

What's a Practitioner to Do When Everything is Broken?: Choosing Among Strategic Communication Channels for Rebuilding Civil Society

By

**Maureen Taylor
Rutgers University**

and

**Carl H. Botan
George Mason University**

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ABSTRACT

National crises present many challenges to governments, publics, and practitioners alike. All three are forced to rely on various channels of communication, including interpersonal communication with leaders and mediated communication via state run media and independent media, for direction, reassurance and information. In the time immediately following the crisis governments and practitioners have to build, or rebuild, trust and the choice of channel may have a significant effect on publics' acceptance or rejection of their messages as well as on the overall development of civil society.

This paper reports the results of a project funded by USAID [Grant OTI/ZE 198] in which trained native-language speakers administered oral and/or written questionnaires to more than 740 Bosnians in six cities, and in three dialects of Serbo-Croatian, to explore the role of strategic communication channels in rebuilding civil society after its utter breakdown. Bosnians were asked about their levels of trust in the three kinds of strategic channels most available to practitioners; government officials, alternative media, and state controlled media. The findings suggest that shortly after the war Bosnians had medium levels of trust in the available communication channels, although when it comes to obtaining important information it appears that alternative media are considered to be significantly more trustworthy than either the state media or local government officials. Finally, political affiliation and ethnicity affect trust in communication channels in complex ways. This information helps us to understand both the strengths and limitations of these communication channels and the ways that they can contribute to civil society.

As with all case studies, this paper suffers from limited generalizability, but we hope the results can inform the efforts of public relations practitioners and other strategic communicators in other civil society, public diplomacy, political, public policy, and social marketing campaigns.

By Maureen Taylor and Carl H. Botan

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Governments and government practitioners must strategically communicate with various publics in good times and bad. During times of calm, government messages may be quite ordinary: pay your taxes by this date, wear your seatbelt or get some exercise. During times of crisis, governments and government practitioners have a very different agenda. They seek to build or rebuild trust, provide direction, and frame citizens' understandings of unpleasant events. Government leaders accomplish this strategic communication through various channels including the mass media, interpersonal communication, and controlled communication formats.

We believe that most of this paper would apply equally to NGO's, the international community, United Nations missions and others, but the purpose here is just to inform the efforts of governments and their practitioners, when rebuilding after a national crisis, by providing a case study of the different levels of trust in strategic communication channels after such a crisis. This paper reports the results of a project funded by USAID [Grant OTI/ZE 198] in which trained native-language speakers administered oral and/or written questionnaires to more than 740 Bosnians in six cities, and in three dialects of Serbo-Croatian, to explore the role of strategic communication channels in rebuilding civil society after its utter breakdown. Bosnians were asked about their levels of trust in the three kinds of strategic channels most available to government officials: interpersonal channels, alternative media, and state controlled media.

The first section of the paper reviews the government communication, civil society, and trust literatures that situate the hypotheses that guided this research project. The next section outlines the method used and result of the study. The final section provides a discussion of the levels of trust in Bosnian society and the role that interpersonal and mediated strategic communication channels play in government efforts in civil society development.

Government Communication in Civil Society: The Bosnian Case Study

Strategic communication efforts by governments and their practitioners have an historical place in the public relations literature. For example, undergraduate texts frequently show how government communication efforts shaped the early years of the field. How, for example, Adams' work in the American Revolution or the Creel Committee's work during WW I helped shape the development of the field of public relations in the U.S. The relationship between public relations and American history goes much deeper, however, as first Primlott (1951) then Pearson (1990) suggested when they examined the relationship between democracy, public relations and capitalism. An observation echoed by Cutlip (1995) in his historical analysis of the genesis of government information campaigns.

Such strong mutual impacts between government and public relations is not limited to the US, of course. Governments all over the world attempt to build and/or change their relationships with citizens. Edited books by Culbertson and Chen (1996), Scanlan and VanSlyke Turk (1999), and Sriramesh and Vercic (2003), have provided public relations practitioners and scholars from around the world venues to explain government strategic communication efforts and found among other things, that that are various relationships between governments, media organizations and publics. This paper examines one important aspect of these relationships in the little-studied – but crucial – period following pronounced national crises.

There is a broad continuum of government-media relationships. On one end of the continuum are the governments that control all media channels and thus have unlimited

ability to dictate the tone and content of their messages. On the other side of the continuum are governments that must rely on a host of supportive and hostile media organizations that will filter their messages. Of course, there are many permutations of this relationship in nations across the globe. Nelson (1994) noted that the use of communication for persuasion "is an increasing component of both private and government communication" (p. 225) while Ponder (1990) found that "press offices, under one title or another, have spread throughout. . . local governments in the twentieth century" (p. 94).

These examples, however, represent only one aspect of the relationship of government and public relations. Government is frequently viewed as a receiver or audience in the public relations process. As Crable and Vibbert (1985) note, organizations can catalytically define and guide issues through a life cycle in the hopes of a resolution that is favorable to the organization. Government, like other organizations, may also catalytically define and guide its own interests through this public opinion process. Government leaders rely on press offices, for example, in shaping supportive public opinion.

