

The Question Is: Can The UN Survive The Trump Era?

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December 21, 2016

The United Nations will swear in António Guterres as its ninth secretary-general on Dec. 12, when the organization will be only weeks away from the inauguration of Donald Trump and the potentially most threatening, hostile political opposition to the UN ever assembled in Washington, D.C. The UN will have to be prepared to respond and defend its record. Most likely, it will also have to fend off a wave of “fake news” and bogus sites designed to weaken public support in the United States and around the world. It will have to expand its audience reach as well.

By many accounts, the UN has fallen off the map.

Many factors are responsible for this situation. Inside the organization, competent staff members are silenced by an atmosphere that has made speaking out too big a risk to careers, even within the Secretariat or in high-profile missions around the world. Opaque, overburdened and ineffective UN information systems are largely not up to contemporary competition. Major international media have cut back coverage of the UN. Reporters who remain, denied access to officials and critical internal reports, are thrust into an adversarial role. Outside the UN, teaching and research about the organization have atrophied or have all but disappeared from most universities. Social media moves quickly into the vacuum, often with harmful disinformation.

Alarms are being raised around the world about what a Trump administration will mean for international programs and institutions. Among the many commentaries on various subjects, the British medical journal *The Lancet* took the unusual step of publishing a full-page editorial warning that American “commitment to global health and development could be at risk.”

Inside the UN, scores of officials and their staff at all levels are primarily preoccupied with the arrival of Guterres and his new team and worry about their futures in the organization. To make

matters worse for UN officials, they see no coherent foreign policy being articulated by Trump, whose impulsive pronouncements and tweets — he has not held a news conference since July — flip-flop from day to day on issues important to the organization. He does not attend most national intelligence briefings, which are customarily given to presidents-elect.

“I don’t think people are thinking about the Trump administration,” a UN official said, “because, frankly, we really don’t know what to think. First of all, we don’t know who to talk to; there’s no foreign policy transition team. The transition from Ban [Ki-moon] to Guterres is what we are focusing on now.” That transition, he said, is going smoothly. By an accident of history, the UN and US are getting new leadership at the same time, putting a priority in both New York and Washington on internal decisions.

Several high-ranking UN officials, including Secretary-General Ban, have publicly condemned the harsh policies Trump endorsed during the presidential campaign and as president-elect, such as torture, religious profiling, mass deportations and bans on immigration. Trump’s harshest and most outspoken UN critic in recent months has been the high commissioner for human rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al-Hussein, who has called Trump a danger to the world. Trump’s attempts in recent weeks to tone down hardline threats, possibly only a tactic against public outrage, are met with some skepticism.

The appointment of Nikki Haley as US ambassador to the UN attests to Trump’s apparent lack of interest in ensuring a strong presence at the organization. Haley, the governor of South Carolina and an early critic of Trump, has no experience in multilateral institutions or foreign policy and seems more likely to have been chosen to meet pressures on the Trump administration to find women and appointees from minority groups for cabinet positions; her parents migrated from India. Haley’s departure for New York — she must first be confirmed by the Senate — also conveniently leaves in her place in South Carolina a lieutenant governor whose views are more in line with Trump’s.

Richard Gowan of the European Council on Foreign Relations and the Center for International Cooperation at New York University, described the president-elect in *World Politics Review* on Nov. 16 as demonstrating “an utterly incoherent vision of international security.”

At the same time, while the nationalists in the team that Trump is putting in place in his White House may know the world better, they are not shy about broadcasting their biases. Michael Flynn, the nominee for White House national security adviser, recently retweeted a message alleging that the new UN development goals would lead to a global ban on Christianity, according to a CNN review of his Twitter use. Unesco and the US Fund for Unicef, among others, have also been targets of online misinformation from obscure sources, which they have publicly refuted.

In the US Congress, the solid control that Republicans now have over both houses jeopardizes the commitments to pay UN assessments and contributions to the UN, which the Obama administration honored for the core UN Secretariat, as well as its peacekeeping role and humanitarian work. UN agencies and many other international programs in the larger UN system

could also see their US contributions slashed, with the UN Population Fund an obvious first target because of its support — shared by the UN as a whole — for safe, legal abortion.

