

Fighting the Information War but Losing Credibility

What Can We Do?

Lieutenant Colonel Rumi Nielson-Green, U.S. Army

FIGHTING THE SO-CALLED “information war” against terrorists and insurgents has cost the U.S. military nearly \$1 billion in the past three years.¹ But that may not be the highest cost.

Congressional questions about the spending for communication programs and news reports about questionable use of contracted public relations firms and journalists have brought to light an undefined area of military operations with little oversight or controls. Not surprisingly, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, in March 2010, directed an internal assessment of information operations and internal investigations into specific activities.²

In a December 2009 *Washington Post* column, David Ignatius points out that “the military has funded a range of contractors, specialists, training programs and initiatives,” and that the “militarization of information,” particularly when hiring “covert contractors,” should sound an alarm.³

However, in times of war, when ends may justify means, why shouldn’t the military aggressively promulgate positive images of the United States and fight enemy propaganda?⁴ Why shouldn’t the military hire public relations firms to plant unattributed American-friendly articles in foreign media (as alleged in the case of the Lincoln Group in Iraq in 2004)?⁵ Why shouldn’t the military use companies that offer to “do more than just information gathering,” merging “reporting, intelligence, connection-peddling, and strategic communications” (as is alleged about International Safety Networks)?⁶

Contractors who operate journalistic, news, or public relations activities for the military blur the lines between public affairs, journalism, military information support operations (MISO, formerly PSYOP). The dangers of these types of activities seem obvious. They change what are accepted international protections for journalists as non-combatants. They hinder and endanger journalists and render military public affairs ineffective. They rile up conspiracy theorists and provide fodder for anti-American sentiment. A nation that cherishes and promotes freedom of speech and press erodes these values and its credibility when it subjects foreign people to covert media

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PHOTO: U.S. Army GEN Stanley McChrystal speaks to the Afghan media during a visit to the Freedom Bridge in the town of Hairatan, Afghanistan, 27 May 2010. (U.S. Navy, PO1 Mark O’Donald)

manipulation. In the world of instantaneous news reporting, such activities extend beyond targeted foreign populations and reach U.S. and allied populations.

Robert Hastings, a former assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, sees a line that “ought not to be crossed.” He notes that “as a constitutional democracy, our government has an obligation to share robust information based on truth without attempting to influence its people,” but adds, “We have to remember that public affairs needs to be done by public affairs people. Moreover, if we hire someone to do this type of work, they need to follow the same rules and directives that military public affairs officers follow. We should not be able to hire a surrogate to do otherwise.”⁷

Questionable public information contracts are merely a symptom of an underlying problem within the military: *no doctrine exists for strategic communications*. This results in ineffective implementation and insufficient training for leaders and public affairs officers. In the absence of doctrine, military organizations experimented with strategic communications during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the end, these well-intended

schemes might cost the United States its credibility. Why did these ill-advised initiatives become so pervasive? How do we meet the need to communicate in a far-sighted way that is integrated into all operations and demonstrated in not only words but by deeds?

What the Military Needs is Some “Strat Comm”

The military is in the business of fighting and winning our Nation’s wars. Commanders saw a need to fight in the information realm and found innovative ways to do so. They must be innovative not only because of technology and an instantaneous news cycle, but also because there is no doctrine to follow. What does exist are guiding principles of strategic communication published in August 2008.⁸ These are neither prescriptive nor proscriptive and are only guidelines. Each military service has manuals for public affairs, information operations, and psychological operations, but none for strategic communication or communication strategies. Beyond internal regulations and doctrine, the military is not restricted or empowered by laws or codes addressing its roles, authorities, or responsibilities in public information.



(U.S. Army)

U.S. Army LTC Richard McNorton, left, a public affairs officer, and LTC Charles Poole, the 10th Mountain Division chief of information operations, talk with an employee of the Kandahar Media Compound, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 26 January 2011.

