

POTREBA PO DEJAVNEJŠEM SODELOVANJU IN BOLJŠIH KOMUNIKACIJAH V SVETU, V KATEREM VLADA STALNA KONKURENCA

THE NEED TO IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS IN A WORLD THAT IS IN A STATE OF PERSISTENT COMPETITION

Povzetek Vsak, ki se danes ukvarja s komunikacijami, se spoprijema s hitrim informacijskim okoljem, tehnološko pismeno publiko in svetovnimi razmerami, v katerih vlada stalna konkurenca. Pri tem se državni in nedržavni akterji namenoma vključujejo v kognitivno domeno.

Da bi bile strateške komunikacijske in informacijsko delovanje učinkoviti, je torej nujno, da se zavedamo potrebe po izboljšanju veččin dejavnega sodelovanja in komunikacije.

V članku obravnavamo spreminjajočo se dinamiko, ki vpliva na strateške komunikacije, predvsem na vpliv globalnih omrežij in družbenih medijev. Preučujemo načine, kako povečati učinkovitost z boljšim zgodbičenjem, in zaključujemo z vpogledom v vlogo in koristnost tako imenovane simulacijske skupine nasprotnika za informacijsko delovanje (Red Information Operations Team).

Trdimo, da čeprav so se številni vidiki teh razmer spremenili in se še spreminjajo, veliko temeljnih načel učinkovitega komuniciranja ostaja stalnica od vsega začetka civilizacije. Če se osredotočimo na te bistvene elemente zgodbičenja in jih uporabimo v našem sodobnem okolju, bomo pri podpiranju svojih strateških in taktičnih ciljev veliko učinkovitejši.

Ključne besede *Strateške komunikacije, stalna konkurenca, aktivno sodelovanje, zgodbičenje, kognitivna pristranskost, informacijsko delovanje, simulacijske skupine nasprotnika.*

Abstract Anyone involved in communications today is faced with a fast-paced information environment, a technologically enabled ‘audience’, and a global situation that has evolved into a state of constant competition, with state and non-state actors deliberately engaging in the cognitive domain.

For Strategic Communications and Information Operations to be effective, it is imperative that we recognize the need to improve engagement and communication skills.

This article looks at the changing dynamics affecting Strategic Communications, especially the impact of global networks and social media, how to increase effectiveness through better storytelling, and concludes by looking at the role and benefit of a Red Information Operations Team.

We assert that, while many aspects of this situation have and continue to change, many of the fundamental principles of effective communication have been with us since the earliest days of civilization. If we focus on these essential elements of storytelling and apply them to our modern-day environment, we will be far more effective in support of our strategic and tactical objectives.

Key words *Strategic Communications; Persistent Competition, Engagement, Storytelling, Cognitive Biases, Information Operations, Red Teaming.*

Introduction It is now generally accepted that the nature of conflict has changed. The change is not so much at the ends of the scale from Peace to War, but rather the middle has been stretched and populated with different levels of ‘conflict’.¹

There remain many armed conflicts around the world, and most of these are below the level that would be legally considered a War, although a pragmatic view would recognize that most armed conflicts feel like a war to those who are directly affected or closely impacted.

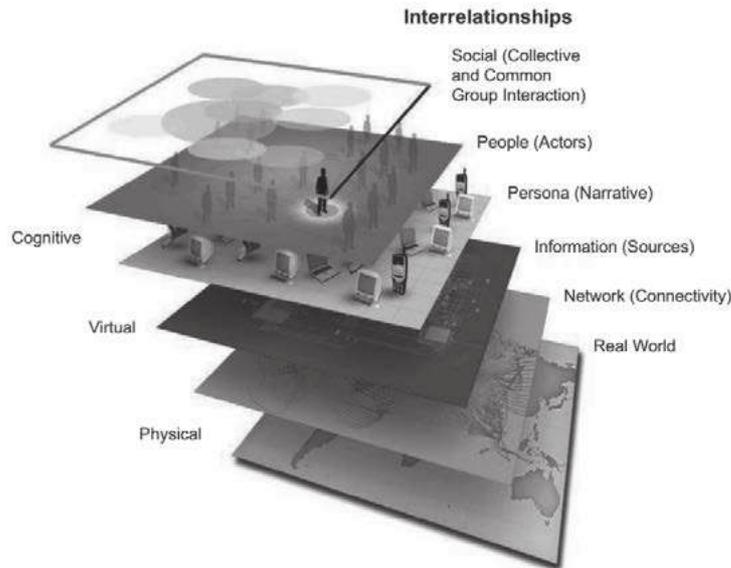
In addition to these violent conflicts, there now seems to be an escalation of global rivalry; a situation often referred to as a state of persistent or ‘constant competition’². The players in this constant competition are states and non-state organizations. The field of play and the goals in this competition are our minds and of course, our hearts or emotions – more formally labelled, *The Cognitive Domain*.³ Figure 1 illustrates the overarching nature of this cognitive domain and the interrelationships between the more commonly recognized virtual and physical domains.

