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Distilling Strategic Communications

by

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Establishing a strategic communications process within the departments and agencies of the Executive Branch of the United States government, including within the military, continues to meet with broad bureaucratic resistance and outright suspicion. It is viewed by many as an effort by communicators to either unduly influence or even highjack the policy process, or to convert the offices of government into a collective propaganda machine.

At the same time there has been increasing collective anxiety within the government over presumed failures in the so-called “war of ideas,” resulting in wide agreement that national strategy and policy cannot now be effectively executed within the modern global communications environment without the participation of public information specialists. Such frustration was often expressed by former Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and has also been a frequent topic of discussion in the news.¹

Consequently, as noted by Lawrence DiRita, former special assistant to the Secretary of Defense, “The old-fashioned idea that you develop the policy and then pitch it over the transom to the communicator is over. You’re continually thinking about communication throughout the course of the policy development process.”²

Unfortunately, overcoming institutional resistance to developing an effective interagency process has been complicated by promiscuous misuse of the term “strategic communications” itself, often used interchangeably with—or as an all-encompassing umbrella for—public affairs, public diplomacy or psychological operations (PSYOP), which has caused enormous confusion. The result is an unfocused semantic environment hobbled by institutional distrust in which disagreement and confusion over how to define strategic communications is rampant. The following quotation, taken from a memorandum produced by another department in the Executive Branch, provides a good example of the resulting imprecision in defining strategic communications:

Communicating strategically during a war on global terrorism should be an urgent part of the mission of every arm of the U.S. Government. Explaining our government’s actions and policies to the peoples of the world must be a top priority.³

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Any useful working definition of strategic communications hinges upon first recognizing that the target audience cannot possibly be defined so indistinctly and broadly as “the peoples of the world,” and still be in any useful sense strategic. Strategic, to mean anything, must have a certain specificity associated with it that provides priorities with regard to what and to whom one wants to communicate. By contrast, if the definition of strategic communications degenerates to mean simply everything connected with anything remotely associated with venues through which information and ideas are passed, the term is rendered useless in practical application. Moreover, broadening the term in such a way begs a deeper question as to whether there is really anything to be gained, e.g., “Is there any real difference between ‘strategic communications’ and other already established public information activities such as public affairs, public diplomacy, and PSYOP except that they are more expansive?” To answer that question, four specific characteristics of strategic communications (along with a proposed definition derived from those characteristics) are noted below to help distinguish it from being understood merely as a more robust version of current public affairs, public diplomacy or PSYOP programs.

The first characteristic is that strategic communications implicitly require the existence of an institutional strategy, which itself implies a clearly articulated set of very specific end-state objectives. Bluntly put, an organization cannot have a strategic communications program without a strategy. The sad experience of any organization that tries to introduce a strategic communications process without clearly articulated organizational strategic objectives is predictable. Unfortunately, nebulous or overly broad strategic objectives—or no strategy at all—are a common failure among organizations that impede strategic communications efforts.

That said, it is important to emphasize that there is a fundamental difference between having a strategy and being strategic. A Soldier may have a personal strategy for trying to get out of a work detail, but this is qualitatively different from what “strategic” is presumed to mean when describing a communications strategy aimed at informing Congress about the specific funding the Army requires to do its mission; or national communication strategies aimed at advancing specific national political objectives. Therefore, the “strategy” of strategic communications cannot be thought of as focusing on the “routine” or “small” objectives of an organization (as compared to public affairs and public diplomacy that routinely convey large amounts of mundane information to general publics). Instead, strategic communications by definition should be understood as having as its focus supporting the achievement of those specific key goals that have a very high level of importance to the organization, i.e., strategic communications deal with big issues, not little issues.

The association of strategic communications with exclusively “big” purposes further implies a focus in execution that is different from garden-variety public affairs, public diplomacy or even PSYOP, much of which has the explicit mission of providing general information to “the peoples of the world.” For example, the “big” strategic objective of most facilities located in the continental United States (CONUS) is obtaining adequate funding. Therefore, the major strategic objective (with supporting strategic communications plan) should focus on obtaining those specific resources. Clearly defining strategic objectives is key to determining the specific audiences to whom strategic communications must be directed, which in turn facilitates the development of appropriate metrics to measure strategic communications’ effectiveness.