The U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948, known as the Smith-Mundt Act, allows Department of State activities to “promote the better understanding of the United States among the peoples of the world and to strengthen cooperative international relations.”⁹ This act “is a key statute outlining the global mission of U.S. propaganda abroad and the limitations on distribution of U.S. propaganda at home.”¹⁰ Many view the act as applicable to the Department of Defense (DOD), but it is not. In 2006, the Defense Policy Analysis Office concluded that it did not apply to DOD.¹¹ The advent of the information age, the military’s need to operate in the information realm, and the increasing need for interagency synchronization makes the provisions of this 62-year-old act outdated.

Absent existing doctrine on how to operate in the information realm, military leaders instituted directors of strategic communication and reorganized public affairs functions in the last several years. Hastings, who served as the military’s head of public affairs in 2008 and 2009, said that during his tenure, he watched as strategic communication became the initiative *du jour* in every major command. He describes “Strat Comm” offices “popping up” throughout the military as major commands attempted to engage both enemy and friendly audiences in the information realm. The organizational structure and functions of these offices varied: some of these structures were effective and appropriate, while others were not.¹²

Even as we describe it as “the orchestration and/or synchronization of actions, images, and words to achieve a desired effect,” the term “strategic communication” is a point of contention and confusion.¹³ Admiral Michael G. Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, notes, “We get too hung up on that word, strategic. . . . But beyond the term itself, I believe we have walked away from the original intent. By organizing to it—creating whole structures around it—we have allowed strategic communication to become a thing instead of a process, an abstract thought instead of a way of thinking.”¹⁴

The distinction between strategic communication, information operations, and public affairs is critical. Military officers and laypersons alike often use the terms interchangeably, adding to the problem.

Information operations practitioners train to coordinate and synchronize five core functions

to influence the adversary: military information support operations, military deception, electronic warfare, computer network operations, and operations security.

Public affairs is a related capability but not a function of information operations.¹⁵ Military public affairs personnel are responsible for internal communication, media relations, and community relations and are advisors to commanders on these areas. Public affairs is not an information operations discipline or a MISO tool. It contributes to information operations by communicating truthful and factual unclassified information in a timely manner using approved DOD guidance to keep the public informed about the military’s activities. Public affairs operations also counter adversary propaganda and deter adversary actions while maintaining the trust and confidence of U.S., allied, and friendly audiences without censorship or propaganda.¹⁶

During the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. commanders saw the enemy use the media to amplify the propaganda effects of suicide attacks and other violence. The commanders recognized the need to counter and pre-empt the enemy’s messaging. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates shared this view. In a speech at Kansas State University in 2007, he said, “It is just plain embarrassing that Al-Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the Internet than America. Speed, agility, and cultural relevance are not terms that come readily to mind when discussing U.S. strategic communications.”¹⁷ Such observations led to reorganizations within headquarters’ staffs throughout the military in an attempt to *operationalize* communication.

One result is the subordination of public affairs functions, along with MISO and information operations, beneath an effects director or a strategic communications director within some senior military unit headquarters. On the surface, this may seem a reasonable consolidation of functions; however, it leads to several troubling outcomes.

Public affairs is not an information operations discipline or a MISO tool.

(U.S. Army, SGT David Alvarado)



The Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Rangin Dadfar Spanta, center, listens as a wounded Afghan National Security Forces member gives his recollection of events following a suicide attack that occurred near the International Security Assistance Force headquarters, 15 August 2009.

In some operational level headquarters, public affairs functions are under the control of effects chiefs who are combat arms experts. This type of hierarchy, by default, treats public affairs operations as a means to target audiences or use press releases as virtual bullets in the information realm. This paradigm leads to the production and release of press products that push good-news stories while withholding negative information.¹⁸ Mullen said, “Make no mistake—there has been a certain arrogance to our ‘strat comm’ efforts. We’ve come to believe that messages are something we can launch downrange like a rocket, something we can fire for effect.”¹⁹

The real effect of attempting to make public affairs a non-lethal weapon is that it renders it ineffective. Journalists will not repeat a press release full of polemics and propaganda with little or no news value; therefore, no one gets the message. The effort is futile. Worse, the long-term consequence is damage to credibility and media relations. Journalists will not trust a spokesperson pushing propaganda, and the public will lose trust in the military.

