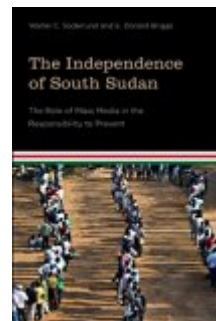


**Walter C. Soderlund, E. Donald Briggs.** *The Independence of South Sudan: The Role of Mass Media in the Responsibility to Prevent*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014. pp. \$38.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-77112-117-0.



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The world's newest nation, South Sudan, formally attained its independence in 2011 after nearly forty years of civil war that left more than two million people dead and forced an estimated four million persons to flee their homes. The epic saga of South Sudan—an overwhelmingly tragic story where misery continues to unfold in 2015 as internal violence threatens to rip apart the fragile young country—most certainly deserves whatever book-length focus that scholars, policymakers, human rights advocates, and relief workers can bring to the subject. Given the immense scale of human suffering in South Sudan during the past five decades, any initiative or study that brings informed attention to the country and its people should be welcomed.

*The Independence of South Sudan: The Role of Mass Media in the Responsibility to Prevent* is at first glance an ambitious book that attempts, as the title indicates, to explore the confluence of three complex issues: the twists and turns of events that led to South Sudan's independence; how mass media coverage influenced the policies

of the United States and Canada to preserve peace in South Sudan and support its independence process; and how the relatively new international standard of “responsibility to protect” was applied in South Sudan. (The “responsibility to protect” standard to which UN member states agreed in 2005 holds that the international community is supposed to intervene to prevent or stop massive loss of life when a country's own government is unable or unwilling to fulfill that basic responsibility.)

The book's strength is its description and analysis of the politics and ethnic tensions that have fueled South Sudan's conflict with its Sudanese neighbors to the north as well as South Sudan's crippling internal divisions that have sabotaged the young country's tenuous unity after independence. The authors display extensive knowledge of the tortured political and social dynamics that have long dominated Sudan and South Sudan. In addition, the book offers a useful summary of how international norms have evolved in recent decades to partially erode the

bedrock diplomatic principle of state sovereignty that traditionally governs international relations among nations and has long allowed governments to abuse their citizens with impunity.

The authors' writing is clear and sure-handed for the most part. The glaring exception is a short section that strangely strays into a fog of technical jargon and abstract concepts as it struggles to summarize academic literature about the media's important role of "framing" news stories in ways that help make those stories understandable and relevant to the public.

In pursuit of its core purpose, however, the book falls short. The book primarily seeks to explore how media coverage and the doctrine of "responsibility to protect" influenced US and Canadian foreign policy officials during the 2010-11 run-up to South Sudanese independence. The focus is based on a flawed premise.

In reality, neither the media nor the formal "responsibility to protect" standard had meaningful influence in shaping policies toward South Sudan during this period. Particularly in the United States, key government officials and outside advocates who possessed decades of involvement in the Sudan conflict and long professional commitments to human rights issues were the driving force behind the US policy approach to South Sudan. Those actors greatly influenced how US media covered the issue, not vice-versa. Buried in the authors' own research data is one telltale indicator that this was the case: 20 percent of the articles published about South Sudan by the US newspapers examined in this study were opinion and analysis articles, primarily written by government officials and independent advocates (p. 110).

The non-influential role played by the media is acknowledged—finally and far too belatedly—in the final dozen pages of the book's text: "The question that remains is how did major media outlets ... influence or contribute to the strategy of positive diplomacy that had been adopted" by Canada and the United States (p. 108). "(T)here is

little indication that [Canadian and US media] attempted to spur their governments to greater action, or indeed to any form of involvement other than what was already being undertaken.... It seems likely, moreover, that in this particular case little push from media or mass publics was needed. The urgency was already recognized by government bodies practically everywhere" (pp. 115-116). In short, the main body of the book devotes nearly half its pages to a lengthy summary and analysis of how the media covered South Sudan's final steps to independence—media coverage that was largely beside the point in terms of how policy was made in Washington, DC and Ottawa.

This provides the latest example of why books based on scholarly studies would be well advised to consistently include an executive summary of three to five pages that succinctly lays out key findings and conclusions rather than compel readers to wade through an entire text to discover whether it is truly relevant. An executive summary is particularly advisable for books such as this one that examine public policy with hopes of being read by policy-making officials.

Despite its good intentions, the book for the most part misses its mark. Yes, the story of South Sudan is worth telling. Yes, the reciprocal influence between media coverage and policy making is worth examining. Yes, the controversial "responsibility to protect" principle adopted in recent years by the international community merits scrutiny in real-world situations. That is why the book is such a lost opportunity. All three of these foreign policy issues deserve attention and research, but with a different focus than this particular book brings to bear.

To the extent the book and its authors wish to focus on South Sudan, research on the very real policy tensions that existed in Washington and, presumably, in Ottawa between the goal of nurturing independence for South Sudan versus the goal of finding peace in Sudan's Darfur region

would have been relevant for gaining a better appreciation of the difficult tradeoffs inherent in policy-making—trade-offs that can cost lives. Although the book briefly mentions that tensions existed between the South Sudan and Darfur camps in policy circles, the book does not pursue the matter. Alternatively, the authors' keen interest in how external influences affect government policy could have led them to examine more closely the curious but important fact that southern Sudan—now known as South Sudan—has attracted over the years a large cadre of influential and highly committed advocates both inside and outside government circles that is unmatched by any other African country.

To the extent the book's authors prefer to focus on the role of media in shaping public opinion about foreign policy challenges such as South Sudan, it would have been more useful and timely had the authors examined their own startling discovery that television news in the United States and Canada so completely ignored the South Sudan story that there was virtually no television coverage available to analyze—despite survey data showing that television is the primary source of news for a large plurality of citizens (p. 109). The authors treat the dearth of television coverage as an unfortunate hiccup in their research methodology rather than scrutinize it as an important insight with possible foreign policy repercussions that beg for closer examination.

Another highly relevant research angle about media would have been to explore whether the formation of influential public opinion is stunted or enhanced by the public's growing reliance on the Internet for news—a trend that the book cites but then ignores. Also worthy of study in the context of South Sudan and other foreign policy issues is the extent to which government officials and other elites drive media coverage. This is much closer to what occurred in the coverage of South Sudan than the mistaken assumption that media coverage drove policy.

On the issue of the “responsibility to protect,” there is a significant need for thoughtful research and provocative analysis. The book does not mention the US government's establishment of an Atrocity Prevention Board in 2012. What has been the impact of the Atrocity Prevention Board on US government policies, if any? Do similar government bodies or mechanisms exist in other countries? Why have the United States, Canada, and other leading nations applied the principle of a “responsibility to protect” so inconsistently to crises in Syria, Libya, Central African Republic, and elsewhere in recent years? To what extent does the media's meager coverage of foreign crises undermine public support for aggressive policy options such as intervention to protect local populations? These various lines of inquiry offer an opportunity for research that could make a solid contribution.

*The Independence of South Sudan: The Role of Mass Media in the Responsibility to Prevent* provides a readable summary of the difficult final obstacles overcome by the world's newest country to realize its long dream of independence. The authors deserve appreciation for introducing their readers to that important recent history on the African continent. However, the book does not achieve its goal of uncovering important new insights into the complex cycle of cause and effect among mass media coverage, prevention of atrocities, and formation of foreign policy.

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