



FFI-rapport 2013/02227

# An essay on Strategic Communication, Information Operations and Public Affairs



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29 January 2014

FFI-rapport 2013/02227

1207

P: ISBN 978-82-464-2338-8

E: ISBN 978-82-464-2339-5

## **Keywords**

Strategisk kommunikasjon

Informasjonsoperasjoner

Presse og informasjon

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## English summary

This report presents an essay written as a part of the Information Operations Postgraduate Certification (IOPGCERT) at Cranfield Defence and Security, Defence Academy – College of Management and Technology, Cranfield University, United Kingdom.

The IOPGCERT is a part-time, distributed course organized into three 6-months sections. Each section has a five day residential at the Defence Academy, which forms the basis for online syndicate work, essay assignments and private study during the rest of the sections. The main modules covered by the course are Information Operations Planning; Target Audience Dynamics; Measurement, Targeting and Monitoring; Defensive Information Management and Operations in Cyberspace.

The essay in this report was written as part of the Defensive Information Management module, for the topic Strategic Communication. It presents a point of view which is relevant and in line with some avenues of research in the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment's (FFI's) research project Military Information Operations. As the essay was assessed to have a high level of quality by subject matter experts on Cranfield, the project decided to publish it as a separate report so that its distribution would be wider. The essay assignment in its entirety was:

*The rise (and fall?) of Strategic Communications underlines the difficulty of fusing and coordinating Media Operations and Information Operations. Discuss, noting any impact on your own planning.*

The only changes to the essay, compared to the submitted and reviewed version, is the introduction of section headings (introduction, main body and conclusion), and minor corrections of a few citations.

## Sammendrag

Denne rapporten gjengir et essay skrevet som del av graden Information Operations Postgraduate Certification (IOPGCERT) ved Cranfield Defence and Security, Defence Academy – College of Management and Technology, Cranfield University, Storbritannia.

IOPGCERT er et hovedsakelig nettbasert deltidsstudium som er organisert i tre 6-måneders-seksjoner. Hver seksjon omfatter en femdagers arbeidsøkt med oppmøte ved universitetet, som danner grunnlaget for nettbasert syndikatarbeid, essayoppgaver og egen lesing i resten av perioden. Hovedmodulene som dekkes av kurset er informasjonsoperasjonsplanlegging; målgruppedynamikk; måling, targeting og monitorering; defensiv informasjonshåndtering; og operasjoner i cyberspace.

Essayet i denne rapporten er knyttet til modulen defensiv informasjonshåndtering, for temaet strategisk kommunikasjon. Det presenterer et perspektiv som er i tråd med noen av prosjektets refleksjoner innen temaet. Da fagekspertene ved Cranfield vurderte essayet til å holde et meget høyt faglig nivå, besluttet prosjektet å publisere essayet som en egen rapport slik at flere kan dra nytte av arbeidet. Essayoppgavens ordlyd var:

*Framveksten (og undergangen?) av strategisk kommunikasjon understreker utfordringene med å fusjonere og koordinere mediaoperasjoner og informasjonsoperasjoner. Diskuter; bemerk eventuell innvirkning på egen planlegging.*

*[The rise (and fall?) of Strategic Communications underlines the difficulty of fusing and coordinating Media Operations and Information Operations. Discuss, noting any impact on your own planning.]*

De eneste endringene som er gjort i essayet, sammenliknet med den innleverte og karaktersatte versjonen, er bruken av seksjonsoverskrifter (introduksjon, hoveddel og konklusjon), og mindre rettelser knyttet til noen få henvisninger.

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# 1 Essay on Strategic Communication, Information Operations and Public Affairs

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## 1.1 Essay Introduction

This essay considers different viewpoints on the challenges of fusing and coordinating Media Operations / Public Affairs (PA) and Information Operations (IO), and discusses the impact of the evolving understanding of strategic communication. The essay concludes that while the PA-IO debate is full of assertions difficult to evaluate, the true impact of strategic communication is the timely reorientation away from PA-IO firewall issues to the more crucial issues of correcting a flawed message influence model, taking into account what our actions communicate, and integrating audience perspectives into all planning.