¹ UK Ministry of Defence Joint Doctrine Note 1/19: Deterrence: The defence contribution [1.5]

² Speech: Dynamic security threats and the British Army: Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Nicholas Carter KCB CBE DSO ADC Gen 22-01-2018

³ UK Ministry of Defence (JDN 1/12) Strategic communication: the defence contribution [211]

Figure 1:
Strategic
communication:
the defence
contribution
(JDN 1/12)
Figure 2.1



While some argue that this era of constant competition is new, actually the only aspects that are truly new are the scale of reach and the number of participants in the competition. The ‘battle’ for people’s opinions has been waged for millennia. From the birth of large-scale civilization, powerful communicators have sought to persuade through the power of words and images.

However, what has changed, is the global digitalization of communication; in short the internet, and the ease with which communicators can reach audiences. But again, mass communication is not new in itself; the mass media has been around since the 19th century, and has been exploited extensively with political and military intent.⁴

So, now we may be thinking that we simply need to have a good Public Affairs team and our Strategic Communications are covered? Well, unfortunately not.

This is why there is so much focus on Information Operations and Strategic Communications now, and why so many in defence speak about the changing nature of war. The digitalization of communications and a connected worldwide audience has fundamentally changed the flow dynamics of information, and this has, in turn, raised the expectations of audiences.

It is no longer sufficient to simply ‘broadcast your story’ in the one-way manner that we have understood and used for over a hundred years, from newspapers to modern day mainstream media. Our communications must now also be engaging, and that does not simply mean ‘well-written and interesting’.

⁴ *Propaganda & Persuasion* By Garth S. Jowett, Victoria O'Donnell Ch3 'Propaganda Institutionalized'

This article explores what has changed in the arena of communications and how these changes have impacted upon Strategic Communications. First we look at the technological impact and the consequent changes to methods of communication, and at the same time we consider that, even though the world has and continues to change dramatically, the fundamentals of effective communication remain the same. With that assertion, we consider the critical elements of good communication, the perennial nature of ‘storytelling’, and how we might increase the use of ‘story structures’ in our communications activities. Finally, we briefly explore how we can increase the resilience and effectiveness of our Information Operations activities through the use of a skilled and knowledgeable Red Information Operations Team.

1 THE ERA OF DIRECT ACCESS

The key dynamic that changes everything is ‘Direct Access’.

Anyone wishing to communicate to an audience can reach them directly without the need to use any third party publisher. Also, anyone interested in receiving information can seek out content from any number of sources, again not just the ‘traditional outlets’.

So, this explosion of access to information could only be a positive thing, yes?

‘More people can access more information, and more people can share more information; so the truth of everything will be available to all and anyone can find anything’: a utopian view of the democratization of communications.

Unfortunately, this utopian view forgets a few critical dynamics of the human condition.

- Firstly, to communicate means far more than just sharing information or opinions, regardless of whether they are based on fact or fiction. How our communication is framed and delivered is of great importance if we want to be not only heard but more importantly, listened to.⁵
- Secondly, this seems obvious, but we only really care about that which interests us. If we do not have our audience’s interest, then again, they will not be listening.
- Thirdly, human cognition is inherently lazy; our minds will seek out the path of least effort for everything unless we deliberately make it work harder. Consequently, headlines, soundbites and memes that are easy to digest and make assumptions about are highly effective in delivering messages.⁶
- Fourthly, and related to the third dynamic, we generally like to be comfortable, and this applies to our cognitive state as much as it does to our physical state.

⁵ *Why Inspiring Stories Make Us React: The Neuroscience of Narrative*, Paul J. Zak, Ph.D. Feb. 2, 2015

⁶ *Shah, Anuj K.; Daniel M. Oppenheimer (March 2008). "Heuristics Made Easy: An Effort-Reduction Framework". Psychological Bulletin. 134 (2): 207-222*

So communications that reassure and reinforce our current understanding (confirmation bias) are much more readily accepted; again regardless of truth or falsehood – we do not feel the need to check.⁷

- Lastly, we are, generally speaking, selfish, or rather, we are focused on our own interests, some more so than others. Communications that promise us personal advantage will always gain cognitive precedent over those that do not.⁸

If communications are *well structured, interesting, easily understood, enjoyable, and personally advantageous*, then we greatly increase the likelihood that our messages will influence our audience.

