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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.

Public Affairs:
Maintaining Credibility While Evolving
with Strategic Communication

by

Carla M. McCarthy

CDR, U.S. Navy

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: _____

6 November 2007

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Abstract

Public Affairs: Maintaining Credibility While Evolving with Strategic Communication

Public affairs has been identified as a key component of strategic communication, but incorporating public affairs within a strategic communication framework within the military, without compromising credibility, has been a source of friction as commanders have tried dealing with the war on terrorism from different angles, especially in the information environment. In light of the turmoil over strategic communication, public affairs must maintain credibility as the operational commander's principal spokesperson, while also evolving to support strategic communication. This paper examines the issue through a review of what strategic communication is, examples of conflicts with credibility, the existing joint doctrine, and the current outlook of strategic communication as it is being used at the combatant command and joint force command levels and at the Department of Defense level. The paper concludes with some recommendations as strategic communication continues to evolve.

INTRODUCTION

“Effective communication by the United States must build upon coordinated actions and information at all levels of the (U.S. Government) to maintain credibility and trust.”¹

Public affairs has been identified as a key component of strategic communication, but incorporating public affairs within a strategic communication framework within the military, without compromising credibility, has been a source of friction as commanders have tried dealing with the war on terrorism from different angles, especially in the information environment. Much of the concern has dealt with interactions with other supporting capabilities of strategic communication, primarily information operations. The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review pointed out the need for credibility and trust through communication, “through an emphasis on consistency, veracity and transparency both in words and deeds,” in order to build “trusted networks that counter ideological support for terrorism.”²

However, much work remains to be done and while joint doctrine specifically for strategic communication has yet to be promulgated, confusion or the possibility of misinterpretation of intent is very likely both within the communities that are considered “components” of strategic communication and with the operational leaders who seek to employ strategic communication. Leaders know that strategic communication is critical to winning today’s conflicts, but there is still a lack of consensus regarding what strategic communication is and who exactly does it.

How the combatant commander or joint force commander employs public affairs in relation to strategic communication is critically important for the public affairs community and the military as a whole in order to retain credibility. It also affects how public affairs continues to contribute to joint operations across the Range of Military Operations. While

strategic communication has come to the forefront of concern in fighting the war on terrorism, military public affairs professionals are at times being viewed as synonymous or interchangeable with strategic communicators. Information operations officers are also being viewed interchangeably as strategic communicators, leaving room in both cases for misinterpretation and an unclear working relationship.

Public affairs has traditionally been the commander's avenue to external audiences, usually via the media. Everyone from the commander down to the operational planner recognizes that this thing called "strategic communication" is necessary, yet in June 2007 the Senate Armed Services Committee rejected some key funding requested by the Department of Defense to move along the institutionalization of strategic communication; the Committee cited that public affairs, along with public diplomacy and information operations were viewed as three "distinct functions," and that integrating them endangered the integrity of each.³ On the one hand, the Department of Defense is moving forward with a solution, and on the other, Congress is concerned with that solution.

In light of the turmoil over strategic communication, public affairs must maintain credibility as the operational commander's principal spokesperson, while also evolving to support strategic communication. This paper examines the issue through a review of what strategic communication is, examples of conflicts with credibility, the existing joint doctrine, and the current outlook of strategic communication as it is being used at the combatant command and joint force command levels and at the Department of Defense level. The paper concludes with some recommendations as strategic communication continues to evolve.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

The Department of State has the overall lead in integrating strategic communication throughout the U.S. Government, and the Department of Defense aims to “reflect the U.S. Government’s overall strategic objectives” as strategic communication evolves.⁴ At the national level, work remains to settle on a single definition or way ahead.

