

Being first to take and disseminate photos or videos of an incident offers advantage in shaping perceptions and reactions

U.S. Marine Corps (Joe Kane)

Strategic Communication

AND THE Combatant Commander

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It is important to emphasize the indispensable role that combatant commanders play in strategic communication (SC), which includes the coordination of statecraft, public affairs (PA), public diplomacy, military information operations, and other actions through which we engage and influence key global communities. Given the current negative assessment of U.S. efforts in this arena, a concurrent, balanced, and collaborative effort is required. Combatant commanders and their staffs, as well as deployed forces, are important instru-

ments of influence. They are “current” in terms of what might have resonance and what will not. They have built personal relations and are unparalleled conduits of influence in virtually every country. These commanders realize that every member of their commands who interacts with any international audience, no matter how large or small, is their most important strategic communicator at that moment and location.

This article explores the role of the combatant commander as a central conduit for, contributor to, and implementer of U.S.

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Government strategic communication. It also examines the concept of the “Influence Cycle” and presents a series of focused recommendations for the improvement of this critical national security function.

The Commander’s Role

The combatant commander leads the largest single group of America’s strategic communicators in almost any area of the world—the uniformed men and women of the Armed Forces and a growing number of civilians under his command. To be effective, he must have an effective SC architecture that consists of qualified people, analysis, technology, systems, procedures, advocates, education, linguistic and lexicon knowledge, innovation, fusion, coordination, cooperation, and effective linkages among strategic, operational, and tactical levels of engagement, as well as among joint, combined, and interagency players and planners. Successful architecture also requires resonance, education and training, and incentives. Finally, the combatant commander’s role in strategic communication is now mandated by Annex Y of the Joint Operation Planning and Execution System (JOPES) process.

In terms of multinational and coalition issues:

- Combatant commanders can/must/do play a central role.
- “Standing” information coordinating committees would help.
- There is a mandate for SC inclusion from the outset, not as an afterthought, for all operational plans (OPLANs), concept of operations (CONOPs) plans, Department of Defense (DOD)-sponsored regional centers, and all transnational issues including but not limited to combating terrorism, counterproliferation, and counterdrug operations.
- While we have some degree of unilateral capacity, we should tap into a much wider set of conduits and capabilities, and be actively involved in helping to increase capacity; we need to engage the U.S. interagency community, private sector, and allies in these efforts.
- Some allies and friends have better human intelligence, superior equipment, more resonant conduits, and significantly more presence and knowledge in areas where we have little or none. Some of our partners may be open to providing cooperative analysis and feedback, or engaging in combined

activities or even research, development, test, evaluation, and acquisition.

Based on experience in both Afghanistan and Iraq, it is clear that while planning for military operations has a broad scope of considerations, planning for SC effects remains neither pervasively integrated into the process nor, in some cases, even a consideration for operations. Even what constitutes

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the information environment is not well understood. Planning for SC effects needs to be incorporated into the targeting cycle regarding poststrike influence activities, a role for which the Intelligence Community is poorly prepared. We remain either reactive or overly incremental in giving visibility to the facts, allowing the adversary or adversarial media to retain the “offensive.” Worse, our reaction is often slowed by our bureaucracy to the point where efforts are ineffective. If adversarial media use disinformation, not responding to disinformation emboldens those who produce and propagate it. Disinformation needs to be actively countered as rapidly and vigorously as possible. Failing to respond tends to validate the disinformation.

The Influence Cycle

Air Force Colonel John Boyd developed his concept of decision superiority from his experience flying combat missions during the Korean War. Known as an OODA (observe, orient, decide, act) loop, Boyd’s concept holds that whichever decision system—whether an individual warrior or an entire command structure—can *observe* what is happening, *orient* as to what those observations mean, *decide* what to do about it, and *act* to execute that decision will generally win the contest. But the concept is focused on short-term, fast-acting decisionmaking. Can it influence outcomes over the course of decades?