Unlike operational level units, strategic level headquarters are adopting a strategic communication director model that produces other negative outcomes. Under General Stanley McChrystal’s command, the International Security Assistance Force, the NATO military headquarters in Afghanistan, implemented such a reorganization for its communication effort. Rear Admiral Gregory J. Smith, director of communication, synchronizes “public affairs, information operations, and key leader engagement.”²⁰ Smith is a career communicator with skills and experiences well suited for orchestrating these functions. He understands both the art and the science of communication as well as the implications of public affairs and MISO crossover. However, he may be the only experienced, suitably ranked flag officer in the U.S. military able to head such an endeavor. Colonel Gregory Julian, public affairs chief for the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, said there are no other qualified two-star generals in the U.S. pipeline. Furthermore, Julian observes there is no other nation in the alliance within NATO that has such an expert at the requisite rank.

Julian, who served as the director of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan Public Affairs in 2009, is “disappointed with the multi-layer bureaucracy that has been put into place.” During the previous tenure, they operated with “flat, clear authority for rapid/accurate release of information.” They were able, in most instances, to get facts out before the enemy propaganda cycle.²¹ The additional bureaucracy has synchronized communication, but degraded speed and agility in releasing it—the very need that drove reorganization.

Layering public affairs beneath other staff structures reduces its responsiveness; it eliminates a public affairs officer’s ability to serve as a special advisor to the commander. In these modified structures, a public affairs officer must provide his advice to either an effects chief or strategic communications director whose training, public affairs knowledge, or personal assessment determines what, if any, advice goes forward. This works in the case of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) because Smith is a trained public relations expert. However, even with an expert at the head of such an organization, the very fact that public affairs and information operations activities share the same immediate supervisor is troublesome. As Ignatius

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puts it, “Problems arise in part because activities are lumped together.” He recounts Smith saying that he has tried to bring a more disciplined view of what information operations is, and make certain that ISAF does not have activities bleeding into one another.²² De-linking these functions will make such blending even less likely.

By making strategic communications an entity rather than a way of operating, organizations increase the divide between rhetoric and action. Communications umbrella organizations segregate public affairs activities from routine operations. Rather than looking to build new structures, we should be changing the processes. Strategic communication should permeate the organization. Leaders should weigh the effects of their actions against effects on the population or adversary perception and train their troops to think likewise. A model



(U.S. Navy, PO2 David Quillen)

U.S. Army soldiers with the 318th Psychological Operations Company distribute *Baghdad Now* in the East Rashid region of Baghdad, Iraq, 11 July 2007.



(U.S. Navy, LCDR John Gay)

U.S. Army COL Greg Julian, public affairs officer for the United States Forces-Afghanistan, meets with villagers in Tagab, Afghanistan, 27 January 2009.

“strat comm” savvy public affairs officer is one who thinks of achieving desired effects through prudent public affairs activities, implements and integrates communication strategies and techniques supporting all operations, and provides sound advice to the commander. How do we move toward this ideal?

Education and Training

New “strat comm” structures and public affairs reorganization did not happen arbitrarily. Leaders need to solve problems, public affairs officers are not always part of the solution, and neither has received adequate training to operate in today’s information environment. Without the requisite skills and knowledge, leaders experiment with communication deficiencies including contracted outsourcing for these functions. Had public affairs officers produced desired effects consistently, there would have been no reorganizations and perhaps better advice to commanders about outsourcing. This is not the fault of public affairs officers. They are products of the military system. They have been successful by happenstance, not by design. Like their commanders, they have not received the necessary communication education, training, or resources.