There have already been calls on Capitol Hill to withdraw the US from the Human Rights Council, which falls under the purview of Hussein, and even the UN itself, though critics might pause at the thought of losing a permanent Security Council seat.

There is a lot to lose. By any measure, the US — and the American people — are the largest contributors to the UN system and its many activities around the world. In 2016, the US was assessed 22 percent of the organization's regular budget, while China was billed roughly 8 percent and Russia, 3 percent. Assessments for the peacekeeping budget for 2016-2018 were calculated at 28 percent for the US, 6 percent for China and 3 percent for Russia. These assessments — dues derived from treaty obligations — are only part of the hundreds of millions of dollars that go to special appeals, UN agencies outside the Secretariat and other forms of contributions.

The cost of UN membership is emphasized and often exaggerated in writing that is critical of the organization. Several influential Washington think tanks with conservative, often anti-UN agendas and publications inform Republican opinion in the White House and Congress. Among them are the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute and the libertarian-right Cato Institute. Gone from the US Senate are moderate outward-looking Republican supporters of the UN, like the late Charles Percy of Illinois and, more recently, Richard Lugar of Indiana, a Senate leader on foreign affairs, who lost a primary re-election bid in 2012 to a Tea Party challenger. Lugar later founded the Lugar Center, which focuses on global food security. In 2016, he was awarded the Fulbright Prize for International Understanding.

Among the general public, Republicans in the US routinely hold a more negative opinion of the UN than Democrats or Independents. A Pew Research Center poll in 2013 showed Democrats giving the UN a 72 percent favorable rating, with Independents at 60 percent. Republicans were not only on the low end of the scale, at 41 percent, but had also been steadily dropping over preceding years. A 2016 Gallup poll found that only 38 percent of Americans thought the UN was doing a good job; 54 percent said it was not and 8 percent didn't know. The rest of the world leaves the US well behind in knowledge of how the UN works

The Trump team has a fertile field in which to plant more doubts about the UN and galvanize action against it.

Peacekeeping stories you will never read

In 1999, Kofi Annan, UN secretary-general at the time, and his spokesman, Fred Eckhard, published media guidelines for UN officials that for the first time in the organization's history introduced a formal policy of being “open and transparent in its dealings with the press.” The guidelines, initially devised for the peacekeeping department, gave all Secretariat staff members the right to speak to the media on subjects “within your area of competence and responsibility,” but to “provide facts, but not opinions or comment.” The guidelines are still in effect, according to the UN spokesman's office, though they have languished and are disregarded repeatedly.

In no area has this unwillingness to listen to UN staff or allow them to do honest reporting been more harmful to the organization than in peacekeeping. Internal information on scandals of various sorts have been suppressed, ignored or shelved for unconscionable periods of time by higher-ranking people in a hierarchical system. Outsiders — in the media, nongovernmental organizations and sometimes courageous staff within the UN — make these scandals public, putting the organization immediately in a defensive position, as allegations fire up critics. Furthermore, UN peacekeeping operations are dynamic environments in which reporters can see the UN in action for themselves, often in dramatic post-conflict settings around the globe.

Every peacekeeping mission has a large public information unit dedicated to ensuring that the local population understands the mandate of the peacekeepers and to garnering international support for their operations. But lately, with shrinking newsroom budgets and the closing of international bureaus, news organizations don't send as many reporters to cover far-flung conflicts that are only simmering, or cooling, when more dramatic stories compete. Western troops are sporadically involved as UN peacekeepers, with some exceptions, as in Mali, and the lives and contributions of "blue helmets" from developing countries carry far less significance in the international media.

In peacekeeping missions, communications officers are expected to sell trite "positive" stories to the media, while withholding comment on more complex or sensitive issues, from political negotiations to outbreaks of violence. Recent headlines — from attacks on civilians in South Sudan to sex abuse by peacekeepers in Central Africa and the cholera epidemic in Haiti — dominate in media, which give minimal coverage to other aspects of a mission, each one a complex operation taking more than tweets to explain fully.

