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Synchronizing Information: the Importance of New Media in Conflict [1]

The effectiveness of information campaigns today will more often dictate a victory than how well bullets and bombs are put on a target. Putting information on target is more important when dealing with an asymmetric adversary that cannot – and does not need to – match the military or economic power of the United States and her allies.

Insurgents and terrorists increasingly leverage New Media to shape perceptions around the globe to be attractive to some and intimidating to others. New Media collapses traditional concepts of time and space as information moves around the world in an instant. Unlike traditional media, search engines and the web in general, enable information, factual or not, to be quickly and easily accessed long after it was created.

The result is a shift in the purpose of physical engagement to increasingly incorporate the *information effect* of words and deeds. Thus, the purpose of improvised explosive devices, for example, is not to kill or maim Americans but to replay images of David sticking it to Goliath.

The U.S. military is actively and aggressively revising its role in shaping its own narrative in cyberspace, but this is falling short. While the U.S. is finally coming to grips with the centrality of information and perceptions, it remains confused as to how to use information effectively. American responses seem to stem from the belief that the message and the messenger we are countering are the same without regard for the target audience, intent, or how the message fits into a larger narrative, which perhaps mirrors our own perception of information as propaganda.

The link between the propaganda of deeds and the propaganda of words is very real and is increasingly established not in traditional media but online through instant and persistent media that reaches a growing audience. The U.S. needs to master this link in real time in order to win the information war and ultimately the physical one.

The American Firewall

Bifurcating the means to inform and counter adversarial messages challenges our effectiveness in telling our story. The uniquely American firewall between conversations with overseas audiences and domestic audiences limits our ability to create a discourse with foes and their base, allies, "swing-voters," and the domestic public. The result is a foreign policy shaped more through unanswered adversarial narratives rather than American narratives.

This fear of being overheard in America has done more to neuter U.S. responses and to encourage the creation of new information functions than anything else. The American response has been to allow the development of an information architecture that cares more about how a broadcast, flyer, or message will play in Iowa than in the primary center of gravity of the fight: the minds of the support base of our adversary.

In 2008, the Defense Department (DoD) will look into how the National Security Act of 1947 should be modified to adapt to 21st Century conflict. In February, the Defense Sciences Board on Strategic Communication released its report. While the DoD-sponsored report has yet to be written, the DSB report incompletely addresses the functional, institutional, and bureaucratic barriers to the necessary synchronization across the whole of government.

Defense Leads Because It Has To

The different working philosophies of the State Department and DoD pose another challenge to the promotion of the U.S. narrative. The State Department's Public Diplomacy is configured to influence over an extended period of years or decades. Rarely is it intended to shift ideas and perceptions over months or even weeks. This is a problem in the 24/7 global information

environment that hinders State's ability to be effective.

DoD runs by a different clock. DoD influence operations – such as Public Affairs, Information Operations and Psychological Operations – work proactively and frequently as part of a multifaceted approach to shape outcomes both during and immediately after an event. The extended DoD timeline includes State-like *longue durée* approaches, but it mostly operates in the "here and now" because of the need to respond to the current battlefield.

While the focus on the "now" allows DoD to make better use of New Media, there are other, institutional, challenges to the effectiveness of its information campaigns. Within DoD there is a separation mimicking the distinction between Public Affairs (PA) and Public Diplomacy. PA views any contact with Information Operations (IO) to be "dirty" and "tainting". In practice, IO is used before something is public but after the media gets wind of it, IO drops it and PA picks up the issue and starts from scratch. The result is an informational strategy that falters from the start because handoffs from one group to the other, if they occur at all, are incomplete and disconnected.

Capacity problems at State and the disappearance of the United States Information Agency, the two civilian organizations traditionally charged with U.S. public information and persuasion campaigns further compelled the military to step up and respond to the battlefield of today and tomorrow. It is DoD, more often than State, that is now in the "last three feet" of engagement with foreign publics, either directly or in the media. The Secretary of Defense is asked more frequently than the Secretary of State about resurrecting the United States Information Agency. Furthermore, as the Bush Administration has intentionally shifted the virtual ownership of the wars on to the military, today news from the field comes primarily from uniformed personnel.

Weaponizing Information

A famous dead Prussian once said that war is a continuation of politics by other means, but the reality today is that war is not part of political intercourse with foes but an orchestrated, if loosely, effort to gain strategic influence over friends, foes, and neutrals. YouTube, blogs, SMS and traditional media, make every GI Joe and Jihadi a communicator, public diplomat, and persuader. Our adversaries understand and exploit this reality. Writing to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri stated that "we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media [sic]."

The U.S. military as reluctant heir to the information throne in an online world has several inherent challenges. First, operating in the environment of New Media requires awareness and agility inconsistent with the current organizational culture of the military. For example, in Iraq the military broke through the bureaucratic red-tape and started posting videos on YouTube. However, this small "victory" was incomplete: the group that uploaded to YouTube was still not permitted to view YouTube. In effect, they were posting information they were not authorized to see.

