conflict and sensation this is overshadowed by their low value on some of the other news values.

Failed states are certainly not elite states, and there are no elite persons associated with failed and failing states^{ix}. Their importance is rated as very low. The consequences of a total breakdown in Sierra Leone or in the Congo are given scant consideration. Their timeliness becomes dependent on actions involving elite nations or elite people such as statesmen in powerful countries.

There is also little for the reading public to identify themselves with. On a mass scale, the public expects killings, poverty and war in Africa. The image of Africa is one of helplessness, poverty and dictatorship (Holm 2000). There is little for the public to identify with. Personalized stories of child soldiers, individual famine victims or mutilated persons create strong reactions in the reader or viewer, but these stories are few and far between. The episodic framing may result in higher degrees of identification but also in reduced interest in the systemic causes behind the suffering (Iyengar 1991). In addition these stories are not easy to get.

For personalized stories to be produced media organizations will have to invest in a field reporter. This is costly and dangerous to the individual journalists. With a potentially low reader interest this is not often done^x.

News values are in themselves a major impediment to sustained coverage of failing states. In addition, what is news is also determined by practical and organizational considerations.

A US study pointed out that individual differences (political orientation) and organizational constraints in the newsroom were important when shaping editors perceptions of foreign news factors (Chang and Lee 1992, p. 554-561).

The Danish study confirmed these conclusions by demonstrating that in many cases the practical reasons for doing or not doing a story determined selection: The news operation is structured in a way that makes coverage of failing states difficult. There are few or no correspondents in Africa. There is a reluctance to send reporters on expensive and dangerous missions to states that are falling apart. There is little knowledge in the newsrooms about these states. If one media organization decides not to cover then other media organizations often follow. A story is not a story before other media agencies have picked it up. If it is not on the newswire it gets easily ignored. The 1998 study indicated that as much as a third of arguments related to other considerations than the news (Holm 2001).

In a US study of community and regional newspaper gatekeepers, the questions of the impact of editorial structure and organizational constraints were specifically examined. The data showed that the dominant “concerns for decisions you make on your paper” both on small papers and on large daily news were editorial concerns. Nineteen percent of editors mentioned “organizational problems” as the “major concerns” on their paper (Donohue et al, 1989, p. 807-812).

Table 2: Editorial arguments for selection or rejection of stories

	Arguments N =223	Pct. of total=100
Media structure/ competition	16	7
Editorial structure	62	28
Journalistic self conception/ news values	145	65
Timeliness	44	20
Importance	45	20
Conflict	9	4
Sensation	24	11
Identification	23	10

Two things stand out very clearly from the figures in the table:

1. The classical news values are still by far the most influential arguments used in the selection of foreign news.

2. More than a third of arguments used reflect other considerations than news content.

Twenty nine percent of all arguments referred to organizational structure, staffing issues etc (editorial structure): “The correspondents are very tired and have been working hard”. Moscow doesn’t want to produce more stories, because he already has three stories that haven’t been used.” “ We can’t get the people in the graphics department to do it today and the story needs graphics”.

Some arguments reflected considerations of picture coverage. A good photograph can put a story in, even if the story is not that important. No pictures can kill a good story. How the story is told is also an important consideration in its own right.

The predominant arguments for story editing come from the category of journalistic self-conception/ news values. Table 2 shows that 64 percent of arguments are related to this category. Of these arguments, the most important are “ Timeliness” and “Importance”. Forty percent of all arguments related to this: “ This is an important story” “ This just came in”. “We have to go with this story, it may affect a lot of people.” These arguments are journalistic standard arguments, and reflect a core understanding of what journalism is all about: The reporting of important events. They may in part also be standard arguments used for any story that the gatekeeper finds relevant, but nevertheless there seems to be agreement on what these stories are. When we looked at the stories that were selected as the top foreign news stories in the different editorial offices, about 80 percent of the stories were the same stories. The classical hard-nosed news criteria are strongly internalized and mutually reinforced by looking at the selection that others do. The mainstreaming of news is the inevitable result. Failing states do not pass the barriers.

As much as 20 percent of the arguments refers to receiver identification or sensationalism.

“ It is very exotic and so far away that it is interesting” “ because it is a story of the type dog bites man”(in reference to a story about a South African priest who turns out to be a crook). The coverage of both Diana and the Lewinsky stories were clear reflections of these. One editor argued “ Everything about Lewinsky is good stuff just like the Diana stories”. Identification is also the reason used for using a national (Danish) angle in stories. Particularly among editors and reporters on radio this was an often-used argument. “ There is a Danish angle”. “ It is important for Denmark “. “ There is a demonstration about this issue in Copenhagen”.

However, the majority of the arguments come from the conviction that what is essential news must have priority. “ This is an important story”. “ This has regional significance” “ This fuels further nationalism” “This will be one of the main problems for the future” etc.

Story selection based on traditional news values provide part of the explanation of why failed states are only covered in bursts of coverage, and why there is no consistent coverage of what happens after states fail.

2. National world views

Though Tony Blair seems correct in identifying the lack of media interest in failing states as part of the problem, he neglects to mention that as shown above, the media will cover issues that politicians involve the country actively in.

A series of recent studies have demonstrated how much the national media reflect the foreign policy framing of the national world outlook. It is not that the media uncritically reflect the foreign policy of the country, but rather that the world outlook that shapes the foreign policy also shapes the media coverage.

A recent FAO study examined print and online media in 11 countries in a six week period in June and July 2001. The study showed that the UK press and the French press carry more Third World news than the other countries included (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, Japan, Norway, Spain, Sweden, USA). The reason is simple. The more former colonies you have the more news you have from the Third World. In the Scandinavian press there is also a certain focus on Third World issues but here clearly related to the aid efforts of the national government (FAO, ECHO). In both cases the “foreign policy filter” indirectly sets the agenda for press coverage.