A recent article, “In Search of the Art and Science of Strategic Communication,” by Dennis M. Murphy, states that “doctrinal underpinnings are absent” and the institutional culture prefers conventional kinetic applications. Murphy thinks the military needs a

“forcing-function” to drive information efforts. He suggests instituting a commander-articulated “information end-state” alongside the doctrinally established military end-state that drives all operational planning.²³ This approach will shorten the timeline for bringing the military toward Mullen’s call to shift to “a way of thinking.”²⁴ However, this is only a starting point.

Declaring an information end-state will not make commanders better in communication or grasping the strategic implications of their actions and rhetoric. Hastings suggests a deeper institutional change is necessary. He says we need to

give commanders the breadth and depth of understanding to operate in the information realm. He observes that the “very top guys get it” but “as you move down to the colonel levels, are they going to have to learn the lessons as the others did?”²⁵ Hastings thinks communication instruction for officers should be given from accession, reinforced at every level of institutional education throughout an officer’s career, and incorporated into training. He points out that all officers, regardless of specialty, learn the value and necessity of planning for enabling functions, such as logistics or signal support, without which military operations fail. Communication and public affairs are just as critical, particularly for today’s counterinsurgency operations, yet are not thoroughly taught.²⁶

The paucity in communication education, exacerbated by a lack of doctrine, is not surprising because we do not view it as an enabling function. New military officers are expected to become experts in the complex art and science of warfighting through rigorous courses and training directly associated with their specialty. These specialty courses vary in length from six months to a year and leave them little time for non-critical tasks. The public affairs officer basic qualification course for all military services is 43 days.²⁷ It is the only required public affairs-specific training for the remainder of an officer’s career. Because public affairs officer selection differs among the military services, the amount of on-the-job experience attained by the time an officer reaches mid-level and senior ranks vary. Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps public affairs officers typically begin

their careers shortly after entry into service as lieutenants or ensigns. Many Army public affairs officers enter the field after more than 10 years in service in other Army specialties.²⁸ Both of these accession methods are beneficial. Beginning a career and remaining in that field for the duration of the service obligation produces highly experienced, specialized personnel. However, military services currently favor combat arms skills, so such singular specialization may preclude selection to senior grades. Conversely, the Army's model provides public affairs officers operational experience in other fields, producing a better-rounded professional whom combat arms practitioners may consider more credible. None of the services has routinely promoted public affairs officers to general officer levels. Only the Navy and the Army have career public affairs flag and general officers.

Military career progression requires officers, including public affairs officers, to attend an intermediate level education course and then, if selected, one of the senior service colleges. These institutions present opportunities to incorporate increasing levels of communication education. When selected to attend these schools, public affairs officers can contribute to their colleagues' understanding of communication integration. As an officer progresses in rank, opportunities for specialized communication, public diplomacy, and other associated fields should be required. We should provide all senior leaders with the academic foundations to apply strategic communication in an operational environment that demands interagency cooperation and synchronization in U.S. interventions or conflict. The Nation needs to produce military leaders who think beyond kinetic solutions. This should not be the exception, but the norm.

In addition to institutional opportunities afforded all officers, public affairs officers have limited opportunities to train with industry and attend graduate programs. Expansion of these programs with the addition of strategic studies and communication academic fellowships to think-tanks and graduate schools can create the needed cadre of senior-level public affairs experts. Along with well-educated, forward-thinking strategic leaders, equally qualified and capable public affairs officers are needed to advise them and prevent the blurring of lines between propaganda and appropriate public information.

Conclusion

This article is not a comprehensive exploration of the full scope of strategic communications, public affairs, and information operations challenges. Other considerations in preparing military leaders and public affairs officers to operate in the information environment include education in sociology, anthropology, and related fields. These areas would certainly provide officers with a better appreciation for the human-factor, as could expansion of foreign language proficiency and foreign military exchange programs.

