



Information Operations

From Good to Great

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WE ARE IN an information war. Because the people are the center of gravity in counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, one of the defining characteristics of insurgencies is the constant struggle between the legitimate government and the insurgents for the trust and cooperation of the indigenous population. Influencing the citizenry's views of the conflict and managing their expectations of the future is thus essential to waging a successful counterinsurgency campaign. The people's perceptions and attitudes will ultimately dictate who they support—their government or the insurgent.

To that end, competently managing information that affects the population's attitudes and beliefs is a decisive element of successful counterinsurgency. In U.S. military doctrine, we refer to this effort as information operations (IO). Information operations are activities undertaken by military and nonmilitary organizations to shape the essential narrative of a conflict or situation and thus affect the attitudes and behaviors of the targeted audience. Examples of IO activities include key leader engagements, the dissemination of products such as handbills and flyers, conversations and interviews with press organizations, television and radio advertisements, and any other activity that promotes the dissemination of information. Unlike the insurgents, we cannot lie or propagandize with falsehoods and intentional misinformation with these activities. However, as the saying goes, we can be “first with the truth.” Moreover, we can be smarter with the truth.

Fortunately, most leaders today in the U.S. military recognize that information operations are a legitimate and necessary component of successful counterinsurgency. However, it has been my observation that the approach units take in integrating IO into their daily framework operations varies greatly, and consequently so do the results.

Most successful information operations share similar characteristics, beginning with the development of a sound IO concept of operation and culminating with a detailed plan of execution. There are some very creative and intellectually sound concepts and plans developed by commanders and their

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PHOTO: U.S. soldiers assigned to 3rd Advise and Assist Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, provide security during a key leader engagement in Al Maaqal, Iraq, 9 October 2010. (U.S. Army, SSG Michael L. Casteel)

staffs at all levels from battalion through corps and army-level command. There is less understanding and appreciation, however, of how to best execute IO in practice.

The purpose of this article is to identify common shortcomings that units experience while executing IO and to offer suggestions on how to improve that execution. Three conditions must exist to achieve optimal affects with information operations.

First and foremost, commanders at all levels must understand and acknowledge that information operations are an important and potentially decisive component of their overarching COIN strategy. In other words, commanders must emphasize the importance of IO in everything they do so that subordinate leaders and units not only hear the message but also see it reinforced in the commander's actions and priorities. If this fundamental condition is not met, and information operations are not understood as a top priority of the unit commander, then they won't be important to subordinate commanders either. The result will be insufficient rigor in application to achieve positive effects.

The second necessary condition for success is a concept of operation that integrates information operations into every facet of a unit's daily framework. To gain maximum effect, operations need to consistently and constantly send a message to the target audience. The key to developing that kind of repetition with information operations is to develop a concept of operation that threads IO activities through every line of operation constituting a unit's campaign plan.

The third condition for success is execution of an IO plan such that intended messages are driven home repetitively to the target audience. Of the three conditions identified, the competent and persistent execution of IO activities is the one that most units most often fail to achieve. To that end, the remainder of this article will identify unit and organization shortcomings that dull the positive impact of IO and thus impede mission accomplishment.

Repetitive Messaging

The most common mistake committed by units when executing information operations is the failure to achieve sufficient repetitious delivery of messages to their intended audience. Repetition is a key tenet of IO execution, and the failure to

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constantly drive home a consistent message dilutes the impact on the target audiences. For years, commercial advertisers have based their advertisement strategies on the premise that there is a positive correlation between the number of times a consumer is exposed to product advertisements and that consumer's inclination to sample a new product. The very same principle applies to how we influence our target audiences when we conduct COIN. In general, four main areas individually or collectively contribute to a lack of repetitive messaging:

- Too many IO themes and messages.
- Too little time dedicated to disseminating them.
- Little or no unity of effort when delivering messages.
- Lack of processes or feedback mechanisms to ensure that messages are being delivered accurately, routinely, and repetitiously.

I will address each one of these areas individually.