Other factors may also influence the ultimate acceptance or rejection of government messages that are communicated to the public, however. This paper seeks to extend our understanding of government communication with publics by examining another aspect of the government-media-publics relationship, particularly in times of profound crisis. We began by asking, what strategic channels can governments use to communicate their strategic agendas to various publics during or after almost total societal breakdowns? And, how much do publics trust those channels? We also wanted to find out if all the communication channels we studied are equally trusted in such situations or if some are more probably useful than others. The next sections provide a case study that examines strategic communication channels, and trust in those channels, in the context of rebuilding civil society in Bosnia.

Background

The nation of Bosnia-Herzegovina was created in 1992 out of the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and it immediately entered into a three-year civil war (Glenny, 1996). The international community has recognized the enormous cost associated with Bosnia's transition out of communism and nationalism. Rebuilding personal lives and enacting civil society in Bosnia and in other transitional nations requires, at a minimum, the effective use of several kinds of strategic communication channels – from interpersonal to mass. The purpose of this case study is to explore one important dimension in the development of civil society, namely, trust in the available channels of strategic communication in a place like Bosnia. Our data, collected in 1998, represents a snapshot of trust levels at a time during the nation building process when memories are still relatively fresh, daily life has taken on some semblance of normality for many, and the alternative media have had six years to become part of daily life. We chose trust in the available channels and the messages they carry because we believe it is foundational to all civil societies, and low levels of trust between individuals, organizations, and institutions in Bosnia may be hindering the development of civil society.

Civil Society

Hauser (1997) defined civil society as "the network of associations independent of the state whose members, through social interactions that balance conflict and consensus, seek to regulate themselves in ways consistent with a valuation of difference" (p. 277). The concept of civil society has a rich history. For example, Hauser (1998) traced civil society through the Greek and Roman concept of the public sphere, through the concept of responsibility of the Enlightenment, and to current ideals of democracy. Taylor and Doerfel

(2003) traced the roots of civil society through some of the major texts that guide communication theory. Taylor and Doerfel noted that Aristotle's *Politics*, Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* collectively inform our contemporary understandings of civil society as a communicatively constructed phenomenon.

The concept of civil society has also been gaining interest in the last decade in a variety of disciplines. In Political Science, Gellner (1994), Barber (1998), and Putnam (2000) have examined public participation in community life and policy decisions. In Sociology, the work of Seligman (1997) has placed trust and civil society within a contemporary framework that helps us understand both the potential and limitations inherent in the two. O'Connell (1999) describes civil society as an "invisible colossus" that allows people to engage in relationships, participate in decision making while at the same time assuming certain responsibilities to others in the community. At the heart of civil society, according to O'Connell, is a free and independent media that informs citizens and helps to keep leaders accountable.

In media studies Splichal, Calabrese and Sparks (1994) provided one of the first attempts published in communication that addressed the relationship between information, media control, and civil society. More recently work by Jacobson and Jang (2002) has explored how the media can contribute to a global civil society through promoting peace as well as coverage of democratic struggles.

Public relations scholars have also been thinking about civil society. Taylor (2000) argued that media, especially independent media, have a role to play in helping activist organizations set public agendas and stimulate public discourse. Taylor and Doerfel (2003) showed how social capital was created and maintained through communication and relationships in Croatia. Civil society is created, changed, and maintained through various types of communication. Interpersonal relationships, inter-organizational relationships, and media channels all contribute to or limit the potential for civil society and public relations practitioners wishing to influence the rebuilding of civil society have to depend on them. Indeed, the limited resources typically available to practitioners in these situations may make it necessary to choose one, or a few, strategic channels to depend on so this choice may be one of the most fateful faced by practitioners.

Trust

Trust is a complex interpersonal and organizational construct (Duck, 1997; Kramer & Tyler, 1995). For Communication scholars, trust occurs when parties "hold[ing] certain relevant, favorable perceptions of another" and this relationship allows for "expected outcomes" (Wheless & Grotz, 1977, p. 251). Inherent in this concept is the idea of risk and dependency. Trust in a specific person has been studied (Wheless & Grotz, 1977) as well as general trust in others (Rotter, 1967).

Trust is also a foundation of civil society because communities cannot function without it (Fukuyama, 1995; Misztal, 1996; Murphy, 2002). Tonkiss, Passey, Fenton and Hems (2000) identified trust as a key element that underpins social and economic relations. Every social interaction, from crossing a street to using an elevator, purchasing products, or exchanging services, is based on an implicit assumption of trust in others, or at least in the messages one receives about those others and their intentions, capabilities, and dependability. When low levels of societal trust persist citizens may have difficulty communicating and cooperating and the ultimate prospect for a civil society diminishes. Therefore, the authors do not assert that trust in channels of communication is just a

constituent part of civil society but rather that such trust is a foundation of civil society that can be understood and studied through both interpersonal and mediated channels.

