**SOFT POWER AND THE SUBALTERN: WHO WINS?**

A reflection on the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar by Marissa Moran

During lunch on the first day of the Milton Wolf Seminar, a group of us, students, started discussing soft power and its place in international relations theory. One of the other scholars was trying to clarify whether soft power, defined as the ability to wield influence through attraction and co-option rather than coercion, requires a source of hard power (i.e. military and economic strength that can be used with force) behind it in order to have weight and thus to be considered power at all. We concluded that yes, it seems safe to say that Joseph Nye’s theory of soft power assumes that any state or actor wielding soft power most likely also has the ability to use hard power. I suppose one could argue that soft power varies depending on whether the source of hard power behind it is military or monetary strength.

Facebook, for example, while it originated in the United States, serves a global audience and has widespread cultural influence. Facebook doesn’t arm itself with tanks and bombs, but it does have lots of money that allow it to extend its network and brand globally. As Facebook gains more users and makes itself attractive to people around the world, one could argue that Facebook—and other transnational corporations for that matter—use soft power for its own economic benefit. Facebook also potentially represents U.S. interests abroad through this networked version of soft power. An interesting 2009 CFR interview with Elliot Schrage, VP of Global Communications, Marketing, and Public Policy, Facebook, discusses the strengths and weaknesses of governmental use of social media, though he claims there is not yet an online equivalent to international broadcasting efforts such as Voice of America.

In the first panel, entitled “From Soft Power to Soft War: Information Rights and National Sovereignty,” the panelists discussed information flows and the boundaries and norms of freedom of expression. They looked at Iran as a case study for soft war, and explained the difference between soft war and soft power; soft war is psychological warfare that may result in regime change without the use of military force (think the 2011 Arab spring) while soft power leads to political change but not regime change.
So have Facebook and other social media assisted this shift from soft power to soft war? In the end, who benefits from such a shift? Is it the people in the countries where the change takes place, or is it the international actors—often originating in the West—that are credited for much of the change? At the top of the hype cycle about Facebook and Twitter’s role in the Arab Spring, pundits across the political spectrum—even academic scholars—went so far as to say the revolutions happened because of these tools. I couldn’t help but wonder if Mark Zuckerberg felt like a god, simply because everyone was acting like his invention changed the world. Don’t forget the viral “Thank You Facebook,” photo. However, with Internet penetration only 15% in Libya, how democratic were these “revolutions”?

In Nye’s theory, soft power has perpetuated the power balance of the West over the rest, with information flows traditionally flowing to rather than from the Global South. Seminar discussions, which covered a range of examples including the Western promotion of internet circumvention tools in Iran to defy government censorship of the online public sphere and encourage—suggest a shift from soft power to soft war. But does this also change the global flow of power? One of my favorite quotes from the seminar came in a later panel: After extensive media coverage of the 2011 uprisings and western consumption of such coverage, is “orientalism changing in Ohio?” (No offense, Ohio, but it makes for great alliteration).

One participant suggested comparing Iranian notions of soft war versus Western notions of the term. This tied into another comment made about understanding information flows from the perspective of the receiver. My current research will seek to do just that as I attempt to identify how narratives among the Somali diaspora in the UK respond to the strategic narratives coming from the transitional federal government in Somalia. Ultimately, it’s a question about power and whether information flows maintain current power structures or allow room for the subaltern to challenge the status quo.¹

Another theme that arose during the seminar surrounded the responsibility of private businesses (i.e. Google and Facebook) to respect freedom of expression. With algorithms and filters that automatically omit certain information from your Facebook newsfeed depending on your pattern of “likes” and click-throughs, there is a new type of censorship in town. I myself add to the definitional confusion by calling online networks like Facebook and Twitter “social media.” It’s dubious whether these sites perform the same functions as traditional media platforms like The New York Times and the BBC. Social media allow users to share news and spread messages to massive quantities of people, but they are not creating the news—or are they? If their algorithms determine what news and messages users see or don’t then they are indeed playing gatekeeper, a role traditionally reserved for broadcasters and newspaper editors. If social networks and traditional media

¹ The subaltern refers to “people without access to the lines of social mobility,” or in another sense, “a position without an identity,” according to Gayatri Spivak. See the link to hear her explain the subaltern in her own words (begin at minute 09:00).
organizations both demand the ability to exercise freedom of expression, as the former did during the SOPA and PIPA\(^2\) debates and the latter do every day, then they must also respect the responsibilities that come with such freedom.

Terms like mediation and social media are elusive and difficult to define; this brings us to the question: what are the international norms regarding information flows? As many people asked throughout the seminar in Vienna, who has the right to set those standards? I'm personally interested in the question of who sets standards for information flows, because of the people these standards commonly exclude, often called the subaltern. Can we assume that if people are not connected— if they don't have internet or news access— then they don't have a say? Will they always be receivers and never senders? How would the subalterns themselves respond to this question?

Wait... I thought we were supposed to emerge from two days at the **Diplomatic Academy** with the answers, not more questions! Simply put, the answers probably don't exist yet. As mentioned at the Seminar, these changes – and their effects – are more likely generational than immediate. Also, let's hope we are open enough to allow ourselves to accept changing narratives, even the ones we construct as scholars. How can we expect governments and political systems to change if we ourselves are not willing to when necessary? (Last question, I promise!)

It was an honor to sit at the table with such notable scholars and professionals who are contributing to positive change every day. Thank you to everyone who participated and made the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar a special occasion for deliberation, discovery, and some healthy debate.

**About the Author**

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Marissa Moran was selected as an Emerging Scholar Delegate to the **2012 Milton Wolf Seminar**. She is currently in the MSc Media, Communications, and Development program at The London School of Economics. She completed her Bachelor's in Political Communication and International Affairs, Peace and Conflict Studies at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. in 2010.

She entered the field of international media assistance through her undergraduate honors thesis, which compared media development projects in post-conflict Rwanda and Bosnia

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\(^2\) Two bills debated in the US Congress and Senate that proposed expanding the government's ability to enforce copyright violations on the internet
and emphasized the need for media regulation and policy approaches in future post-conflict interventions. Her current Masters dissertation will analyze the reception of and response to strategic narratives about Somalia among the Somali diaspora community in the UK.

From 2010-2011 Marissa served in the U.S. community service network Americorps, coordinating secondary and post-secondary educational opportunities for low-income and immigrant youth. Originally from Norwalk, Connecticut, she currently works for Albany Associates, a media development and strategic communications firm that works in post-conflict and transitional states.

**About the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar**

Launched in 2001, the Milton Wolf Seminar Series aims to deal with developing issues in diplomacy and journalism – both broadly defined. Using case studies such as Hungary, Iran, Syria, Egypt, and Tunisia, the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar, Transitions Transformed: Ideas of Information and Democracy Post-2011 explored the evolving relationship between media and democratic transition in light of rapid technological change and the shifting structure and dynamics of the international communication system. The seminar was jointly organized by the Center for Global Communication Studies (CGCS) at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication, The American Austrian Foundation (AAF), and the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna (DA).

More information about this and previous seminars is available on the Milton Wolf Seminar [website](http://global.asc.upenn.edu) and our [Facebook Page](https://www.facebook.com/MiltonWolfSeminar).