Leaders who understand the relationship of strategic communications to overall organizational strategy can avoid the fatal error of viewing them merely as bigger “public affairs.” To illustrate, not all public communications coming from the Department of Defense, the Department of State or even the White House are strategic merely because they originate from high-level headquarters

elements or even specific key leaders (including the President himself). Each such organization produces a high volume of mundane and routine public communications with marginal strategic significance. Nevertheless, the inclination to regard all high-level public communications as strategic communications persists as a key repeating error that has contributed widely to the current difficulty in meaningfully defining strategic communications.

The second characteristic is that, unlike public affairs or public diplomacy, the term strategic communications is a semantic chameleon that changes practical meaning according to context. Context is key to selecting the appropriate and essential tools for communication and applying the situational ethics involved in strategic communications appropriate to the situation. For example—understood in context—Multinational Force-Iraq (MNFI) strategic communications are different in many fundamental ways from strategic communications appropriate for the individual services, for the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, or for the Army Recruiting Command.

To illustrate, within the context of U.S. domestic society and politics, service-level strategic communications at the Pentagon must ethically remain mainly informational in character and distance themselves from lobbying. In contrast, strategic communications in Iraq must necessarily be aggressively promotional and specifically parochial in terms of promoting strategic political objectives—including not only lobbying but perhaps in some cases bribery, patronage and open threats against targeted audiences.

To help clarify, informational strategic communications in a CONUS garrison environment ethically provide purely factual information with regard to particular issues or proposals. For example, strategic communications for Fort Irwin would ethically and legally include synchronized efforts among the offices of public affairs, legislative affairs and protocol to inform audiences that provide resources to the installation about requirements. However, such efforts cross the line when they become calculated efforts to mount aggressive lobbying campaigns targeting members of Congress with uninvited overtures, or through advertisements and other promotional inducements.

In contrast, within the context of a war zone, strategic communications must aggressively promote political objectives in a patently “unfair” manner through the synchronized employment of not only public affairs and public diplomacy, but also PSYOP, private diplomacy, disinformation, deception and even lethal or destructive measures to intimidate selected members of targeted audiences (a recourse not usually available to strategic communicators at CONUS installations when dealing with uncooperative members of Congress and their staffers, or with disagreeable reporters). All such legal measures are not only appropriate but essential and necessary components of strategic communications within the context of a battlefield to shape the opinions and behavior of targeted audiences to achieve specific political objectives.

The third defining characteristic is that strategic communications is an event-driven process in contrast to the predominantly recurring, programmatic nature of public affairs, PSYOP and public diplomacy. Strategic communications that aim to adequately inform target audiences about the specific need for funding a new training area have dynamics and priorities different from those of public affairs (or similarly conceived PSYOP programs) that manage newspapers and webpages for the purpose of conveying broad categories of information to general audiences on a recurring basis, or managing scholar exchange programs that have as a general long-term goal cultivating international understanding and influence without any specific goal in mind. It is the same dynamic that distinguishes communications associated with elections from those associated with media reporting and public service communications.

To further illustrate, the strategic goal of obtaining new training space for Fort Bragg, North Carolina, should result in a set of event-driven supporting strategic communications activities to inform key audiences that culminates with the decision to provide or deny resources. Consequently, a proper strategic communications plan supports the strategic objectives by focusing on developing appropriate content and media avenues to reach and educate those narrowly defined key audiences at specific key windows of opportunity—matching methods of communications to opportunities for informing the key decisionmakers. Strategic audiences would therefore be agencies and leadership with a decisionmaking role in prioritizing DoD resources, as well as members of the media or interest groups that inform those decisionmakers.

Similarly, strategic communications conducted by the Multinational Force Headquarters in Iraq may have as their primary objective eliciting from key audiences specific political action to halt ethnic conflict or stabilize certain sectors of the economy. Strategic communications in both cases supports the organization’s “big” specific strategic objectives according to context in an event-driven way.