These are all qualities that a good story has, and furthermore, they are the tools that a good storyteller uses to engage and communicate with their audience. This is why the egalitarian, utopian view of internet-enabled publishing for all and unfettered access to information has, in reality, become an exploitable battlefield.

A virtual battlefield, where those who understand how to communicate and engage tell well-crafted stories to audiences that are sub-consciously receptive to influence and are not inherently inclined to challenge what they see, hear or read, especially if it reassures us and we see something in it for us!

Describing this as ‘exploitation’ may seem like quite strong or inflammatory language; however, it is simply an objective assessment and description for that which we are all happy to live with – perhaps, for some, in blissful ignorance.

The art of good storytelling has been part of the human psyche since humankind started to organize into sustained tribal structures. The oral tradition was used to impart knowledge, maintain history, inspire, bond, warn and lead. Today, the best storytellers are hired to sell to us and to entertain us, ideally doing both simultaneously; furthermore, we give awards and recognition to the best.

Therefore, is it a surprise to find that, given direct, unfiltered access to large-scale audiences, those seeking political or military advantages have deployed the art of storytelling and storytellers to achieve their goals?

1.1 Is there really a difference between Strategic Communications and Propaganda?

Today, many consider the term ‘propaganda’ as pejorative and use it that way. This means there tends to be great reluctance and indeed, vociferous denial, that Strategic Communications might be in any way similar to propaganda. However, if we were to be completely objective, it is normally just the communications directed at our audiences from undesirable sources that are usually labelled ‘propaganda’. Our own

⁷ *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman

⁸ *Crano, W.D., & Prislin, R. (2006). Attitudes and persuasion. Annual review of psychology, 57, 345-74.*

messages are more likely to be labelled ‘Strategic Communications’ or something similar, even if it may simply be a matter of perspective.

It may be worth considering why the label of propaganda is a negative one, and what we can learn from that for our own communications. Simply put, it is our own fault, or rather, the fault of past ‘strategic communicators’. Often in the past, political orators have frequently used powerful speeches and well-written articles to obfuscate and conceal, rather than to amplify and extol reality. So, when the truth of a matter is finally revealed, we, the audience, realize it was actually false propaganda, used to, in some manner, deceive, distract or confuse us. The biggest cost of this behaviour is the trust of all audiences, intended or otherwise⁹. This is a key factor in the loss of trust in our institutions and the growth in fake news, mis-information and dis-information.

However, with all that said, when considered objectively effective propaganda usually has all the same characteristics as a good story, and is often delivered by skilled storytellers, either in person or through the content they produce.

To increase our engagement and communications, we need to gain our target audience’s interest and deliver well-structured stories, AND we need to be authentic and open, extolling and amplifying reality.

There are differences of course, but these are related to the intent and purpose of the communications rather than the structure and delivery of the messages. The other dimension to propaganda is that which is based on falsehood or deception; such communication is better labelled as disinformation or mis-information.

1.2 Let's get social...

The final part to engagement and communications is the two-way, or rather multi-directional nature of communications in our connected world.

The most important aspect of social media is that it is *social*. It is community-oriented and, put simply, it is the digitization of word-of-mouth.

In just the same way that physical word-of-mouth exchanges are multi-directional, so too are digital interactions. It is useful to picture a small town or community now, and remember that within such a town, different people and places play different roles in the exchange of information.

- A shopkeeper, hairdresser or barber for propagating stories/gossip;
- A tradesman or professional, such as a plumber, electrician or doctor, for specialist, trusted information on their particular expertise;
- The town officials for ‘authoritative’ information;
- The well connected, well-respected voices of the community are influential supporters or decriers of news and opinion;

⁹ Gallup Research, Edelman Trust Barometer

- The pubs, coffee-houses and club-houses are good places to gather a range of views and to reach like-minded individuals.

The metaphorical similarities go on and their digital equivalents are easy to identify on social media.

Thinking of social media in this way helps us to realize that different individuals, audiences and places need different messages, content and approaches. However, all of them require some form of interactive engagement in order for our communications objectives to be achieved.