The answer is “not exactly,” but the approach itself is useful and provides a way forward. It is important here to be aware of the information environment, the combination of information connectivity and the networks

that convey the informational content that creates a cognitive effect. The Influence Cycle begins with the recognition that every audience—whether as small as one individual or as large as the global Islamic population—is constantly sensing the content carried by rapidly expanding global connectivity. The audience reaches out to obtain some of this information, some is sent to the audience, and much just “happens.” The goal of any influencer/strategic communicator is for the audience to internalize that information so it becomes a set of perceptions favorable to the attainment of particular objectives. This new set of perceptions must be constantly reinforced and developed—especially in the face of inevitable adversary reaction—so they become a new set of beliefs, which thus enables a set of observable behaviors. If the behavior is observable and its change from previous behavior is measurable, we have that most valuable commodity: a metric for gauging the effectiveness of an influence campaign.

Any professional influencer can quote the necessary steps of what amounts to a template for influence, beginning with a clear understanding of the intended objective and cultural analysis of the key audience, then progressing through the formulation of the message, determination of the most effective transmission medium, and assessment of the effort’s success. Each of these steps is critical in its own right, and when viewed holistically, they clearly imply that the task is very difficult. While there are certainly quantitative methodologies that can aid some of the necessary analytical steps, such as polling and audience measurement, an influence campaign cannot be developed using a slide rule. It needs the expert hands of people with long education and experience in the arts of influence, and any advertiser or political persuader knows this. Get the audience and cultural analysis wrong, and our influence effort may actually stiffen the adversary’s negative perceptions toward us. Get the wrong message to that audience—never forgetting the most important form of message or content is an action that the target audience observes—and all the hard work of the audience analysis may be wasted. Select the wrong means of message delivery—shortwave radio when the audience is on Twitter or is in the mosque every Friday—and all the positive work of the earlier steps will be for nothing. Finally, if we do not have a useful means for

measurement, we may not even know that we have been successful. But marrying this analytical process to the Influence Cycle will provide the SC planner and the combatant commander with a useful approach for the planning and conduct of the influence campaign.

However, unlike the OODA loop from which it is drawn, nothing about the Influence Cycle is likely to happen quickly; the measurement period will not be hours or days—it will probably be years to decades. This is not a tool for tactical impact on short-period crises, but is a strategic weapon for employment in long-term campaigns such as the “war of ideas.”

Recommendations

1. Each combatant command should establish a Strategic Communication and Response Element to prepare for and respond to propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation. The Multi-National Force–Iraq SC section is supposed to integrate, coordinate, and synchronize information efforts, acknowledging different audiences as well as different missions. However, the mandate is for coordination and not overstepping bounds while contributing to the achievement of the same objectives.

2. Each combatant command should establish a standing Interagency Information Coordinating Committee consisting of the J2, J3, J5, counterterrorism, and information operations (IO) planner, political advisor, special advisor, PA officer, deployed joint task force representative, legal counsel, and, when appropriate, Embassy public affairs, political officer, station chief, joint psychological operations task force, allied representatives, and regional U.S. Agency for International Development representatives.

3. If there is SC policy guidance, use it. If not, ask for it. In many cases, summaries of conclusions from policy deliberations have been disseminated but not further distributed to the lowest level necessary and laterally among all the players who are either affected or who have the capacity to influence foreign audiences. Draft needed guidance. Consider asking specific questions as a means to influence the policy process. Combatant commanders are far more influential in focusing interagency attention than staffs. Requests for policy/SC guidance should be in writing. Recommend “Personal for” messages or memoranda.

4. Intelligence divisions should approach SC requests for information differently in support of a continuous requirement for an “influence campaign.” Include preclearance for declassification of prestrike intelligence supporting the target rationale, cockpit video, other aspect imagery, attack details, and other relevant, explanatory, and “defensible” information—all within existing authorities of the commander. When considering the influence objective and strategic and operational influence effects, apply intelligence gain/loss considerations, but beware of letting the tactical needs of the moment outweigh the long-term strategic need for success in the influence effort.

5. Each combatant command should immediately build a media “order of battle” for its area of operations, encompassing both “adversary” and “neutral/friendly” media. This should be an essential part of the intelligence preparation of the operational environment. DOD has several systems, albeit not yet fully funded, that could significantly enhance strategic, operational, and tactical information management. Combatant commanders should demand immediate funding to facilitate the earliest possible deployment of these systems to commands, forward headquarters, and joint task forces. These include

each combatant command should develop appropriate external information requests that identify the interagency requirements

Media Mapper, the Information Strategy Decision Support System, OpenSource.gov, and MAPS. Currency must be maintained on each country’s indigenous media as well as external media that reach the populace. Data must include frequencies, broadcast times, key communicators, caricatures in newspapers, and so forth. Commanders should ensure that their staffs track what has been reported, when, and by whom to catalogue egregious broadcasts that incite violence.