Roberto Capocelli, a Fulbright scholar from Italy, worked as a human-rights public information officer with Monusco — the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo — the largest peacekeeping operation. The mission had been mired in bad news when a landmark human-rights trial took place in 2014, conducted by Congolese courts with assistance from Monusco and UN human-rights officials. A notorious war criminal, Bedi Mobuli Engangela, or "Colonel 106," who had long terrorized communities in eastern Congo, was finally meeting justice.

Capocelli got to the trial ahead of the international media and with his deep knowledge of the issues, wrote up the story, stressing the UN's contributions in logistics and protecting witnesses. He sent it for release to his superiors at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva. It was published two months later, virtually unchanged but buried in an obscure part of the UN Human Rights website. A video he made on the event was never used.

"In the end, we are not journalists," Capocelli said recently. "But everyone had been complaining about impunity and after a huge investment of time and resources, [the UN] managed to do something good, especially at the moment the UN was under criticism for child abuse, corruption and inaction. Everyone is aware of this dynamic, how much the bureaucratic process can stop you from acting. I had the impression my work was not really needed."

Susan Manuel, a writer for PassBlue and an American journalist before joining the UN, worked in some of the most important and dangerous peacekeeping missions in the world, in addition to

spending eight years in UN headquarters. During that time, she saw the relationship between UN missions and the media shrink from her first decade in Cambodia, South Africa, the Balkans and Afghanistan to her final posting in Darfur before retiring in 2012.

“In Cambodia, the UN peacekeeping mission, Untac [the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia] was narrating the electoral process to a large international press corps,” she said in a written interview. “In the former Yugoslavia, I literally saw coverage of the UN improve after making an effort to get to know the local and regional journalists and provide them with concrete information. We told the story, even when the UN failed, even when the so-called UN-protected enclaves in Croatia and Bosnia were overrun. We public information officers were reporting these events in real time to media because these people were our responsibility.”

“In Kosovo we were narrating the growth of a new administration — with regular press briefings, interviews, guided visits for journalists,” she said. “We fed them constantly, and not with fluff, as these were discerning professionals, some of them veteran war correspondents.

“There were incidents of exploitation and abuse of the local population by peacekeepers in those earlier missions -particularly Cambodia and Somalia,” Manuel said. “But they didn’t threaten to bring down UN peacekeeping. Journalists knew these were complex and largely vital enterprises, which they covered on a daily basis. Scandals weren’t the only headlines.

“In Afghanistan, the UN mission was the most credible voice during a long saga of conflict, peace processes and human rights struggles, and the media depended a great deal on it.

“But when I arrived in Darfur [in 2011], the international media were gone, local media were ignored and the conflict was invisible, even — to a large extent — to the peacekeepers. We weren’t saying much about it.

“Senior UN mission officials disdained the sole opposition radio station, Dabanga,” she recalled. “Sometimes it was only when a blogger, Matthew [Russell] Lee, who is based in New York, read out reports from Dabanga on incidents in Darfur at the daily briefing by the secretary-general’s spokesman in New York that we could convince the mission leaders to respond. Or, I would figure out ways to release information surreptitiously by embedding it in otherwise anodyne messages or op-eds from the head of mission.”

When she retired from the UN, Manuel wrote in her end-of-assignment report on Darfur — where hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed as Sudan’s repressive government battled a regional rebellion from 2003 to 2009 — that UN policy makers needed to decide whether the peacekeeping information offices are there to promote only the “good news” of the mission or to “get and disseminate clear factual information about the situation on the ground related to our mandate,” which, Manuel added, “could enhance our credibility and lead to realistic responses.”

“Is it our role to report publicly on the conflict, as part of the mission’s security and protection of civilians’ mandate, or is it ‘none of your business,’ as one senior official told me after repeated requests to be included in information on fighting and human rights abuses?”

Shortly after Manuel left Darfur, Aicha El Basri arrived as spokeswoman for Unamid [the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur], lasting only eight months in what she called an “Orwellian” situation. In 2014, she dropped a Snowden-like bombshell, when she leaked thousands of code cables and emails to Foreign Policy magazine, which led to a series of articles excoriating the UN-African Union mission in Darfur. The Security Council and even the International Criminal Court demanded answers as El Basri, a Moroccan-American, had claimed the mission was covering up crimes against humanity.