The civil society and nation building literatures, both those cited above and others, have primarily addressed trust, as opposed to source credibility. In the communication literature trust and source credibility have often been treated as overlapping constructs. For example, Giffin (1967a, 1967b) treated source credibility as a constituent, but tightly bounded, aspect of trust while Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, and McCann (2003) reviewed source, message, and media credibility. Source credibility has been investigated in Communication by looking at trustworthiness, expertise and dynamism, the last two of which are subsets of overall trustworthiness in the approach used in this paper.

Organizations are sources of messages in which organizational credibility is seen as "a complex institutional structure with a history of experience and information, to which the public has already been exposed" (Metzger et al., 2003, p. 299). This case study examines independent media, politically/state controlled media and interpersonal communication from a local official as sources that contend to gain the trust of the audience. As Metzger et al. note, when individuals and organizations act as information sources, people make sense of the communication by their experience and history with that channel. The channel itself has a specific meaning to the audience and one component of that meaning is a level of trust.

In spite of the fact that two of the channels we study are mass media, we adopted an interpersonal approach to trust that had been successfully used in the past to address trust in institutions. We made this decision because: 1) one of the channels we feel is essential to study is actual interpersonal communication; 2) this well-tested approach focused on precisely the three dimensions of trust we wanted to study.

Of course, other channels of communication, such as the informal channel between family members or friends, also play an important role in nation building. Such interpersonal channels are typically not directly accessible to those charged with rebuilding a civil society, however, so they typically do not play a strategic role in nation building. In fact, such informal channels are often the targets of the kinds of strategic channels studied here. Thus, even though important, the roles of informal interpersonal channels in rebuilding civil society are beyond the scope of this article. Similarly, some obviously important new communication technologies such as the Internet fell outside the parameters of this study, largely because they were not readily available to a meaningful proportion of the people of Bosnia when this study was being conducted.

Trust in Bosnian Communication Channels

Trust plays a paradoxical role in building and sustaining civil society. While it is a prerequisite to civil society, too little, too much, or misplaced trust can be detrimental to civil society. For governments to rebuild civil society, then, a balancing act between two extremes of trust in communication channels is needed.

Varying levels of trust underlie the complex social relationships in Eastern Europe. From the results of a 10-year study of public trust among institutions in Eastern Europe, Smeltz, Bell, Mendrala, Sweeney, and Teare (2000) found that of all of the East European institutions only the armed forces enjoyed consistent levels of public trust. Hospitals, universities, government officials, media and the church all were rated as less than trustworthy. Lovell (2001) noted that trust is so low in post-communist nations because of "the real and perceived behavior of current elites, disappointment with outcomes so far, and brazen cheating in the market place" (2001, p. 32). Research also suggests that people who

lived in the former communist states developed "strong, face to face social networks" that enabled them to trust one another (Rose, Mishler & Haerpfer, 1997, p. 85).

Government Leaders and Trust

The question of trust in mediated and interpersonal communication channels in building civil society drives this research project. Effective government leadership is central to the development of civil society, but such leadership is largely carried out through strategic communication channels. So how well those channels, and the messages they carry, are trust become a question of central importance to government practitioners.

During times of uncertainty, people seek out their leaders for personal communication, confirmation, and direction. When mediated channels are absent or corrupt, people go directly to their leaders for information and guidance. Elected officials, who support the concept of civil society, whether consciously or unconsciously, tend to make decisions that promote dialogue, change, and participation (Hadenius & Ugglä, 1996). Media channels not controlled by the state or other interests are another necessary partner in civil society. Overall, people in stressful situations will turn to multiple sources for stabilizing information. Predictable sources are state-run media, alternative media and local government leaders. The pattern of use and dependence will vary from situation to situation but trust in these channels will determine how useful the sources of information will become for the development of civil society.

The nation of Bosnia-Herzegovina is the focus of this case study because it has experienced such a stressful situation. Yugoslavia started to implode when Tito died, and in the early 1990s nationalist leaders gained popularity. Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia voted in referendums for independence from Yugoslavia, and a four-year war began in 1992. The war was devastating for Bosnia whose ethnic groups were ravaged by ethnic cleansing. The leaders of Croatia, Bosnia, and Yugoslavia signed the Dayton Peace Accord in 1995. A major part of the peace plan was to ensure that democratic elections would be held in each nation. Significant amounts of international humanitarian assistance were devoted to Bosnia (Alexander, 1998). Two important parts of that assistance were to establish accountable government at the local and national levels and to create alternative media to facilitate the development of civil society. Interpersonal, state controlled and independent media channels are constantly involved in disseminating information about the political and social situation to the Bosnian public.