A lack of a national strategic communication plan or process has been pointed to as the reason that the United States is failing at the war of ideas, creating much debate but generating little progress. One argument surmises that the effort to bring together the various government agencies to produce a strategic communication plan has been hindered by lack of agreement, especially from “the public affairs community, which fears absorption into a national propaganda machine.” However, while deficiencies in the public affairs environment may be one explanation, this is a symptom of a “failure at a national level to find interagency agreement among the various departments and branches of government on the substance of what we want national strategic communications to convey to audiences of interest, and with what sense of urgency.”⁵ Without a strategic message, skeptics doubt that the U.S. can succeed at strategic communication, even if the interagency coordination aspect is fixed, people are trained, and a new “style of communication” is created.⁶

While the U.S. Government has been unsuccessful in agreeing on one single overarching definition of strategic communication, the Department of Defense recognized, in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review, that “the Department must instill communication assessments and processes into its culture, developing programs, plans, policy, information and themes to support Combatant Commanders that reflect the U.S. Government’s overall strategic objectives.”⁷

The Department of Defense further decided to define strategic communication within the September 2006 Strategic Communication Execution Roadmap as:

Focused United States Government processes and efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable to advance national interests and objectives through the use of coordinated information, themes, plans, programs, and actions synchronized with other elements of national power.

The Roadmap's first objective is process-oriented, "by which principles of Strategic Communication are incorporated in the development of strategy, policy formulation, planning, and execution." The second objective involves defining "roles, responsibilities and relationships, and develop[ing] doctrine for Strategic Communication and its primary communication supporting capabilities," which includes Public Affairs as well as Information Operations (IO), mainly Psychological Operations (PSYOP).⁸

Dr. Linton Wells, from the National Defense University, testified in 2007 before the House Armed Services Committee that "there seems to be a wide agreement that strategic communication is a process that links together many different kinds of activities, from public affairs, to public diplomacy, to some kinds of information operations, to the use of visual information, across many parts of the U.S. government, primarily focused on foreign audiences." He warned that without interagency agreement on exactly what strategic communication is, strategic communication will be difficult to achieve.⁹

The former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Peter Pace, pointed out in his February 2007 posture statement that there is progress: "the Joint Staff, the Combatant Commands, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense are working together to ensure greater consistency and timeliness in our strategic communication efforts."¹⁰ A concept of operations was promulgated shortly after the Roadmap came out and centers the future of Department of Defense strategic communication within a construct based on operational planning.¹¹

CONFLICTS WITH CREDIBILITY

As strategic communication within the Department of Defense has evolved over the last five or so years, issues have arisen that have threatened or affected the credibility of the public affairs aspect of operations. Until the roles of public affairs, information operations and public diplomacy are both clearly defined and widely understood within the context of strategic communication, the possibility for missteps will remain. Jeffrey Jones, a previous Director for Strategic Communications and Information on the National Security Council, put forth that “traditional dividing lines between public affairs, public diplomacy, and military information operations are blurred because of immediate access to information.”¹² However, the Department of Defense Principles of Information clearly state that “propaganda has no place in DoD public affairs programs.”¹³ As a result, much of the debate and apprehension about strategic communication within the military has been grounded in the relationship between public affairs and information operations.

Traditionally, public affairs informs audiences vice influencing, and this approach is grounded in the democratic tradition and “western political ideology, which calls for transparent government, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and other such principles that militate against shaping public opinion.”¹⁴

Some of the concern created over the years which affects how strategic communication is viewed today is based in the decision to close the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) in 2002, only four months after it was created and after a barrage of negative publicity. It “produced a bow wave of effects in the strategic communication arena. The renewed emphasis by the White House and DoD for the need to maintain a firewall between

operational and tactical influence efforts (PSYOP) and broader influence efforts like Public Diplomacy (PD), produced a bifurcated interagency process.”¹⁵

Carnes Lord, from the Naval War College, stated the belief that the Department of Defense public affairs community was behind the demise of OSI and pointed out that “continuing tension between the PSYOP and public affairs communities over the fundamental nature of strategic communications remains perhaps the most serious impediment to more effective action by the Defense Department in this critical arena.”¹⁶