The main sources representing the traditional PA perspective are two articles on the PA-IO relationship by Colonel Darley, and Lieutenant Colonel Keeton and Major McCann; plus General Meyer's infamous 2004 memo. For an opposing view, Major Sholtis' PA and IO article and Major Morgan's "Planning to Influence" guide are drawn upon. The understanding of strategic communication relies heavily on Rosa Brook's article "Confessions of a Strategic

Communicator”, “A Short History of Strategic Communication” slide set and her testimony to Congress. Paul’s book “Strategic Communication” and congressional testimony are also consulted. Corman et al’s “A 21st Century Model for Communication in the Global War of Ideas” is used for critiquing the message influence model. Note on terminology: For the sake of this essay, Public Affairs and Media Ops are deemed synonymous.

The essay is structured as follows. First, the viewpoints of “traditional” PA are presented, as well as the main opposing view. Their positions are then debated, with a focus on inform versus influence, and aspects of effectiveness (efficiency, culture, and credibility). This is followed by considerations of impact on own planning. Next, the addition of strategic communication to the mix is discussed. The true crucial issue is then identified, followed by implications for the way ahead. Finally, the essay concludes.

## **1.2 Main Body**

The conceptual landscape of information, influence and communication in the military is not easy to navigate. Polarized debates spanning diverse arguments and viewpoints abound; one of these is the debate of how and to what degree PA and IO should be coordinated and integrated. Of more recent issue is the question of what strategic communication is and what it brings to the table – if anything. It is a messy landscape where the unwary may enter to never return, or at least return somewhat half-baked.

Seen through the eyes of what might be called the PA traditionalists, everybody beside PA is suspect of sacrificing truth on the altar of tactical or operational effectiveness. Only PA does not and will never do so, and this is the self-perceived linchpin of PA’s credibility: PA informs; it does not influence, or God forbid, deceive (Keeton and McCann, 2005, p 84; Darley, 2005, p 10). In a memorandum by then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard Myers, the “necessity for PA to maintain its institutional credibility” is stressed, and creating “physically integrated PA/IO offices [...] have the potential to compromise the commander’s credibility with the media and the public” (Myers, 2004, p 2). PA takes a dim view of efforts aimed at “achieving effects”, even if they don’t directly involve lying (Keeton and McCann, 2005, p 83-84; Kucera, 2005). Just the notion of becoming tainted with objectives beyond “pure” informing – even by association – instantly puts PA on its guard (Keeton and McCann, 2005, p 94); at its most extreme, even talking is shunned (Paul, 2008, Chapter 5, Section "In Practice", para. 4). The PA traditionalists are not alone; Congress too weighs in (quoted in Gregory, 2005, p 19); and the media is always alert at the possibility of being deceived or influenced by officials, as the brouhaha surrounding the short-lived Office of Strategic Influence demonstrates (Schmitt and Dao, 2002). The answer has been a firewall (Gregory, 2005, p 15,18), which even the Public Relations Society of America has a stated recommendation of maintaining (PRSA, 2005, p 3).

Yet there are forces even within the PA community which opposes this strait-laced view. It is based on myths, says Major Sholtis; IO does not have to lie, nor will the perception of PA-IO contact irrevocably destroy credibility forever (Sholtis, 2005b, p 98-99). Credibility is not an absolute. Furthermore the notion of separate information spheres for PA and IO is naïve and

results in uncoordinated information products with unpredictable effects on all audiences (Sholtis, 2005b, p 102). Major Morgan concurs – IO should be rooted in the truth and remain congruent with PA (Morgan, 2006, p 10); that mere PA-IO association is damaging is an unsubstantiated assertion (Morgan, 2006, p 5); and successful planning requires direct PA-IO collaboration (Morgan, 2006, p 8).