Interpersonal Channels

Interpersonal channels are often combined with the mass media during times of tension. Trustworthy information channels are needed so that the public can make important decisions, many with potential life and death import. In the time before the war, government officials in Yugoslavia were members of the Communist Party. These officials were known to represent the interests of the Tito government, and their decisions followed the party line. Individuals often did not seek out personal communication with these leaders (Rusinow, 1985). During the break up of the nation of Yugoslavia, new political leaders assumed positions of power. Many of these officials, however, were affiliated with nationalist political parties, and once elected they used their positions to incite war and ethnic tension (Silber & Little, 1996). Although the constraints of war forced these leaders to communicate interpersonally with their constituents, their credibility was often doubted as well. Once the war was over, the United Nations prohibited government officials from using their positions to incite ethnic tensions. The Dayton Peace Accord fostered a cadre of professional, public-service-oriented officials working at the local and regional levels of government. The presumption was that these government officials would be accountable, transparent in their

actions and trusted so they could lead Bosnians toward civil society. One outcome of this case study is the early indication of how successful these attempts have been.

Government Controlled Media

During the war, the state-controlled media shifted their focus and began serving as mouthpieces for nationalist political parties. State controlled media were the only available media during the war and the public was dependent on this channel for information. The state controlled media are blamed for contributing to the Bosnian genocide (Glenny, 1996). Hence, one part of the civil society initiatives in Bosnia was the establishment of media outlets independent of government control.

Alternative Media

The alternative mass media, although still in a nascent stage of professional development, are the other media channel to play a role in civil society development in Bosnia. There are more than 300 alternative outlets in Bosnia (Udovicic, 2001). The public response to them is also mixed. While alternative media perspectives on social and political issues are valued by many, the low production quality and other factors may limit the credibility of such media. Taylor and Kent (2000) conducted focus groups with Bosnian citizens after the war. They found that "Bosnians are neither ready to entirely disregard the state media nor willing to fully embrace the independent media" (p. 373). The results of these focus groups did not explain what specific factors were limiting public trust in the different channels of communication. This study attempts to answer that question.

In summary, the state-run media are often not trusted because of their history as well as the history of some of those who control these channels. Even though elections for local officials now occur, many have a history of political affiliation with the former communist government or nationalist parties and may or may not be trusted. Finally, the alternative media, six years old at the time of the Taylor and Kent (2000) study, may or may not have established high levels of trust. Thus, Bosnians have uncertain and potentially very different levels of trust in the channels of communication on which civil society initiatives depend. Studying just how trusted/distrusted these information channels are will contribute to effective strategic decision making about the channels for use in civil society initiatives, how to use them, and with which publics.

HYPOTHESES

Trust is the multidimensional dependent variable central to this study and to building a civil society in Bosnia. Trust only exists "without explicit guarantee" (Elofson, 2001, p. 127). In other words, the key element of trust is that those trusting are risking something. Gambetta (1988) observed that trust is particularly relevant "in conditions of ignorance or uncertainty with respect to unknown or unknowable actions of others" (p. 218). Trust seems to be a particularly appropriate tool for studying how people who have been the victims of almost total societal breakdown differentially accept the major channels of strategic communication. This research studies the channels that they turn to for information about the unknown process of rebuilding a civil society. The answers to these questions will help international public relations better understand government communication and civil society.

One useful way of understanding perceptions of trust in interpersonal relationships and in societal institutions in civil society can be found in the measures first developed by Giffin (1967a, 1967b) and then expanded by Botan and Frey (1983). In this combined framework, trust has three dimensions: character, expertness and dynamism. Character refers to perceptions of intentions and taps into whether or not people believe that a source

has honorable intentions toward them. Expertness addresses perceptions of the knowledge and expertise of a source. Dynamism is the likelihood that a source can be trusted to put forth the effort needed to accomplish goals. When examined together, we feel that these three dimensions can tap into public perceptions of the mass media and formal interpersonal channels crucial to civil society in Bosnia. These dimensions allow for an examination of the perceived intentions, expertness and productivity/dynamism of channels of communication.

Our understanding of the complex crosscurrents affecting trust in strategic communication in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as the multi-dimensional nature of trust itself, made developing a hypothesis for overall trust difficult. We felt that the alternative media would be more trusted overall than the state-run media, primarily because of the importance of the character dimension of trust. On the other hand, we expected the assessment of expertness in the alternative media to be held down by the sometimes extremely low production values and frequent use of teenaged staffs by many alternative media (Taylor & Kent, 2000). Nevertheless, we anticipated that overall trust in alternative media would be higher than in state run media. Thus,

H1: Alternative media will be significantly more trusted message carriers than state run media.

H1a: Alternative media will score significantly higher on the character dimension of trust than state run media.

H1b: There will be no significant difference between alternative media and state run media on the expertness dimension of trust.

In spite of the advantage alternative media were expected to enjoy over state-run media when it comes to trust, much of the communication literature has suggested that messages derived from direct contact with individuals are typically more persuasive than any mass media messages (Rogers, 1995; Rogers & Storey, 1987; Rose, Mishler & Haerpfer, 1997). As a result, we hypothesized that an interpersonal channel for information gathering would be more trusted than either kind of mediated channel. We sought the subject's assessment of the available channels of strategic communication rather than assessments of the specific individuals they talk with or the specific content they talk about. We used the channel itself as the referent for subjects and this, again, led us to use a formal interpersonal channel, like local government officials, that we thought respondents could reasonably have evaluated in comparison to mediated channels. Thus,

H2: Local officials will be significantly more trusted message carriers than state run media.