Secretary-General Ban ordered an internal review, which confirmed five instances of underreporting or no reporting, of attacks against civilians and peacekeepers. He told the Security Council that “the media policy of UNAMID will be re-examined to ensure greater openness and transparency.” He exhorted other missions as well: “Ensuring that the UN speaks out consistently against abuses and identifies the perpetrators is a key goal of my Human Rights Up Front Initiative.”

How this advice has translated into action at the UN is hard to determine.

But recent crises involving peacekeepers indicate that the operations tend to react publicly only after the media has exposed them. By then, the mission has lost the opportunity to put its perspective out front authoritatively. The UN mission in Mali, on the other hand, has received more nuanced media attention, as the UN’s most dangerous mission. It gives regular press briefings and maintains an informative website, in French and English, Manuel noted.

“As only a consumer of media these days, it can be painful to read some of the headlines,” Manuel said, “because I know there are good people out there trying their hardest. But a UN perspective explaining the background is often missing. And if you go to the Facebook pages of some of the missions dealing with crises, it’s just la la land. The fact the sites have so few comments or shares tells me not many people are buying that version of reality.”

An information center in need of more resources

The hub for most news and documentation in the UN Secretariat is the Department of Public Information, known universally in the system as DPI, which was established in 1946 “to promote global awareness and understanding of the work of the United Nations.” An office of the spokesperson for the secretary-general was added later as part of DPI, but has since migrated (without cutting all links there) to the orbit of the the secretary-general’s staff, with independent functions as a conduit to media reporting on the organization. Agencies and programs outside the Secretariat, as well as major departments within headquarters, have their own communications specialists, but their work can be affected by practices and attitudes at UN headquarters. Outside the UN, diplomatic missions of countries include public-affairs officers who reflect and explain the policies of their respective governments.

At DPI’s founding, there were 51 mostly like-minded member countries in the UN. Now 193 countries are represented at the UN, offering many points of view on what news and information the UN should or should not be disseminating, particularly most recently on social developments like the recognition of LGBT rights or the promotion of women’s personal reproductive rights, to

which numerous nations do not subscribe, at least in practice. LGBT issues are notably not in the Sustainable Development Goals.

“We are a melting pot of cultures poured into a bureaucracy designed in the 1950s,” Stéphane Dujarric, the secretary-general’s spokesman, said in an interview.

The Department of Public Information is also completely hamstrung by its mandate, officials acknowledge, and the head of the office, who ranks as under secretary-general, is not chosen primarily for his or her media skills, but is often a political appointee with little or no journalism experience. He or she must work under tight budgetary conditions deliberately framed to not give the department the tools it needs. Samir Sanbar, who headed the office from 1993 to 1997, said in an interview that he was flatly denied funds by the General Assembly budget committee to create a UN website. Instead, he stretched the resources of his existing staff to develop the platform.

“Even the idea of information going to the public remains always a question of arguments with member states,” he said. “Senior officials within the Secretariat were [also] not so keen on it. Peacekeeping, and even the office of the secretary-general, were afraid we were giving too much information to the public. I said: ‘This is what our job is! We need to reach the public. We need the public to support us.’ “

Susan Markham, a former director of strategic communications at the UN from New Zealand and a frequent spokeswoman for many UN summits and global conferences, analyzed in a memo for PassBlue some of the constraints faced by the department:

- o DPI is not able to reach out to the public of a member state to try to counter criticism of the organization by that member state’s government. Such activity could be interpreted as being contrary to the UN Charter (intervening in matters that are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of a member state). DPI has been encouraged by member states to limit its activities to ‘informing’ the world about what it does, not doing crisis communications. The UN does not have its own voice or opinion, unless it is shared by a majority of member states.

- o Budget cuts and constant restructuring forced on the DPI disrupts its effectiveness. DPI has gone through more ‘restructurings’ than any other UN department. First to go were information staff in the field, at a time when most organizations were touting the effectiveness of decentralization and opening field offices. DPI is supposed to tell the UN’s story to the world like a media or public relations company with a fraction of the resources. And, unlike most media or PR companies, DPI produces most of its material in more than six languages. Materials generally use ‘UN-speak’ rather than language that is clear and succinct. Journalists covering the UN find this particularly frustrating.

