

# **The GNN Effect: Global News Networks as Intelligence Gathering and Diplomatic Institutions**

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## **ABSTRACT**

News and information organizations have an apparent effect on foreign policymaking. Generally, it takes the form of influence on agendas or elites. But there is a less apparent, and arguably more important role they play in both forming and carrying out foreign policy: they are active participants in both diplomacy and intelligence gathering.

Journalists are not diplomats or spies, but they often perform those roles – whether they know it or not and whether they admit it or not. This study looks at what has been overlooked and it uses exclusive and, by necessity, mostly confidential interviews to expose and contextualize this long-established, yet mostly hidden, practice.

Western journalists have long dominated the global news and information system. But that is changing rapidly. Chinese and Russian capacities are currently expanding and developing at an unprecedented pace while the West's are diminishing and degrading, due primarily to the collapse of the traditional, non-state Western news business model.

The world's fastest growing players in these Global News Networks (GNNs) and in this evolving media ecology are now the Chinese and Russians. Both states control and are investing heavily in market-agnostic, state-owned news and information enterprises. This study reveals that Russian and Chinese GNNs are actively exploiting the same diplomatic and intelligence gathering practices as those who preceded them in the West—where the practice continues, but capacities are relatively diminished.

Further, the Chinese and Russians have long formalized the roles of spying and diplomacy into their journalistic system and are actively exploiting new opportunities in globalized media, non-governmental organizations, and the academy. As a result, the costs, risks, and inherent limitations borne by non-Western states establishing traditional intelligence and diplomatic outposts are minimized by exploiting GNNs—and the journalists, NGO workers, and academics who comprise

contemporary GNNs—to undertake more of their states’ intelligence gathering and diplomatic burden. The players may be new (and there are certainly more of them), but the game is old.

What this means is that the West is losing absolute and relative diplomatic and intelligence gathering capacities it may never have controlled, but always exploited. The Chinese and other non-Western countries, on the other hand, are rapidly gaining greater capacities from institutions and individuals they have always controlled. This relative shift in capacities from West to non-West is certainly having an effect on state intelligence and diplomatic practice. The ultimate effect of this shifting relative power between the two is the material power gain of capacities for the non-West, often at the expense of the West. This is today’s GNN Effect.