The situation has also been influenced by the 2004 Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff memorandum regarding the public affairs and information operations relationship. While it stated that the two communities needed to remain separate and should not be integrated into one organization, it did say that coordination and synchronization between the two elements were necessary. Institutional credibility for public affairs operations was a key component to the memorandum.¹⁷ However, that still leaves the situation to a somewhat subjective resolution based on the commander and his or her perceptions, primarily in how to employ public affairs and the information operations aspects of the military business. Where is that dividing line? Is it acceptable to place public affairs and information operations officers within the same organization and within the same work spaces? The answer is: “probably not.”

When the military does not get it right, and the media feels that the military has used them for other than straight-forward reporting of the facts, reporters are quick to turn that into a story in itself, which could be considered a direct hit to the public affairs operations’ credibility. In October 2004, for example, a Marine public affairs spokesperson called CNN with breaking news and went on camera to provide information about a major operation in

Fallujah, Iraq. That information was subsequently labeled as misleading and reported within the news as “an elaborate psychological operation,” intended to gauge the enemy’s response to such statements.¹⁸ CNN further reported on the incident, raising it as an example to highlight the debate over using information as a weapon and whether psychological operations and public affairs should be under the same leading officer.¹⁹ The public affairs officer’s interactions in this particular instance have filtered down to other levels of public awareness where at least one high school lesson online questions whether it is acceptable for military spokespersons to mislead the media and, if it is, when do citizens in a democracy know whether the military is telling the truth or lying?²⁰

In another case, a public affairs officer observed that at the operational level of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the ground commander decided to put public affairs into information operations, and the media “felt press briefings were stage-managed.” The public affairs coalition press information center in Qatar subsequently lost credibility.²¹

In Afghanistan, Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan (CFC-A) “created a new organization called Theaterwide Interagency Effects, or Effects, to synchronize communications-based public affairs, information operations, psychological operations, and political-military operations” similar to a Strategic Communications Office that was created in Iraq. Both efforts, according to the senior public affairs officer in the Afghanistan organization, stirred up debate regarding credibility with the media for public affairs officers.²²

An example of credibility loss from the Afghanistan strategic communication structure occurred around the same time as the CNN incident, when a U.S. Army spokesperson, who happened to be an information operations officer, told reporters at a press

conference “that the Taliban leadership was fracturing and that the rank and file were demoralized.” The press initially reported that, but when they asked subsequent questions to write follow-up stories, the lead public affairs officer in Afghanistan was unable to provide factual information, or proof, to explain the initial announcement, leaving reporters to write stories in which the Taliban just denied the statement.²³

Debate over the public affairs and information operations relationship was even addressed in a Public Relations Society of America Professional Standards Advisory, recommending that military commanders and communicators keep the two disciplines separate and voicing concern “that a military communicator accused of allowing deceptive information to get into news channels may create serious credibility concerns that may need correction or clarification.” The society recommended a firewall separation but did agree that coordination was necessary between them in order to safeguard that separation.²⁴

When the Lincoln Group activities, which involved paying Iraqi newspapers and journalists to print or write good news stories, came to light through the media in late 2005, it was pointed out that the Lincoln Group was “initially contracted through a military public affairs office” and that the endeavor helped the enemy depict “America as a hypocritical interloper.” Audiences may find trouble considering information credible if they have some doubts as to whether they are a target of information operations. If democratic principles include freedom of the press, many onlookers would be well-justified in wondering why the U.S. would resort to planting stories to begin with.²⁵ The media reported extensively on the military paying Iraqi media to publish stories, as well as the Defense Department’s subsequent investigation, which warned that such practices “could damage American credibility” and called for the practice to end. The investigation also reportedly criticized the

creation, in 2004, of the Baghdad Press Club, which paid Iraqi journalists to cover American reconstruction efforts, and the review stated that “officers involved in the propaganda effort were often confused about the boundaries between public affairs work, which is supposed to be strictly factual, and what the military calls “information operations,” which can employ practices like deception and the paying of journalists to defeat an enemy.”²⁶