H3: Local officials will be significantly more trusted message carriers than alternative media.

Finally, the researchers were interested in the relationship between respondent's political affiliation and level of trust. There were at least two reasons for studying the possible interaction of channel and politics. First, in spite of the fact that the western media have often sought to portray the violence in Bosnia as primarily ethnic or religious in origin, the most extreme instances of violence have been associated with political affiliation. The media channels owned and operated by these political groups have often played an integral role in exacerbating the violence (Glenny, 1996). So, it follows that the perceived political affiliation of a channel affects its trustworthiness. Second, the alternative media were created for the purpose of breaking the political media monopoly of nationalist political parties. In other words, the international community intended for the alternative media to have political effects – to interact with politics in Bosnia. Thus, we believed that on the basis

of the literature and the experiences gained in five research trips to Bosnia, it is possible to predict that affiliation/ethnicity will interact significantly with channel in determining trustworthiness. This relationship is so complex, however, that neither the literature nor personal experiences during visits provide a sound basis for predicting the direction of such an interaction. We hypothesized that,

H4: Political affiliation will significantly interact with channel to influence trustworthiness.

METHODS

This study, partially funded by the USAID Office of Transition Initiatives (Grant no. USAID/OTI ZE 198), employed survey methods to compare the perceived trustworthiness of local government officials, state-run media and alternative media in four communities in Bosnia-Herzegovina during late 1998. While Bosnia-Herzegovina has, of course, changed since 1998 the purpose of this project was to study a particular case in order to help inform the relationship between strategic communication channels and civil society campaigns, not to provide current data on one country.

Trained native-language speakers administered oral and/or written questionnaires to more than 740 subjects in three dialects of Serbo-Croatian. Of these 720 were complete enough to use. Interviews were conducted in both the Bosnian Federation (Sarajevo, Tuzla, and Zenica) and in Republika Srpska (Banja Luka and Doboj) at a point in time shortly after the worst of the warfare and atrocities. Given the nationalistic feelings and recent atrocities in and around these areas, we felt this could reasonably be described as one of the most extreme communication trust environments on earth. Thus, the results might reasonably inform the relationship between communication channels and trust in ways that would be useful in other post-crisis nations. This goal reinforced our earlier decision to focus on strategic channels as referents rather than on message content or close personal relations and friends.

Design and Independent Variables

This study originally intended to determine whether three strategic channels (state media, alternative media, and local officials) differ significantly in their perceived trustworthiness in nation building/rebuilding situations. It soon became apparent that the ethnic and political divisions would influence perceived trustworthiness, depending on the history of each channel and who the public thinks controls it. Ethnicity and political views coexist and interact in Bosnia in very complex ways so mere ethnicity (e.g., Serb vs. Bosnian) does not necessarily reflect how an individual feels about a particular channel or its trustworthiness. There are great disparities between, for example, rural and urban people even when they are of the same ethnicity. For instance, city-resident Muslims like those living in Sarajevo are often not even thought of as “practicing” Muslims by their rural peers (Friedman, 1996). Political affiliation seems to be a particularly relevant attribute for explaining how sources and messages are judged. This is not necessarily a contradiction; in spite of the fact many political affiliations overlap ethnic group membership (Kasapovic, 1997). Advocates of a particular political view are often from the same ethnic group. But ethnic group membership - which is much larger - can cut across political, urban-rural, and regional differences. To accommodate the ethnicity variable we adopted six levels of self-described political affiliation as the indicator of affiliation. This created a 3 X 6 design with three levels of channel/referent (state media, alternative media, and local officials) and six levels of major political affiliation (democrat, socialist, communist, nationalist, liberal, and other [drugo]).

Dependent Variable - Trust

The dependent variable is trust, operationalized here as a three-dimensional construct and measured on a 27-item 7-point semantic differential scale based on Giffin's (1967a, b) original work and Botan and Frey's (1983) modifications. The instrument was again modified slightly through translation and back-translation procedures to ensure meaningfulness and understandability for this subject pool. This approach uses the three dimensions of trust (character, expertness, dynamism) but total trust was calculated by increasing the weight of character because we believe that in the context of massive neighbor-on-neighbor violence perceived intentions play a much bigger role in determining trust than do perceptions of expertness or dynamism. To determine a total trust score, therefore, we added the three dimension together with character weighted twice as heavily as the other two dimensions (i.e., $2 \times \text{character} + 1 \times \text{expertness} + 1 \times \text{dynamism} = \text{total trust}$). This yielded a scale with a range of 36-252, although the dimensions have sometimes been weighted differently in more interpersonal and non-conflict contexts. The first dimension, character, refers to perceptions of the intentions of the referent toward respondents. Giving this dimension increased weight seemed appropriate in a situation where hundreds of thousands are still homeless refugees due to ethnic cleansing. The second dimension, expertness, refers to perceptions of the knowledge and expertise of the referent. The third dimension, dynamism, refers to perceptions about the degree of activity of the referent or the likelihood that the referent can be trusted to give the effort necessary to be trustworthy. Reliability for the overall scale was $\alpha = .96$ and for the three subscales of character .92, expertness .93 and dynamism .74.