6. Combatant commands should maintain and catalogue data on the popular culture of the countries in their respective areas of responsibility. The Strategic Studies Detachments of the 4th Psychological Operations Group, assisted by the Defense Intelligence Agency Human Factors personnel



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and including analytical outreach to Defense attachés, are key sources of this information. These data are critical to identifying the conduits, form, and medium through which to convey a particular message or theme in order to reach those whose attitudes remain vulnerable to “shaping” the youth. That is not to say that we ignore civilian elites, other policymakers, academics, or senior military leaders; it is only to emphasize the importance of reaching those who will be in positions of power and influence in the future, and whom we have a chance to affect now through longer term interagency efforts. We often focus on the decisionmakers of today while forgetting those of tomorrow. We only need to look at the population by ages worldwide to know that the youth cannot be ignored—and we only need to read the newspapers to understand why.

7. Each combatant command should develop appropriate external information requests (EIRs) that identify the interagency requirements/desires of the commanders to support their respective informational efforts in theater, including peacetime activities, transnational threats, and existing OPLANs/CONPLANS. These would be forwarded to both the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and Secretary of Defense for insertion into the National Security Council (NSC) process. For standard OPLANs and CONPLANS, they would be included in Annex Ys and submitted to the NSC for review and coordination. EIRs would also

include combatant commander–desired U.S. Government interlocutors, regional experts (Arab-Americans, for example), and internationally recognized figures to “fill the information void” on regional media that is all too often exploited by our adversaries, resulting in their getting their message out aggressively and our being reactive.

8. For command post exercises and simulations, strategic communication, operational, and tactical information operations must be incorporated to identify strengths as well as weaknesses and the degree to which allied/coalition participation and contribution are possible. Full-spectrum SC simulations need to be conducted to coordinate, integrate, and synergize activities during deterrence, conflict, and postconflict phases, as well as to identify resource shortfalls. In addition, combatant commanders need to improve simulations so that they incorporate effects/reactions as a result of the information efforts as well as to ensure simulations include a realistic number of events for the process to be exercised.

9. Each combatant command should issue IO effects synchronization guidance, coordinated with the PA guidance, and disseminated during the information coordinating committee meetings described above. Involve military PA in each step of the process, resulting in guidance in line with the overarching approach and nested in the public communications guidance given U.S. Embassies and missions. Active rather than passive guidance is needed in most cases, tapping into known and predicted foreign journalist interest.

10. As critical contributions to addressing the ever-increasing number of jihadist Web sites that provide “inciteful” language and recruitment enticements, combatant commands should develop Web initiatives in accordance with DOD guidelines that assist in achievement of theater and national informational objectives. All of the elements of information operations, including computer network and operations and psychological operations (PSYOP), need to be integrated in this effort. Two useful examples/models might be the *Southeast European Times*, produced by U.S. European Command (USEUCOM), and *Magharebia.com*, originally created at USEUCOM and now operated by U.S. Africa Command.

11. For select operations, rehearse contingency options with the Department

of State and the interagency community, channeled through agencies to the Deputy National Security Advisor for Communications to ensure consistency and coordination with national-level guidance. Determine what effects are needed based on a range of possible outcomes, and reach agreement on talking points, language, timing, communicators, means of dissemination, and feedback conduits.

12. Within each combatant command, and via J7, modify the JOPES process and make concomitant doctrinal changes to include the appropriate responses in the influence realm, creating a more comprehensive approach beyond the kinetic effects of an attack. Historically, we have concentrated our efforts on the planning and operational phase and on effects regarding the target only. In our current approach, we “own” everything up through the strike, and the adversary (and his media support) “owns” everything past the strike. We need to reverse this trend. Most targeting work/matrices only go until the bomb is dropped. We need to extend that matrix to deal with post-action effects. This will allow us to be proactive instead of reactive. Talking points must be “loaded” and “dropped” in synch with the bomb.

13. Be prepared to follow and sometimes precede kinetic strikes with “influence strikes.” Using precleared information that supports our position, we must demonstrate combat power within the constraints of rules of engagement to achieve objectives within

the context of the overall mission and strategic goals. If we are on offense, the adversary is on defense.