In early 2007, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on GEN David Petraeus, Commanding General, Multi-National Force - Iraq, asking for clarification on the 2004 Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff memorandum that directed a separation between public affairs and information operations. The article stated that General Petraeus proposed stressing the coordination aspects of the two disciplines working together, but it also pointed out that commanders “have placed public affairs and information officers in adjoining offices.” One officer within General Petraeus’ command felt they should work together. The article posed the issues from both sides of the argument. On the one hand, proponents of combining the operations say that the U.S. will gain substantially in being able to aggressively coordinate efforts. On the other hand, opponents are still concerned with the Defense Department’s credibility if there is even a perception that the U.S. is trying to use censorship or if the relationship between public affairs and information operations is altered. This may lead to the media questioning the information they are provided. The reporter’s sources pointed out that while General Petraeus may be able to find an appropriate level of balance, other commanders, who may not be concerned with credibility with the media, may take the relationship too far and “subordinate public affairs officials to information operations officers.”²⁷

The fact that the media continues to highlight this debate indicates that it is a serious issue and continues to leave the future of strategic communication within the military in doubt. While some commanders push the boundaries for how to employ the two disciplines, one viewpoint says that traditional military public affairs is being challenged, and, furthermore, that “military commanders seeking more precise effects on the battlefield through the coherent application of all elements of alliance and national power, are blurring the boundaries between IO and PA.”²⁸

It seems evident that public affairs does need to evolve to remain relevant within the strategic communication framework, but to what extent a commander mixes or overlaps the relationship with information operations is a risk assessment that the commander needs to make. “Like other military disciplines, PA has to adapt to a changing world with asymmetric threats and a ubiquitous media environment that showers the entire planet with streaming multimedia. In this new information world, terrorists can propagate their information faster than Western militaries can respond.”²⁹

COMBATANT COMMANDERS AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Combatant Commanders have improvised different ways of approaching strategic communication, considering the lack of national direction throughout the last few years and the need to get ahead of the enemy’s exploitation of information in the global war on terrorism. It seems that at the combatant command level, the credibility concern has been less of an issue, though, than at the joint force commander level.

The director for public affairs in Afghanistan within the CFC-A strategic communication construct advocated keeping the public affairs officer aligned under the traditional position as reporting directly to the commander and adhering to proven doctrine.

She preferred the model that U.S. Central Command headquarters was using in the committee approach in 2005 to coordinate and synchronize efforts instead of realigning functions under a new organization.³⁰

Others continue to advocate that “a single command authority should guide and supervise all information and psychological operations and public affairs staff.” However, in Iraq, too many organizations with too many government agencies have been involved in the strategic communication effort, often failing to coordinate, duplicating efforts and confusing “the Iraqi audience with conflicting messages and ever changing themes.”³¹

Jeffrey Jones proposed in 2005 that combatant commanders formulate a theater information strategy as a strategic communication plan, similar to the way theater security cooperation plans are brought together by coordinating various staff components, including public affairs, information operations, and State Department representatives; his suggestion recommended implementing this plan through the J39, which is typically the information operations section of the staff.³²

U.S. European Command (EUCOM) established a Strategic Effectiveness and Communications Council (SECC) to coordinate “theater information and influence activities” as a way to assess and synchronize its theater security cooperation activities and the information-related operations that support them.³³ At EUCOM, information operations and public affairs staff members “physically work in each other’s offices to ensure these two critical SC components are internally synchronized on daily initiatives and activities.” This forms the groundwork for possible strategies to be vetted through the EUCOM staff and embassy personnel and then forwarded for consideration at the SECC level.³⁴