This article looks narrowly at recent changes in communication approaches and public affairs issues. My recommendations include—

- Establishing, either by law or by regulation, parameters for military information operations and public information.
- Separating public affairs activities from influence operations to remove real or perceived bleed-over.
- Re-instituting strong public affairs and information operations integration across all staff planning and functions.
- Reestablishing public affairs as a special staff function where it has been abdicated.
- Changing doctrine to force deliberate planning for communication.
- Changing educational institutions to better educate officers on communication and strategic effects throughout their careers.
- Improving and expanding specialized public affairs officer training.

Existing gray areas in military communication activities leave room for the possibility of irrevocable damage to the U.S. military's credibility and the reputation of the United States. Today's wars are, and many future conflicts may likely be, counterinsurgencies. The lynchpin of such conflicts is the indigenous population. When they have sufficient trust and confidence in their government and international partners, they will win.²⁹ If the U.S. military operates poorly and proves to be untrustworthy in word and deed, it dooms itself and the Nation's well-meaning interventions to failure. As the war in Afghanistan continues and the U.S. military prepares for whatever may come next, we must make changes now to how the military operates and communicates to the public and the world. The Nation's credibility is at stake. **MR**

NOTES

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2. Geoff Morrell, DOD News Briefing, 26 March 2010, <www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4591>.
3. David Ignatius, "Caution lights for the military's 'information war,'" *The Washington Post*, 24 March 2010.
4. The term "propaganda" is not defined in U.S. code, U.S. military doctrine for information, or public operations. For the purposes of this paper, it means the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purposes of persuasion to help or injure an institution or cause. As a public affairs practitioner, I interpret the intent of public affairs restrictions against propaganda as meaning the release or withholding of information in an attempt to persuade the U.S. public rather than simply to inform.
5. Jeff Gerth and Scott Shane, "U.S. is Said to Pay to Plant Articles in Iraq Papers," *The New York Times*, 30 November 2005, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/01/politics/01propaganda.html?pagewanted=all>>.
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8. Robert T. Hastings, Jr., "Principles of Strategic Communication," U.S. Department of Defense Memorandum for Secretaries of Military Departments, 15 August 2008.
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14. ADM Michael G. Mullen, "From the Chairman—Strategic Communication: Getting Back to Basics," *Joint Force Quarterly* 55 (4th quarter 2009), 2-4.
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(Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 13 February 2006), II-1.

16. Joint Publication P 3-61, *Public Affairs* (Washington, DC: GPO, 9 May 2005), vii-xi.
17. Robert M. Gates, "Landon Lecture" (Manhattan: Kansas State University, 26 November 2007), <www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1199>.
18. I draw these conclusions from my experiences as the Combined Joint Task Force-101 and the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) public affairs officer during OEF IX, March 2008-June 2009. This division replaced a headquarters that had adopted the subordination of public affairs to the effects director. The departing unit's public affairs officer and external observers recommended returning to the traditional public affairs organization. Under the effects cell, the outgoing unit experienced reduced timeliness in information release; over-production of soft news press releases (which, as one reporter confided, was viewed as "useless U.S. propaganda"); and an inability to provide candid public affairs advice to the commander. Based upon these recommendations, CJTF-101 reverted to public affairs as a special staff function but with command emphasis to integrate public affairs activities across all operations and for all operations to integrate with public affairs.
19. Mullen, 4.
20. ISAF biography, <<http://www.isaf.nato.int/en/about-isaf/leadership/rear-admiral-gregory-j.-smith.html>>.
21. COL Gregory Julian, Chief of Public Affairs, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, interview on 23 March 2010.
22. Ignatius.
23. Dennis M. Murphy, "In Search of the Art and Science of Strategic Communication," *Parameters* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2009-2010): 107-108.
24. Mullen, 2.
25. Hastings interview.
26. Ibid.
27. Course description, Public Affairs Qualification Course, U.S. Defense Information School, <www.dinfos.osd.mil/dinfosweb/CourseInfo/course_catalog.asp>.
28. I am an Army officer with 21 years of service, 10 as a public affairs officer. The observations provided are based upon my experiences and understanding of the public affairs accession and officer career development.
29. U.S. Army, Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006), section 1-3, 1-115, 1-118.

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