14. Greatly expand our use of imagery to support our rhetoric. This requires pervasive use/augmentation of Joint Combat Camera, PSYOP electronic news gathering capacity, possible addition/activation of Reserve Component PA, or other photographic expertise. Ensure sufficient systems are available to uplink/downlink both still photos and video for cataloging and selective use in disseminating to desired foreign and domestic audiences. Ensure and budget for satellite time to ensure transmission. This was a major deficiency during Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, despite recognition of the problem during *Enduring Freedom* and extensive coordination with Joint Combat Camera, their preparedness,

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and their recognition of the public diplomacy importance of the images only they could “capture.” Rapid release of the images to the open source world is key. Delays in releasing these images hurt us. We have to be first. Just as in sports, nobody cares about second; the images that come in second will not get play time, no matter how accurate. Consideration





Strategic communication director for Combined Joint Task Force—Horn of Africa speaks during dedication of clinic in Tanga, Tanzania

might be given to attempting, in advance, to get copyright releases in case we do not get our own photographers/videographers to an incident scene before embedded press representatives do and there is a need to use other images on our products.

15. Consider, as U.S. Central Command did, embedding within DOD units (such as civil affairs, engineers, and medical) not only Western media, but also media such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiyah and from across the global range of print, visual, broadcast, and Web-based media. This will provide not only a sounding board for the truth, but also the most credible sources for the global audience since local media and reportage are almost always seen as the most believable to any audience. Connect our “embeds” with information response teams, as well as the appropriate operations command center.

16. Arrive first on scene to an attack area with an information response team. If we know we are going to hit a significant target, deploy a Combat Camera team and some operators either prepositioned or ready (with dedicated helicopter transportation) to “scoop” adversarial media and preempt their stories. Get “before and after” pictures to prove we were monitoring a target (with consideration of operational risk) beforehand, and to avoid any disputes over the authenticity of the site and the environs.

17. Bring in the media, establish the facts, and show them sites where alleged attacks on civilian targets occurred. Have embeds ready to go just after sensitive site exploitation is done. If we feed these types of stories to Al Jazeera and Al Arabiyah, for example, or let others scoop them, this will push our side of the story to their audiences. Pushing information is critical, and historically we do not do it very well. An active PA posture is far preferable to remaining passive.

18. “Red team” the actions from an adversarial propaganda perspective. Identify and game likely scenarios and possible preemptive as well as responsive actions that might be appropriate. Because actions are the most important form of communication and always have more resonance, the spectrum should include PA, public diplomacy, IO, and special activities as well as military actions. Have a dedicated team of subject matter experts available and prepared to defend/explain actions in front of the press to identify inconsistencies or discrepancies in any adversarial disinformation that is disseminated that we should exploit/point out. As part of the risk assessment/mitigation of any significant operation, influence factors need consideration, with a preemption/reaction plan ready to execute from the proper communicators and through the appropriate channels. It is critical that we are hard on ourselves during this game

since we tend always to win, lulling ourselves into dangerous complacency.

19. Similar to combat operational debriefings for the media during times of “hot” war, ensure that we take the informational initiative in operations other than war/low-intensity conflict by doing the same, taking our information to television first and establishing the facts, thus preempting disinformation or propaganda that could be developed regarding an incident.

20. Use an organizational template (matrix) to coordinate actions and options. When guidance is sent out to action agents, it takes the form of whatever tool that agency or office uses to communicate. *Always* balance the need for proactive participation with operational security.

21. Combatant commanders should use the U.S. Special Operations Command joint mission support activity to plan, coordinate, and implement transregional PSYOP.

Implications

Although nation-states and political entities have exercised some of these principles and operations for centuries, the information environment—especially cyberspace—is a new concept. We are not well organized—strategically, bureaucratically, or procedurally—to operate effectively in this space, certainly not in comparison to recent and current adversaries. We have not dedicated sufficient resources—human, organizational, or fiscal—for success. Nor have we created the training and educational mechanisms within our primary strategic communication arms—the State and Defense Departments—to adequately prepare future strategic leaders to operate in this environment. We must see our international partners and allies as indispensable actors and treat them accordingly, involving them in the planning and conduct of critical influence operations and campaigns. The good news is that we have the ability to improve every one of these processes and capabilities. It is up to us—and the time to begin is now. **JFQ**