For the purpose of subsequent discussion we divided the trust scale into three categories, assigning the label low to scores ranging from 36 to 107, moderate or medium to scores ranging from 108 to 180, and high to scores ranging from 181 to 252.

PROCEDURES

The surveys were collected from five Bosnian towns--three communities in the Bosnian Federation and two communities in the Republika Srpska. The trust scale questions were one part of a larger survey collected for an evaluation of USAID's political transition grants in the region. In each location a professional translator worked with the research team to translate the survey questions into the local dialect and to back translate as a validity check. Demographic questions such as age, gender and political affiliation were also part of this survey.

Members of a national non-governmental organization (NGO) with experience in survey research administered the surveys. The researchers conducted a pilot study to fine-tune the instrument. Data collection lasted approximately three to five days in each location. The surveyors were given detailed instructions about sampling (e.g., selecting as representative a sample as possible in each city with attention being paid to age, gender, ethnicity, dress), asking and answering questions, and ensuring confidentiality of responses. Interviewers collected the surveys during different times of the day and in various high traffic locations around each town. Interviewers approached individuals, introduced themselves and their NGO, asked if they would fill out a survey, provided a writing instrument, offered a seat in a nearby café, and provided as much or as little oral presentation of the questionnaire as each individual subject needed.

About 50% of the 1500 subjects approached agreed to participate, a gratifyingly high percentage in a war-ravaged society in which expressing opinions about those in positions of authority had in the past been a dangerous undertaking. In fact this response rate may help signal a new time in Bosnia where people are willing to share their opinions

about social topics. When the number of completed interviews relative to the population of each town was checked, we found we had to conduct a second round of surveys in Banja Luka to increase the sample size and bring that community closer to the response rate of the other communities. Ultimately, 720 questionnaires were complete enough for inclusion in the study.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations and *n*'s for each channel on overall trust and for the character and expertness dimensions that are referred to in the hypotheses. The first hypothesis, H1, that alternative media enjoy significantly more overall trust as message carriers than are state-run media, was tested using MANOVA and was supported while H2 and H3, that local officials would be more trusted than the state-run and alternative media respectively were not supported by the same test. Surprisingly, in fact, local officials are significantly less trusted than either alternative media or state-run media Wilk's lambda = .90, $F(2,644) = 21.9$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .064$.

Table 1 Listed in Table Index

The first sub-hypothesis, H1a, that on the character dimension the alternative media would score higher than state run media was supported $F(2,644) = 22.7$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = .066$. The second sub-hypothesis, H1b, that on the expertness dimension there would be no significant difference between alternative media and state run media was not supported when the alternative media actually scored significantly higher on this dimension than the state run media $F(2,644) = 15.2$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .045$.

The fourth hypothesis, H4, that political affiliation will significantly interact with channel to influence trustworthiness was tested using a factorial ANOVA and was supported $F(10,619) = 3.0$; $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .046$. As Figure 1 shows, the extremely high trust that one group – nationalists – have in the state run media ($M = 189.9$) was the apparent cause of the significant disordinal interaction between the two independent variables. This high degree of trust in the state media is not surprising in retrospect because, as discussed below, many believe the state media to be controlled by these same nationalists. Demographic variables such as age and gender were not significantly related to total trust.

Figure 1 Listed in Figure Index

DISCUSSION

Government officials and practitioners have a variety of strategic communication channels to choose from. The four findings that emerged from this study, however, suggest they may need to rethink their choices.. First, channels do appear to differ in perceived trustworthiness, but this effect does not appear to operate through the sub-dimensions of trust quite as predicted. Second, local officials were not more trusted than mediated channels. Third, political affiliation does appear to interact with channel to influence trust. Finally, all channels tested achieved only medium levels of overall trust. This may be the most important result, particularly if found to hold in other post-crisis nations. The implications of these findings for international public relations, government practitioners, and other civil society proponents are discussed below.

Before discussing the implications of the findings we want to point out that another limitation of this study, in addition to those discussed in the first section, is that the three channels are treated as if they are clearly distinct when they actually overlap. For example, any one channel might carry a message originated by one of the others. Such as when the state-run or alternative media pick-up a story that local officials have been talking about in face-to-face conversations for some time. Such instances are rare, however, and do not appear to significantly impact the results of this study.

Differing Levels of Trust in Channels

In general, when Bosnians need information with which to make important decisions they trust the alternative media significantly more than they trust either the state media or local government officials. But, the relationship between these three channels, and particularly between Bosnians and their alternative media, is a complex one. As suggested by our fourth hypothesis, we were concerned about the extent to which the alternative media actually serve to overcome ethnic and political divisions in Bosnia, rather than to reify them. Thus, an understanding of some of the complexities of the relationship between Bosnians and their alternative media is a first step in addressing this concern.