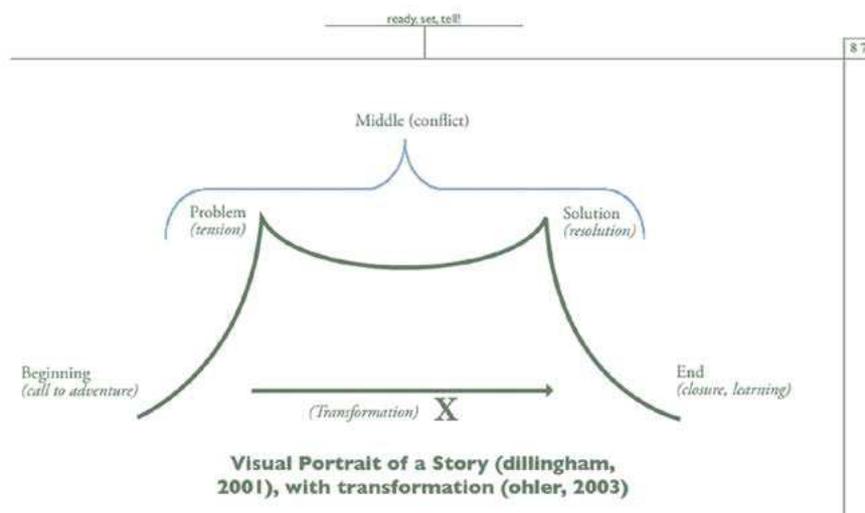
Now we can see that good engagement and communications requires good, interesting storytelling from authentic storytellers who are prepared, capable and empowered to interact with a connected audience.

2 WHAT MAKES A GOOD STORY?

Many people have spent years trying to understand the art of storytelling and some have gone on to create guides and frameworks to help us all tell better stories. You can easily find books, blogs and resources online that go into great detail about how to create good stories, mostly for commercial marketing or the creative arts, but as we noted above, these principles also apply to Strategic Communications.

Back in 2001 Jason Ohler adapted some work by Brett Dillingham to create a simple but powerful visual portrait of a story¹⁰. Figure 2 illustrates this story arc and provides an easy framework to help us sequence our messaging.

Figure 2:
Visual portrait of
a story



¹⁰ Digital storytelling in the classroom: new media pathways to literacy... by Jason Ohler

Regardless of domain or purpose, a good story needs to start and end with people – we need to have empathy in some manner. If we do not care about the characters then we will not remember the story. A forgotten story has no influence and moreover is never retold!

2.1 A practical story framework

After considering different story structures and the nature of social media, we have created a very simple but effective framework for any messaging story, as follows;

1. Interest Stage 1 – Who?

Who is the story about? Who features? How are they relatable to the target audience? Why should they care?

2. Interest Stage 2 – What?

What is the challenge? What are they trying to achieve? What is stopping them? Why does it matter?

3. Influence Stage 1 - How?

How did they overcome the challenge? What did they do? What were the issues faced in achieving the objective? Who and What else was involved?

4. Influence Stage 2 – Why?

Why is this relevant? What did they gain? What was achieved? What can be done now? What did they do next?

5. Call-to-Action Stage

Do you want to know more? Where can you learn more? If you are facing a similar situation, what should you do now? Who can you ask for help? Who should you tell?

This framework acts as a skeleton or mannequin; the art lies in how you put the flesh on the bones or dress the mannequin. Here you need to invest in Intelligence to understand your target audience and find the right answers to the framework questions and the right language to use¹¹.

Take the time to research, understand and plan your messaging, all the while remembering what it takes to be engaging and effective in your communications.

Once you have a narrative approach and tailored stories, you can plan your engagement and communications Information Operations, and then test and improve their resilience using a Red Information Operations Team (>>RIOT<<)

¹¹ UK Ministry of Defence, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Psychological Operations AJP 3.10.1 [0109] UK – Target Audience Analysis – the critical enabler*

3 INCREASED RESILIENCE THROUGH RED TEAMING!

An essential element of military planning has always been the requirement to review and test the plan using Red Teaming¹². This role traditionally fell to the Intelligence Officer and the J2-staff, as they were best sighted on the adversary's tactics and doctrine. However, in fast-moving and pressured headquarters, many of which suffer from 'group think', this is often overlooked, by-passed or rushed. Also, the outsourcing of such a function is frequently restricted by time, practicality or budget.

As a result, plans are often implemented having never truly been stress-tested or questioned, whether the result of a staff-led or command-led process. This is never truer than in the area of Information Operations, or Information Activities & Outreach, where the reactions of audiences, probable ripostes from actors, or the inaction of advocates can affect the outcome of an operation far more than the tactical actions of an enemy.