U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) uses the PACOM Influence Working Group (PIWG), which was formed in 2004 under the J39. It included public affairs representatives and was credited with enabling Operation Unified Assistance in 2005.³⁵ The PIWG is the action officer level, and the Strategic Communication Steering Group (SCSG) leads planning and guidance and provides a mechanism for coordination both inside and outside the organization and with the interagency. PACOM chose to assign public affairs as the lead agency for strategic communication.³⁶

U.S. Southern Command's ADM James Stavridis recently pointed out that "public affairs and strategic communication are two very different things. A strategic communicator must stay at the strategic level and not dip down to the tactical level represented by public affairs." However, he did categorize public affairs as one of the many tools and processes available for accomplishing strategic communication. He related strategic communication in particular to his theater security cooperation initiatives, and he noted that his command pulls in elements of his staff and the interagency as needed to fit a particular endeavor.³⁷

The consistent thread through these examples is that combatant commanders are using the committee-style approach to strategic communication. They are not necessarily creating new organizations within their command, but they are setting in place processes that work for them and take into account the unique circumstances in their area of operations. What was missing from these various approaches is overarching guidance and the doctrine to back up their methods. Those processes also were not necessarily filtering down to the joint force commander level, where credibility clashes seemed to be occurring, especially in the operational environment.

JOINT DOCTRINE

Joint doctrine has been slow to keep up with the advances in strategic communication, and stand-alone strategic communication doctrine has yet to exist. As joint publications have been reviewed, relevant ones, like information operations, have begun to incorporate basic approaches to strategic communication.

The last update in 2005 to joint doctrine for public affairs in JP 3-61 incorporated the clarified relationship between public affairs and information operations and states that “effective coordination and collaboration with IO is necessary for PA to maintain its institutional credibility. Successful PA operations require institutional credibility to maintain public trust and confidence.”³⁸ The doctrine does not yet address the additional aspect of strategic communication, and it has been criticized for being “business as usual,” Cold War-era focused and still reactive, not changing enough to catch up with the current environment.³⁹

The information operations doctrine, JP 3-13, updated in early 2006, includes a brief overview of the strategic communication roadmap’s definition and touches on synchronization between the military’s capabilities that support strategic communication.⁴⁰ The public affairs and information operations relationship is also referenced; the publication approaches public affairs as a related capability and points out the need for credibility for public affairs.⁴¹ Until a stand-alone strategic communication doctrine is published and the public affairs doctrine is updated, this may cause operational leaders to believe that strategic communication is primarily an information operations function.

Where it is more obvious that the Department of Defense has stepped further along the path to clarifying how combatant commanders should incorporate strategic

communication is in the Joint Operations Planning doctrine and the Joint Operation Planning and Execution System (JOPES). Updated at the end of 2006, the Joint Operations Planning doctrine, JP 5-0, addresses strategic communication within the planning process and ties it in more with the interagency involvement. While also reviewing the public affairs and information operations relationship and discussing the synchronization aspect of strategic communication between the activities of public affairs, information operations, and defense support to public diplomacy, the doctrine does reiterate the need “to avoid credibility losses for both the joint force and PA spokesmen.”⁴² JOPES also makes reference to the strategic communication process and how it supports the U.S. Government strategic communication process. This publication specifies that “standing groups, called Strategic Communication Integration Groups (SCIG), at the Interagency, DOD, and combatant command levels will synchronize strategic communication and assess effects on our national, regional and global objectives.” At the combatant command level, “the process may consist of boards, cells and working groups.”⁴³ Still, this does not necessarily address the issue for the joint force commander level.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AS A PROCESS

At the Department of Defense level, the concept of operations for strategic communication, developed after the 2006 Roadmap, focuses on operational planning. This allows leaders and combatant commanders to view strategic communication as a four-phase process, “continuous and integrated from the beginning of each operational planning cycle.” The phases include research and analysis, planning, execution, and assessment, with the goal of full integration of the process into joint planning.⁴⁴