These passive publications were without any or very little context and did not readily fit into larger and active narratives. On occasion these videos, such as those of Al-Qaeda recruiting child soldiers or using the mentally handicapped as human bombs, are released through sterile public affairs briefings because active management of information is considered "influence" and a violation of the "statutory responsibility to factually and accurately inform various publics without intent to propagandize or manipulate public opinion."

But not giving information the necessary context and inserting it into a synchronized narrative is self-muting in the New Media environment.

The U.S. might not be able to prevent our enemies from disseminating information, but we could and must engage them in the information sphere. Without engagement "actions are often abandoned to interpretation" and are left "hanging outside the narrative to be picked up." Too often they are placed within a context of the listener's choosing or risk cooption by a third-party to reinforce an alternative narrative.

There is a two-fold need to create the right capability for managing information. First, there is the underlying requirement to understand the enemy, his message, and its effect. Sun Tzu wrote of the need to know the enemy and yourself. In traditional warfighting this is well understood. In the informational world, it is still a lesson being learned.

The necessary shift is underway in the military. The new Operations manual of the U.S. Army, FM3-0 includes a chapter titled Information Effects. Leading this revision is Lieutenant General William B. Caldwell, the former chief spokesman and Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategic Effects for the mission in Iraq. LTG Caldwell understands the power of information and lays out the requirements for credibility and effectiveness in a simple meme, the "Four B's": Be Honest, Be Open, Be Relevant, and Be Ready.

To be effective, the U.S. military, as America's de facto leading public diplomat, must be proactive, agile, adaptable, and, most of all, credible. Actions and words must be focused locally and globally at the same time. This solution is not changing precision-guided munitions into precision-guided media, but participating in a discourse with a global audience in a grammar that resonates with all.

This is ultimately a leadership challenge. While entrusting "strategic corporals" to carry weapons and high-explosives, lack of proper training and experience in working with information causes many leaders to dread their role as perception managers and they react by ignoring it. Yet the media is hardly a threat compared to an uninformed soldier, an unanswered attack or subversion, and a misinformed public.

The military must drop its zero-defect mentality. While it is better to be accurate than rapid, silence is not golden and concedes the advantage to the adversary. At the level of engagement, LTG Caldwell has another simple meme to encourage the strategic corporal, the Four E's: Encourage, Educate, Empower (e.g. underwrite mistakes), and Equip (e.g. provide YouTube access).

Unfamiliarity with the power of persuasion without force impedes these processes as leaders are unsure how to handle information. Fortunately, doctrine is evolving that will be used to train and guide future engagements in the psychological struggle in which adversaries are participating while our forces are not. Communications "target practice" to develop these skills could help overcome this aversion and lack of understanding. When "expert" ribbons are awarded for achievements in this category, invariably abilities will quickly improve.

Authorization to declassify material must be accelerated or revamped so as not to automatically classify everything. Further, permission to release material must be moved closer to the point of collection. Three months to release a diary of an Al-Qaeda leader that revealed his organization's decline (a release that was done in the Blogger Roundtable) or

nearly as long for the child soldier videos mentioned earlier is excessive, unnecessary, and costly to mission success.

Thinking before Engaging

<u>Edward R. Murrow</u>, the only chief of the United States Information Agency who regularly attended National Security Council Meetings, famously stated that public diplomacy must not only be in on the "crash landings" but also at the "take-offs." This is true of any attempt to persuade or compel, which are the goals of both foreign policy and military operations. It is essential that the information effects of what we do are considered from the outset, including the impact of information campaigns.

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The modern, <u>"rugged communication landscape"</u> requires finesse and a persistent voice to achieve credibility and influence over target audiences. The decentralization of distribution hubs has democraticized information, with individuals contributing their own "soda straw" view of events and being selective in their media consumption.

The U.S. has excessively, and unnecessarily, restrained itself in the "war of ideas". Contemporary American information bureaucracies are not adapted to current realities. Today, states are marginalized as information is increasingly democraticized, and produced and acted upon by individuals and groups in a kind of "market of loyalties." Without an institutional cultural shift, American word pairs associated with shaping perceptions – "public diplomacy", "strategic communications", "public affairs", "information operations" and the rest – are quaint silos of excellence that continue to lack the synchronicity required to be effective today. Failing to understand this means it is increasingly likely that those with diverging opinions will become motivated and empowered to take extreme, kinetic actions against the U.S. and her interests. Embracing this new reality can enhance the probability that the U.S. and her allies, along with the noble values they represent, will ultimately prevail. Empowering the military to respond is the second best option available, but without a civilian agency to "own" the effort, it is the only viable one.