To clarify, a Red Team is an independent team of trusted advisors and thematic specialists who question planning assumptions, ask the difficult questions, second-guess the commander's decision, and ensure that worst-case and most-likely outcomes are sufficiently covered in the planning process. A Red Cell acts as the adversary and other actors during exercises.

In the spirit of "disruptive innovation", the Red Team must be focused on the given problem and understand the context of the operation, adopt deadlines that ensure that their inputs are available to the planning staff at the appropriate time, and (most importantly) be separate from the chain of command.

To examine each in turn as they relate to the Red Info Ops Team (RIOT):

The Team must represent the fundamental components of the spectrum of Info Activities. The RIOT leader should fully understand the information environment and ideally, have experience in Strategic Communications at the governmental level. The RIOT 2iC/Chief of Staff, must understand the planning process (6-Steps, 7-Questions or Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP)) and have extensive operational experience and understanding of relevant adversarial strategy and tactics.

Depending on the scenario or Area of Operations, the team should be made up of experts in Media Operations or Public Affairs and Key Leader Engagement, Engagement & Outreach, Psychological Operations or academic psychology, and Target Audience Analysis/Open Source Intelligence. Additional 'reach-back' to other expertise is also essential, to prevent the team from becoming fixed by the organization's battle rhythm.

¹² Ministry of Defence Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC) guide to red teaming

These RIOT members need to be alive to the details of the operation or exercise, attending the scenario writing phase, if possible, to ensure that Information Operations are to be fully tested and facilitated by the scenario with enough detail to allow an appropriate level of analysis and message development.

The RIOT must adopt hard deadlines that ensure their injects are available to the planning staff at the correct step in the process. Adopting a crawl-walk-run approach will ensure the HQ staff can adapt their processes and incorporate the RIOT inputs without unnecessary disruption to their own timelines. Their budget should be equally restrictive, to prevent the adoption of over-complicated and tech-dependent solutions, incompatible with those used by the headquarters.

Finally, the RIOT must be (and be seen to be) separate from the Chain of Command. This allows their input to remain objective and not influenced by the commander or his staff, or by fear of any negative impact on the careers of the team members. This in turn allows the RIOT to make a significant impact on the planning cycle (i.e. to be disruptive), and maintains separation and objectivity. While this could be achieved using staff from training centres or other units, they will remain rank conscious and unduly influenced by empathy with the planning staff. The most suitable provider of this capability is a vetted and known third-party provider.

The value added from using a Red Info Ops Team cannot be understated. They provide the opportunity to assist in the development of scenarios that support realistic Info Ops exercise play, including realistic audience data sets. They can stress-test the planning staff at a crawl, walk or run depending on the staff's comfort level and training objective. They are able to provide on-hand expert guidance, mentorship and (if needed) additional training, as well as coaching of the senior leadership and commanders. They offer subjective exercise injects, planning inputs and expert feedback, aligned to the headquarters' own battle rhythm, to achieve its training objectives. Once that working relationship has been established, further opportunities such as reach-back support will present themselves. All this comes at a relatively low cost, especially when considered against the potential impact of not fully Red Teaming a plan.

« Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose »

The more things change, the more they stay the same!

Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr in January 1849

Concluding Comments

The power of communications to support strategic objectives has been recognized for hundreds, and arguably for thousands, of years. For our communications to be effective and to engage our target audiences, we need to recognize the importance of story structures and understand how to compete in an information environment where both our adversaries and ourselves have direct access to our audiences, and our audiences have direct access to all manner of information sources.

It is clear that, with the digitization of communications and the connected nature of the globe, many things have increased in reach, speed and volume. It is also generally accepted that the nature of 'conflict' has changed, and that we now operate in a state of constant competition. However, we have also highlighted, that as much as these things have changed, many factors remain unchanged.

Our concluding assertions are that to be effective communicators we need to;

- 1) Always, first, gain the attention of our audience;
- 2) Tell stories that are enjoyable, emotive, easily understood and meaningful;
- 3) Explicitly or implicitly offer our audience the answer to 'What is in it for me?';
- 4) Be open and authentic;
- 5) Be adaptive, reactive and interactive.

As evidence that these techniques and requirements are far from new, in the last century BC, Marcus Tullius 'Cicero' wrote;

"The three aims of the orator are »docere, delectare, et movere.«¹³

In other words, to be effective in communications we need to teach, delight and move our audience emotionally.

Cicero was also known for extolling the importance of truth and authenticity, and we turn to him again for our closing words:

"If the truth were self-evident, eloquence would be unnecessary."
[Marcus Tullius Cicero]

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