Is it possible to inform without influencing, as the PA traditionalists assume, or do all information activities have influence as their ultimate purpose (Morgan, 2006, p 9)? Jowett and O'Donnell categorize communication by the three classes of information, persuasion and propaganda, with the sender's purpose as the main classifying property (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2006, p 29). Under this model the PA traditionalists are right: informing differs from influencing, as long as your motives are pure. There are some obvious weaknesses in this categorization (eg the real "intent" may be contested and is content really irrelevant?). Paul argues that inform and influence cannot be meaningfully separated; only truth and falsehood can (Paul, 2011a, p 16). The clincher, however, is that public affairs officers themselves freely admit that value-free information does not exist, and what they do (with truthful information) is influencing (Helmus et al., 2007, p 38). This makes "just informing" a rather unconvincing claim.

This does not necessarily mean that PA can or should fully enter the influence game; the implications of this must be understood. From an operational perspective, effectiveness rules: given that PA is actually influencing, would it not be more effective to integrate PA and IO tightly without any firewall? Meyer's memo stated IO and PA have different audiences, scope and intent; PA informing inwards and IO influencing outwards (Myers, 2004, p 1). Yet the information environment of today does not have clean borders between audiences (Helmus et al., 2007, p 21), and if both activities influence, the need for tight integration is convincing. NATO's fluctuating command structure in ISAF illustrates the difficulties brought by the PA-IO firewall (Reding et al., 2010, p 15-21); tighter integration would undoubtedly improve the potential for internal efficiency.

Darley, however, fears that with tighter integration, the operational culture IO represents will threaten the cultural idiosyncrasy of PA, which safeguards the truth-based, strategic long-term perspective against short-term tactical gains (Darley, 2005, p 9-10). It is tempting to agree, given recent history (Berkowitz, 2009, p 299-301) and the tendency of the immediate to dominate any agenda. However, in theory it should be possible to cultivate an organizational culture that also considers the long-term perspective. Worst case, it takes a very, very long time for the long-term loss to become apparent enough to weigh up against the more immediately obvious short-term gains. To avoid this, additional safeguards may have to be institutionalized to ensure counterweights to the short-term perspective exist.

Effectiveness is not only determined by internal efficiency; other factors may come into play as well, especially the crucial issue of credibility. Some nations do both state and behave like temporary military payoffs gained by lying to the press is worth international condemnation and the hit on credibility (Gowing, 2009, p 60); but for NATO truthfulness in PA is doctrine (NATO

IMS, 2011, p 12) and presumably reflected nationally. The impact on credibility by tighter PA-IO integration and the consequence of this is a most contentious issue with each camp predicting a different outcome. The accusations of intent to misinform and deceive can be alleviated by following Paul's recommendation of moving the firewall to separate truth from falsehood rather than influence (ie walling off black/deception) (Paul, 2011b, p 181). Yet the perception of the public and the media may not be easily swayed by arguments rooted in conceptual consistency. It might be that to publicly admit, even for ourselves, that we are consciously influencing and persuading others when we inform, is politically and socially – perhaps even legally (Metzgar, 2012) – unacceptable, even if everybody knows it to be true. For now there is insufficient evidence to judge the outcome of such a move.

Choosing a PA-IO perspective will impact own planning. A solution where PA remains firewalled will maintain the (illusion of the?) inform versus influence divide, reinforce cultural uniqueness, chaperone long-term strategic truth-handling, and presumably maintain the existing cordial (?) relationship with the media. On the other hand, a solution with tighter integration and relocation of the firewall will admit to influence as at least a partial objective, may unintentionally sacrifice remote long-term gains for those tangible and short-term due to cultural change, and possibly upset the existing relationship with the media and the public.

Introducing new, fuzzy concepts to an already complicated debate is not necessarily the brightest of ideas, yet this is exactly what many believe is the case with the term “strategic communication”. In fact, an official memo from the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs in late 2012 seems to conclude that the whole thing has been a pointless waste of time (Little, 2012): Strategic communication added a layer of redundant staffing basically doing public affairs; therefore these staff elements are stood down while the term is banished. The only notion kept is “communication synchronization” – which basically means that J5, J3 and PA all go in the same direction. Can we then conclude that strategic communication has both risen and fallen, and can be safely put to rest?