- o DPI is micromanaged by member states through the General Assembly’s committee on information, which oversees everything DPI does. Endless reports have to be prepared for its annual meeting, and DPI staff spend days making presentations, monitoring the debate and (sometimes) lobbying on behalf of a favorite activity that might get the chop. Few if any of the delegates in the committee have any communications expertise. DPI is part of a bureaucratic and

diplomatic organization.

- o DPI staff are also not always journalists or communications experts, and the department is often seen as the dumping ground for UN employees that other departments want to get rid of. The head of DPI is often a political appointee. UN personnel policies make it hard for DPI staff to stay in jobs they are trained for — in radio, for example — and have to move up to management or be transferred to some other job.

- o Much of the UN's work relates to processes. Progress on solving complex issues like poverty, for example, is incremental and therefore not newsworthy. There are only so many public relations 'tools' that can be used — like creating International Days, or holding conferences and seminars, which are worthy but commonplace and often boring.

- o DPI suffers from self-censorship. Although there is a great deal of freedom to develop the content of its materials, something perceived as critical by a member government or another UN department brings complaints that the UN takes seriously. Experienced DPI staff know the boundaries.

- o When a scandal breaks out, the UN is not equipped to respond. In a bureaucracy, no individual is responsible. It takes time for an internal investigation to find out what really happened. Meanwhile, the media are continuing to publicize the wrongdoing. When the transgression is committed not by a UN employee but by peacekeepers or others who are not considered UN staff, there is even less sense of ownership and responsibility. Of course, this distinction is lost on the public, which considers all of them "the UN."

During the tenure of Secretary-General Kofi Annan, his senior adviser and under secretary-general for communications and public information, Shashi Tharoor, an Indian, closed numerous UN information centers abroad, most in Western Europe. UN officials, past and present, think this was a serious mistake, because they had been useful service hubs for journalists and focal points for national governments. The UN continues to maintain centers in many developing countries, as well as one in Washington, which monitors Congress and government policies generally. The UN took a hit from the consolidation in 2003-2004 of two-thirds of the Western European centers. Only three remain: a regional center in Brussels and two in Geneva and Vienna, where the UN has sizable offices.

Helmut Volger, a contributor to PassBlue from Berlin and author of *A Concise Encyclopedia of the United Nations*, published in German and English, is also a co-founder of the German UN Research Network (www.forschungskreis-vereinte-nationen.de).

"In general, the position of the United Nations in Europe with regard to the media has been severely weakened by the closure of nine excellent West European UN information centers by UN-DPI, being replaced by an ineffective and bureaucratic regional UN information center in Brussels," he wrote in a memo for this article. "In Germany, for instance, that meant a clear-cut reduction of media attention from then on."

Volger argues that there is little reporting now on the UN across Europe, except on the activities of the Human Rights Council in Geneva. “A typical example of the ignorance of the media is the UN office in Bonn,” he said. “Even though Bonn is the seat of the secretariat of the important UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, that does not motivate the German media to cover the work there sufficiently.” He added that there has generally been a widespread decrease in interest in the European media about UN topics, above all from television.

“In this situation, the national UN associations such as UNA-UK in Great Britain and the United Nations Association of Germany, try skillfully to draw the attention of the media to the UN topics through events such as panel discussions with high-level UN officials or ‘guided tours’ for journalists to UN peacekeeping missions,” Volger wrote. “But these efforts cannot replace full-time professional media relations work.”

Navigating the expanding ocean of digital media

Samir Sanbar, who pioneered the UN’s presence on the Internet two decades ago, says that when he wants to look up a UN document or other information on the UN now, he turns to Google. It is a common complaint: navigating the UN’s website is hard work and time-consuming.

“I agree that the search function on many of the UN.org sites is frustrating,” wrote Laura Kirkpatrick, who handles social media and writes for PassBlue. “I’ve tried to find data on both UN Women and the UN on the site, and had better results Googling the information, which led directly to the UN hosted pages I was looking for, rather than going through the site itself.