Alternative media. Bosnia, a country of 4 million people, has "the densest frequency network in Europe" (Harbin, 2001, para 2). It would appear, then, that the international community has been successful in developing a network of media channels that are, in fact, free of state control. But do these alternative media actually possess the independence and, more importantly, are they perceived by publics to possess the independence, implicit in the original goal? Maybe not. Only Nezavisne Novine ("Independent Paper") serves readers from both the Federation and the Republika Srpska, and only Dnevni Avaz, a Bosniak paper that once had a nationalist political orientation in the 1990s, appears financially self-sufficient (Udovicic, 2001).

Second, the international donor community supported the creation of alternative media to provide objective, unbiased and trusted information to the public and to moderate the effects of the nationalist politicians who had used the media as propaganda tools. This meant that intention, when assessed within the character dimension of trust, would be critically important and it was tested with H1a. The public rated the alternative media as possessing more overall trustworthiness and more character than the other channels, suggesting that this small goal for building civil society has been largely achieved.

The high level of trust in the expertness of the alternative media may not be as counter-intuitive as it appears. If the more experienced journalists of the state-controlled media are perceived to be motivated by politics, their expertness may be overlooked and alternative journalists may be viewed as more expert by demonstrating even moderate levels of competence. The high expertness score may also reflect the huge influx of international money and mentoring provided to enhance the alternative media operations. Donors purchased new equipment, modern television sets and props, and modern computers for the alternative media, and this may increase the public's perception of its production value. Also, media organizations such as IREX Pro Media work closely with alternative television stations to raise broadcasting standards. State controlled media outlets rarely had have this type of development assistance.

Government practitioners from the dominant political party and those related communication practitioners may be at a disadvantage when seeking to use this strategic channel. The editorial orientation of these alternative outlets challenges those in power and many alternative media sources view themselves as opposing the ruling party in all its decisions and policies. Alternative media coverage of the news and information generated

by government leaders and practitioners is often politically charged. Indeed, oftentimes the alternative media critique the message rather than disseminating it.

Politically controlled, state media. The politically controlled, state media are few in number because they have to rely on their political party for resources. Since the war, ethnic parties generally support one particular print and electronic outlet, and these become the "state media" when that party is in power. The low levels public trust can be traced back to conditions of the Bosnian civil war. In addition, low levels of trust are not helped by the opportunistic decisions made by editors of outlets such as Dnevni Avaz. While many are under new management and have somewhat revised their content, they do not appear to be winning the trust of the people. The alternative media, in spite of their general lack of experience, seem to winning out decisively over the state media.

These findings have implications for government leaders and practitioners as they seek to widen the scope of their strategic messages. Nationalists appear overwhelmingly to like the politically motivated outlets, but the general Bosnian citizen does not appear to share this preference. Politically motivated outlets may serve as a communication channel for practitioners and their clients to "preach to the converted" but they appear to have limited capacity to reach mainstream publics. It appears that alternative media and politically motivated media have very different trust levels. But how do both fare against a formal interpersonal channel such as direct communication with local government officials?

Interpersonal channels. The Bosnian public appears to be quite suspicious of their local government officials as information sources. It appears that when they need to find information that is important for decision making, they prefer the alternative media first and trust messages from local officials least, even less than the state-run media. This finding may be attributed to the slow development of democratic government at the local, regional and national levels. In many parts of Bosnia, the ethnic parties continue to dominate regional and local governance. For instance, Kasapovic (1997) reported that even though the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has worked to minimize ethnic politics, in the 1996 parliamentary election 95% of the seats went to the ethnic blocks and 86% of the votes were given to the Croat, Bosniak, and Serb ethnic parties. This dominant role of ethnicity in the political process "is more widespread and defined than before the war" (Kasapovic, 1997, p. 121).

During and after the war, when print and broadcast media had limited reach, local officials were responsible for informing Bosnians about such topics as availability of water, food, resources for refugees, and in some cases, the status of their missing relatives. That local officials have the lowest levels of trustworthiness was certainly surprising in light of the traditional view in communication that interpersonal relations are more persuasive than other forms. However, when their low scores are viewed in the context of the role that local government officials played before the war, during the war and now in the transition period, it is more plausible.

Interaction of Channel and Politics

Based on the political situation in the nation and the close link between political parties and media, we hypothesized that political affiliation would interact with channel in determining how trustworthy messages from these strategic communication channels are perceived to be. The data show that nationalists have significant trust in the state-run media. Still, the very pronounced way nationalists trusted the state run media ($M = 141$) as compared to their trust in alternative media ($M = 109$) or local officials ($M = 104$) was surprising. Maybe even more important, however, is the large discrepancy between the mean of nationalists' trust in state-run media ($M = 141$) and the combined mean of trust in

the state-run media for the other five political affiliations ($M = 106$). In fact, as Figure 1 clearly shows, the disordinal interaction between political affiliation and channel was created by the high trust nationalists have for the state-run media. Nationalists and nationalist parties continue to operate in most regions of Bosnia.