Finally, the fourth characteristic—and perhaps the most prominent feature that separates strategic communications from other forms of public information activities—is extremely refined audience definition. To see this difference, it is key to observe that there is no such thing as “non-strategic communications.” Instead, strategic communications are properly viewed as a spectrum of activities that have on one extreme all possible audiences which could have some potential influence on achieving specific strategic objectives, and at the other extreme only the most potentially influential decisionmakers. Between the two extremes are audiences that move in a scale from lesser degrees of influence to greater. Seen from this perspective, all public communications activities conceivably might have a measure of strategic communications impact. However, no organization has at its disposal all the resources that would be required to communicate effectively with all possible audiences. As a consequence, the most basic characteristic that distinguishes strategic communications from related or subordinate public communications activities is a much more refined process for determining where on the spectrum one divides those audiences most likely to positively influence achievement of strategic objectives from those with less potential. This is done to focus and maximize the use of limited time and communications resources. This judgment process is the key feature of strategic communications, distinguishing it from the generally less focused audience selection characteristic of activities better defined as garden variety public affairs and public diplomacy activities, which include a wide variety of programs that serve very broad, general audiences with marginal strategic communications relevance.

To illustrate, a senior military officer’s participation as a speaker at a local high school event may have some possibility of acquiring resources to help a service meet its strategic recruitment goals by touching a responsive chord in a parent, who might then write a particularly poignant letter to the editor of a local newspaper pleading for more funding for recruiting, which in turn could possibly be passed to a congressional staffer in the office of the student or parent’s representative in Congress and in turn to the member of Congress, thereby inspiring his or her sponsorship of an appropriations bill for recruitment. However, it should be self-evident that such a chain of events has much less probability of successfully informing resource providers on specific needs for recruitment than would direct briefings to them, supported by highly focused media and interest group contact that provide greater detail and discussion in an agenda-setting process.

These contrasting examples illustrate that the spectrum of communications activities ranges from more strategic to less strategic—not strategic to non-strategic—and highlight that strategic

communications differ from other public communication activities mainly in their emphasis on refining those key target audiences to determine where the weight of strategic communications activities should be for greatest return on investment of time and effort. Therefore, strategic communications is well defined as the art of selecting and synchronizing public communications activities that have the greatest relative probability of supporting specifically defined strategic objectives as opposed to those that have relatively less probability.

In summary, the term strategic communications refers to “closely coordinated and synchronized activities, including, but not limited to, public affairs, public diplomacy, and PSYOP, with the refined intent of communicating information to narrowly targeted specific audiences of strategic importance in a process that is event driven to achieve specific strategic objectives. The nature and components of any particular strategic communications activity is shaped by context.”

Those who dismiss the four characteristics of strategic communications discussed above can be counted upon to overextend an organization’s capability to manage public communications, dilute its overall communication efforts, and ultimately fail in strategically communicating.

Endnotes

- ¹ Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, addressing the Council on Foreign Relations, New York, 17 February 2006. See also, Will Dunham, “Rumsfeld Says U.S. Constrained in Information War,” Reuters Wire Service, 2 February 2006; Joshua Kucera, “Military and Media – Weaponizing the truth?” *Janes Defence Weekly*, Washington, D.C., 8 June 2005, available online at http://www.joshuakucera.net/2005/06/military_and_th.html.
- ² Linda Robinson, “The Propaganda War,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 29 May 2006, pp. 29–31.
- ³ Department of State, Memo for Strategic Communications, subject: Summary of Conclusions and U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication, 12 October 2006.

***About the author . . .** Colonel William M. Darley, recently retired from the U.S. Army, was a career Public Affairs officer whose assignments included Public Affairs and Visits Officer for the Multi-National Force and Observers (MFO) in the Sinai (1990–1991); public affairs staff officer on the Army Staff (1992–1993); acting public affairs officer for the former School of the Americas (now the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, or WHINSEC), Fort Benning, Georgia; public affairs plans officer for the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), Tampa, Florida (1994–1997); Department of Defense media desk officer for Special Operations and Latin American affairs (1998–2000); public affairs officer for USSOCOM (2000–2003); and Combined Joint Task Force-7 (CJTF-7) public affairs officer in Iraq (August 2003–March 2004). Upon his return from Iraq, he served as the first Director, Strategic Communications for the Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and then as editor in chief of Military Review. He is now employed by SAIC as a strategic communications advisor to the U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center and the U.S. Army Computer Network Operations–Electronic Warfare Proponent, both at Fort Leavenworth.*