Not so, says former DoD-appointee Rosa Brooks, this was merely a skirmish in a long turf war. A memo which only pertains to PA's internal organization doesn't really have much impact beyond that (Brooks, 2012, p 1). The understanding of strategic communication has evolved beyond this reductionist interpretation. In her irreverent but elegantly illustrated history of strategic communication, Brooks explains (Brooks, 2009): Strategic communication started out as an answer to the need for improved messaging, with the active use of PA, Public Diplomacy (PD), and psychological operations (PSYOP). When this didn't make everybody like us, it was determined that message fratricide was the problem, and strategic communication became focused on integrated communication planning. But this didn't give the expected effect either – we still weren't liked. Then came the enlightenment: strategic communication is not about what we say on its own, it is about what our actions communicate and the gap between saying and doing *as perceived by others*. It is necessary to listen, engage and understand more, than further coordinate own messaging.

The old idea of increased and coordinated messaging magically fixing everything is indeed debunked, deservedly so. From this perspective strategic communication has fallen, without really aiding the resolution of the PA-IO debate. But if one accepts the viewpoint of Brooks – and it seems more consistent and compelling than the PA’s ‘it’s nothing new’ – strategic communication has ultimately not fallen but become something else. To quote Brooks, strategic communication is now viewed as the “integration of issues of audience and stakeholder perception and response into policy-making, planning and operations, at every level... and the orchestration of actions, words and images to achieve our strategic goals” (Brooks, 2009, p 12). From this point of view, strategic communication brings something new to the table, which should be an important consideration in all that is planned and executed.

It is pertinent to ask, why did we really believe that improved integration of messaging would be the magical solution? Corman et al. have an answer: we have been using a message influence model which conflates information and meaning. Meaning cannot be transferred by information between two points (Corman et al., 2007, p 7); meaning is the result of a non-linear meaning-making process. Unfortunately, information-corrective techniques that make sense in a Shannon-and-Weaver’esque system, can have opposite results on meaning (Corman et al., 2007, p 8). Yet this model pervades post-9/11-thinking on PA, IO, and media strategy (Corman et al., 2007, p 6). Other sources corroborates this: Sholtis explicitly applies Shannon and Weaver’s transmission model on PA (Sholtis, 2005a), and the most recent US IO doctrine, dated late November 2012, implies the same linear relationships between information (meaning) and effects (US Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2012, p I-3-I-8). Though, some have indeed become enlightened: Paul states that shifting to an improved influence model should be part of a high level of ambition for strategic communication (ie, the run part of walk, crawl, run) (Paul, 2011b, p 168), while Brooks captures the same insight in her exposition of the DoD perspective (Brooks, 2011, p 3,10-11).

However, this does not paint a pretty picture of the challenges lying ahead of us. It is, in fact, quite a painful realization. Because if this is correct – and the evidence does seem to lead that way – the military planning processes (and civilian for that matter) have a fundamental flaw in how influence is conceptualized. To achieve success, it may be necessary to shift from a linear message based process to a non-linear, evolutionary approach (Corman et al., 2007, p 9-14). This is the true impact on own planning, far beyond immediate PA-IO firewall implications. Unfortunately, institutionalizing non-linear planning processes does not sound easy.

### **1.3 Conclusion**

Ultimately, strategic communication has not resolved the difficulty of fusing and coordinating PA and IO. Nor has the issue been otherwise satisfactorily resolved. Strategic communication has, however, shown that this is no longer the most pressing issue it initially was thought to be. The real issue is how to transform the military organization to plan and execute its activities in line with a more fundamentally sound model for influence. This includes moving away from the Shannon and Weaver inspired communication model, getting a far better grasp on what our actions communicate to different audiences, and integrating these perspectives in all planning.

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