“It may be that the amount of information that comes through is too much for each department to handle, but it does seem that there are disconnects,” Kirkpatrick wrote. As an example, she cited the frequent updates issued by the secretary-general’s spokesman’s office via email. While the emails contain content that reads “For specific statements, search in <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/sgstatsarchive.asp>,” the link can take a user to a 404 error, a page where there may be a connection to the server the information is stored on, but the actual content isn’t there.

The press-center pages and certain program sites are not much better, as obsolete content and inconsistent mapping — how data is retrievable for search functions, for example — create diversions rather than direct routes. For instance, content from Unifem, the now-defunct predecessor to UN Women, is still returned in searches on the UN Women site.

“I think the problem is that the staff behind the basic sites like UN Women — but also the main sites for the Secretariat and General Assembly — are not trained to think digitally or strategically,” wrote Kirkpatrick, “but rather in general communications mode. Just consider the URL UnitedNations.org. When you type it into the Google search bar, you get a football team in San Francisco, with no path to the un.org website. No one has thought, ‘If I were a user, how would I search for this information?’ It seems like each section of the site has its own bureaucracy for filing away information and charting through the content, but there is not one cohesive thought behind the complete package.”

By contrast, the UN has developed extensive outreach through social media and emerging technologies, like digital broadcasts of live events that appear to have been given precedence over a traditional digital presence. The UN has several Facebook pages, and most entities, such as peacekeeping missions, have a Facebook presence, similarly with Instagram and Twitter, all delivering content and timely news.

The engagement of audiences via social media is erratic, sometimes depending on who is running the platform. From 2010, a Department of Public Information staff member, Nancy Groves, has directed all UN social media, including its Twitter account, which has nearly eight million followers; Facebook, two million; and Instagram, one million.

In an interview in May 2015 with Audiense, a site that monitors social media, Groves described how UN officials who initially disdained Twitter — “We don’t need to be on social media” — have realized its importance in delivering not only news and information but also visual images, including photographs and graphics. Her small team has kept bureaucratic vetting to a minimum while satisfying various special interests in the system and among member countries.

On the other hand, the department’s YouTube channel functions as little more than a parking lot for UN video products -many of them well-produced and informative programs designed for international broadcasters. Few people are using this critical platform for young audiences, with views for most clips in the 100s.

More alarming, a brief YouTube search of the term “United Nations” indicates that conspiracy theorists are on the verge of dominating this platform: of the first six results that appear, the most popular (with 220,050 views) is “How Dangerous Is the United Nations?” Of those six videos, four involve an imminent “invasion” by the UN.

The social media environment seems fertile ground for anyone with paranoia and an Internet connection, and in the new world order underway, the UN will need to find tools to fight back. Groves recently confronted at least two attempts by outsiders to create fake Twitter accounts for the incoming secretary-general, António Guterres, who is regarded as having a good record in communications in his decade as UN high commissioner for refugees.

The refugees agency has used the social media account of its spokeswoman, Melissa Fleming, to advocate on behalf of the 65-million-plus people who are displaced globally. On Facebook and Twitter, Fleming posts several articles and images daily to keep the plight of refugees and migrants visible to a global audience. A hashtag created by the agency in June, #WithRefugees, and a UN Women-led campaign with the hashtag #He4She, to inspire men to support equality, have developed celebrity followings and “long tails,” or a more focused audience.

“The UN Development Program, Unicef and the World Food Program, among others, have sites and content that are parsed for digital delivery and easily retrievable data. Compare that to the General Assembly site or the secretary-general’s pages and it’s as if they are two different organizations,” wrote Kirkpatrick, about the many ways that content is delivered by the UN.

With an unfriendly US administration and a hostile Congress looming in Washington, the UN will require closer attention by the media, governments, nongovernment organizations and the foundations that support academic programs and other projects focused on the UN, since these spotlights have virtually disappeared.

Dujarric, Ban Ki-moon's spokesman, describes an information environment that could overwhelm any institution — and the UN is a uniquely complex one. “In too many instances,” he said, “the UN should be defended by more outside voices that have a stake in its success.”