A Strategic Communication Integration Group (SCIG), established in August 2006, currently manages how the Department of Defense is institutionalizing a strategic communication process.⁴⁵ A position called the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Joint Communication) was created within the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs). This position is filled by a public affairs officer who serves as the SCIG Secretariat Director.⁴⁶ A Navy public affairs officer, who is the working group level lead for the Navy's efforts to formalize strategic communication into a process modeled on the Department of Defense effort, explained that senior public affairs officers are taking lead positions as strategic communication evolves, not because strategic communication is a public affairs-centric endeavor, but because senior public affairs officers often have experience in working across many levels of an organization.⁴⁷ Commanders should not take this developing relationship as a sign that public affairs should have any oversight over information operations or the other strategic communication components, but instead view it as part of the synchronization aspect to the strategic communication process.

Strategic communication, as a proactive process, is becoming “synchronized actions, words and images” and includes using “multiple lines of operation across capabilities to achieve desired effects on the target audience.” Strategic communication is not just “one or two communities of practice focusing on an issue.” The Department of Defense is now taking the process further to include “operations” as one of the communities involved, in addition to information operations, public affairs, military support to public diplomacy, theater security cooperation, and visual information.⁴⁸

As this Department of Defense approach evolves and proves that this process is viable, the combatant commander approaches to strategic communication may need to

become more formalized and streamlined. As this process becomes further ingrained into joint planning, instances of public affairs and information operations overlap should be diminished, reducing the chance of credibility clashes.

U.S. Joint Forces Command (JFCOM) is also looking to the future of strategic communication within the Department of Defense and how it can do better at integrating all the information activity efforts.⁴⁹ JFCOM is developing a Joint Integrating Concept for Strategic Communication, searching for a solution for a joint force commander eight to twenty years from now. Part of the proposal is “to include strategic communication as an inherent part of operational design, and not as a separate process.”⁵⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The primary lesson to be learned from the last few years is that pulling public affairs and information operations too closely together in the name of strategic communication damages the credibility of not only the public affairs officer delivering the message, but also of the military establishment and even possibly of the United States Government both abroad and at home. As the Department of Defense’s approach to strategic communication continues to evolve, public affairs should evolve simultaneously. In addition to suggestions raised earlier in this paper, the following are the most significant recommendations:

- Keep the disciplines of information operations and public affairs separate, but do have them coordinate and synchronize, in line with recently updated joint doctrine. Ensure that there is enough of a firewall between public affairs and information operations to keep the media from ever doubting the public affairs objectives.
- All the players, or communities involved, should become conversant on the Department of Defense’s objectives with strategic communication. Continue developing strategic

communication as a process thoroughly ingrained within the operational planning construct. Strategic communication should not be viewed as a noun, such as an organization, but rather as a proactive process that contributes to operational planning. Creating new ways of doing business, such as merging public affairs and information operations under a single organization, is not necessarily the correct solution.

- Doctrine for strategic communication should be promulgated and widely distributed. Conversely, the public affairs joint doctrine should be updated.
- Public affairs professionals should rise to the requirements and become more thoroughly involved in the joint operational planning process, and the operational planners should be open to public affairs input.
- The public affairs approach to joint operations should remain grounded in democratic principles of a free and open press balanced with truth. It is a reflection of the fabric of the United States and an example of democracy in action.

The evolution of strategic communication within the Department of Defense will take time, just as with any other new organizational methodology, requiring an investment in a paradigm shift across so many elements of an institution. Time, however, is not a luxury that many commanders feel they have as they fight the war on terrorism. In the meantime, it continues to be imperative that public affairs officers maintain credibility as the operational commander's primary spokesperson. Once strategic communication is firmly established as a joint operational planning process and has become part of operational design, it is then that "the full soft-power persuasive effect is achieved when information operations, public affairs, military diplomacy, defense support to public diplomacy, and visual information are artfully integrated."⁵¹

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