Medium Levels of Trust in all Channels

Concern for the future of the alternative media in Bosnia notwithstanding, the finding that all the channels studied enjoyed medium levels of trust may be most significant. Halpern (1994) found that in authoritarian political systems, media dependency might have a significant impact on political perceptions and trust. That is, while the alternative media is perceived as significantly more trustworthy than existing channels, it is not perceived as very highly trustworthy. Even in an environment characterized by a recent history of political turmoil, ethnic violence and economic malaise, all the communication channels studied garnered at least medium levels of trust (i.e., total trust score of 81 – 134). When Lovell (2001) evaluated trust in post-communist nations he noted that:

A society where distrust is extensive may not be in danger of immediate collapse, but neither can it take advantage of the many opportunities offered by democracy and the market. Addressing the issue of trust is therefore a key matter in determining what sort of society will emerge from post communism. (p. 37)

Perhaps there is a trust floor beneath which trust in strategic communication messages simply will not fall, even under the extreme circumstances in Bosnia. This may or may not be the return the international community sought for its \$70 million investment and thousands of hours of effort, but it does imply significant strategic communication opportunities and responsibilities.

Implications for International Public Relations

One value of this study resides in the immediate implications for understanding how strategic communication channels have the potential to limit or assist governments and practitioners in rebuilding civil society. The international donor community has consistently assisted post-crisis nations in the last decade. Inherent in all of these initiatives for civil society are programs to create alternative media and rebuild trust in local officials. These programs pass through stages similar to the stage studied in Bosnia in this project. While each nation, culture and time period is unique in the nation building process, the kinds of strategic communication channels studied here are used in other situations and questions about how much trust is accorded each channel remains a central question in civil society efforts everywhere.

People starved for useful information in a crisis may assign trust to any formal source that they encounter. The existence of a trust floor would suggest tremendous strategic communication opportunities for building civil society in post-crisis nations. It would mean that practitioners representing international donors, for example, could step in where civil society has broken down and compete effectively with existing communication channels in popularizing a vision of civil society. Finally, if populations can be expected to trust newly created channels as much as established ones, then those donors sponsoring such new channels share ethical responsibility for the effects on those populations. If no one channel earns the trust of publics, then the potential for civil society may actually be diminished rather than enhanced.

CONCLUSION

No one study can settle such complex situations as those encountered in Bosnia, particularly one with small-explained variances. Useful lessons do emerge, however, for public relations researchers and practitioners from this Bosnian experience. Government leaders and practitioners need to be aware of the public perceptions toward each type of media outlet. It is not enough for them to communicate through the outlets that are most closely associated with their political views. Indeed, these channels may not be trustworthy to the general public. Rather, government officials and practitioners need to cast a wider net and make efforts to meet with media from across the political spectrum.

While the alternative media are more trusted than older channels, the data suggest that their perceived trustworthiness still is influenced by political affiliations and is only of medium strength. After almost a decade of extensive international aid, Bosnians still have few sources that they strongly trust when seeking information. On the other hand, Bosnians now have a variety of communication channels from which they can gather the information they want.

Lessons learned from the Bosnia experience may well be useful for practitioners in other post crisis-nations and situations. Trust is a foundation of civil society and even medium levels of trust for multiple channels is a starting point for practitioners. Credible communication channels are an imperative for rebuilding civil societies and because of this, public relations practitioners and theorists must give significant attention to all available communication channels.

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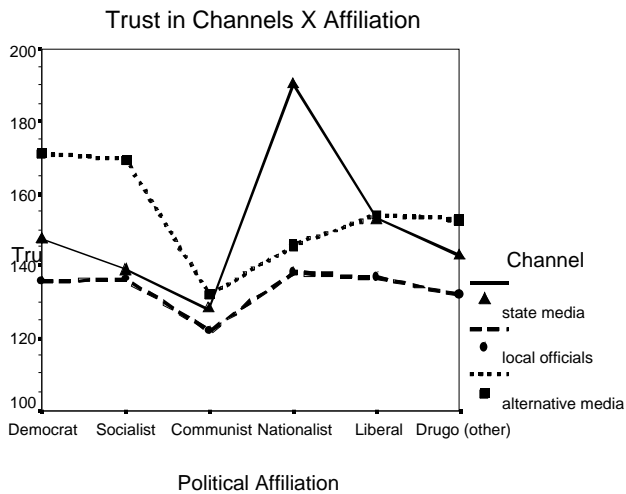
TABLE INDEX

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Total Trust, Character and Expertness

Referent	<i>n</i> of Subjects	Total Trust		Character (x2)		Expertness	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Alternative Media	221	160.6	39.0	80.0	22.4	40.3	11.1
State-Run Media	227	148.1	47.4	75.7	26.4	36.9	13.6
Local Officials	199	133.8	36.1	65.8	21.7	34.3	10.6

FIGURE INDEX

Figure 1



Maureen Taylor
Department of Communication
Rutgers University
4 Huntington Street
New Brunswick NJ 08901
Phone: (732) 932- 7500 x 8125
Maurent@Scils.Rutgers.Edu

Carl H. Botan
Department Communication
George Mason University
4400 University Drive
Fairfax, VA 22030
(703) 993-1092
cbotan@gmu.edu