In a comprehensive study of Television newsreporting of foreign conflicts, Kristina Rigert shows that foreign policy orientation is a strong predictor when assessing how an international conflict will be covered. Comparing British and Swedish television coverage she concludes that: ”the greater the foreign policy involvement of the country, the greater the number of foreign policy aspects were employed by television news to make sense of the conflict.” Analyzing the coverage of the US invasion of Grenada in 1991 she demonstrates that the Swedish coverage would include more about UN efforts, more about the regional context and traditional US hegemony in the region. The BBC in contrast stressed the communist theme, positive reactions in the Caribbean and reactions by the British government.

The British coverage was more episodic rather than thematic. According to the classical study by Iyengar, episodic news focuses on individuals and thereby removes the emphasis from the systematic causes and consequences. The Swedish news was more thematic.

Anyone in doubt about the strong influence of world view and prevalent perceptions on the content and tone of the media need only look at the US media coverage of the world in the period following the attacks on September 11. Even in quality newspapers like the Washington Post, the Afghans were referred to as “the enemy”. Reporters trying to inject criticism were either ostracized or, in isolated cases, fired outright from their jobs for unpatriotic coverage. Analysis of the US media showed that as late as December 2001 only 7 percent of all stories on TV, newspapers and newsmagazines contained predominately dissenting views to the US administration viewpoint. Fifty percent of the stories were predominately favorable to the administration (Pew 2002).

That the failing state of Afghanistan has received continued major coverage for several months serves to illustrate the extent to which the government (and the “mood” of the country) sets the agenda. Despite the magnitude of coverage of Afghanistan the focus has been on the military action and not on the Afghan reconstruction efforts (Pew 2002)

Conclusion

“And now over to Tony Blair in the Congo....”

If public attention is deemed instrumental in creating change in failed states then obviously the media has failed. The media has shown little interest in covering state failures except in the most superficial manner. Coverage has been predicated on the involvement of major states.

The traditional news values work against continued coverage of failing states. In addition, the structure and culture of the newsroom makes it unlikely that even in cases where there is some news to be told, will it be told in any significant fashion.

Politicians like Tony Blair that lament this state of affairs are forgetting their own responsibility. In fact it is government leaders like Tony Blair that in major ways set the agenda for the media. If Britain had involved itself in Afghanistan ten years ago, the media would have followed and much might have been different. If Britain had involved itself in the Congo much might have been different.

The media and the politicians are increasingly two sides of the same coin. Lack of media interest makes the issues less relevant politically. Lack of policy initiatives make the issues of failing states less relevant to the media.

Conversely, when there is policy interest such as in Kosovo or Afghanistan, media interest will be high. High media involvement makes further policy initiatives more likely.

Failing states end up in situations where they are either taken over by the West or abandoned. When failing states are “taken over” problems of dependency are created. When governments and the media get involved, a continual pressure for effective action is the result. The situation in Kosovo and in East Timor illustrates the dynamic. More involvement leads to a gradual complete take over on behalf of the international community. Only in that way can demands for accountability and effectiveness be guaranteed. Failed states get stuck in dependency, making independent state building more difficult.

When failing states are abandoned, human misery and political instability is created. The situation in the Congo is an example of how the lack of attention on the part of the West has led to both civil and international war in a major part of Africa. Being ignored by both policy makers and by the media ensures that this situation can continue. Tony Blair is probably right, but pointing the finger in the wrong direction. Ignoring situations like the Congo creates instability that may indeed come back to haunt us later.

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ⁱ In the CIA failed states project, the definition of a failed state is where either: (1) Democracy is overthrown (2) Civil war occurs (3) Change of government with extensive violence occurring (4) Genocide occurs. See Gurr (1993)

ⁱⁱ For a complete list of internal wars, that combines many of the existing datasets on wars see (Michael Doyle et al 2000)

ⁱⁱⁱ There is extensive literature on the Rwanda case including an international report ordered by governments in attempting to draw out the lessons of why nothing was done. See (Arthur Jay Klinghoffer 1998)

^{iv} Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed this the following way: "This is a just war, based not on any territorial ambitions but on values. We cannot let the evil of ethnic cleansing stand. We must not rest until it is reversed." Speech April 22 1999

^v Hedley Bull argues that rules are a fundamental part of maintaining order in international society. He identifies three types of rules: Constitutional rules, rules of coexistence and rules of cooperation. Rules of coexistence are prescriptive rules of state behaviour such as the rule of non-intervention in sovereign states. (Bull 1977, pp.65-71).

^{vi} See Moeller 1999.

^{vii} If we look at the international news-agencies they argue, and research supports their claim, that they in fact provide much more media coverage of failing states than is actually being selected and presented to the public. The coverage in Reuters is therefore included.

If we then look at national newspapers and electronic media they argue, and research supports them, that they are in fact providing far more stories about failed and failing states than the readers and viewers are interested in (Holm 2000).

^{viii} Number includes all mentions of the Congo or Sierra Leone. This is the case also for the figures for Ritzau. The number for newspapers is for the number of articles actually published. The time period is 2001.01.01 to 2002.03.04.

^{ix} An occasional visit from a Tony Blair, Bill Gates or Bono, a speech or a donation is the habitual extent of elite association.

^x When Time magazine compiled a list of its ten worst selling covers since 1980 many of them were foreign stories: *Anguish over Bosnia* May 17, 1993, *Somalia reporting Hope ?* Dec. 21, 1992. Only two foreign story covers made the list of best selling issues: The death of Princess Diana and the start of the Gulf War. See Moeller 1999, p. 18.