Too Many IO Themes and Messages

All too often, organizations develop too many themes and messages for the target audiences they are attempting to influence. Doing this inadvertently impedes their ability to repetitiously drive home the intended message to a target audience. Remembering the basic advertising tenet that a message must reach its intended target multiple times to compel a change in consumer purchasing habits, it follows that minimizing themes and repeating fewer messages more often will maximize the exposure of the target audience to those ideas over time. For example, an IO plan based on five themes with eight messages developed for each theme is much more difficult to deliver to an audience multiple times compared to a simple plan with three themes, and perhaps three or four supporting messages per

theme. In the first case, over forty messages must be repetitively delivered, while in the second case, there are only nine to twelve messages, making it significantly easier to disseminate multiple times to targeted audiences compared to forty messages.

During my last tour in Iraq from December 2009 to December 2010, the 1st Armored Division developed an IO plan around five themes and six to eight supporting messages per theme; that is, we attempted to disseminate thirty to forty supporting messages to several different audiences. We quickly learned that, based upon the finite number of dissemination options available, we could not gain sufficient repetition to achieve our desired IO effects. Realizing the nature of the problem, we did two things to reduce our messaging requirements. First, we prioritized the themes we wanted the division leadership and units to focus on—reducing that number from five to three. Then we reviewed our supporting messages for these themes and selected the best two to four messages per theme that would resonate with our target audiences. By taking this approach, we reduced our messaging requirements from forty down to twelve, thus creating a condition that allowed us to reach our target audiences multiple times with our limited dissemination assets.

Too Little Time Spreading the Word

Another common mistake organizations make that distracts them from achieving repetition in messaging is the failure to allocate sufficient time for message delivery. All too often, units change the theme and messages they deliver before they have achieved sufficient repetition of delivery to successfully gain any significant IO effect. By their very nature, information operations do not lend themselves to immediate results. When insufficient time is allotted for delivering messages, units typically fail to achieve sufficient repetition, dramatically reducing the chances that their IO efforts will have the desired effect.

In the 1st Armored Division, we found that in order to reach our target audiences multiple times with our themes and messages, we had to deliver them over a period of months—not days or weeks. We used the full complement of delivery assets—senior leader (both U.S. and Iraqi military) engagements with key Iraqi interlocutors, press engagements, billboard and handbill advertisements, radio spots on local stations, television information commercials, and other nonattributable means. No matter how detailed our dissemination plans were, we found that the number



(Photo courtesy of author)

Sheiks and tribal leaders participate in a 1st Armored Division BCT-initiated key leader engagement.

one resource permitting us to repetitively reach our target audience was time.

We also worked hard to ensure that the messages were delivered multiple times by different means of delivery so that our target audience was exposed from various directions. For example, if we were trying to enhance the image of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in the eyes of their own citizens, we would ensure that our key leaders always included supporting messages of this nature in their conversations with key Iraqi interlocutors. We would also ensure that we incorporated these same types of supporting messages in handbills and billboard advertisements depicting ISF security successes, as well as radio and television advertisements that aired several times a day across multiple radio and TV stations. The goal, which we often achieved, was to saturate our target audience with consistent messages that supported one of our key three themes.

After several months of hearing about ISF successes from personal conversations, seeing examples on billboards in the city, hearing of them on the radio stations, and seeing them on TV infomercials, we had a high level of confidence that our target audiences' belief system and attitudes were affected. Quite simply, they got the message that Iraqi Security Forces were competent and capable, and they began to act accordingly. It may sound easy, but that kind of success requires direct and persistent leader emphasis and involvement at all levels. Units also must implement systems to track the execution of their IO activities to ensure that they are delivering messages to the intended audiences accurately and frequently. I cannot overemphasize the importance of such "message saturation." Such repetition and constancy is a critical prerequisite to influencing a targeted audience. Believe me, it does not happen by accident, and it won't happen just because someone writes it into an order.

Unity of Effort and Breadth of Message Delivery

It is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve the required repetitive messaging by relying on only one or two of the delivery options available to your organization. We must make a disciplined



An Iraqi division commander from Baghdad prepares for an Arab press conference. Themes and messages delivered by indigenous leadership to local citizens are an effective way to positively influence the population.

(Photo courtesy of author)

effort to ensure that we employ every messaging asset and capability at our disposal in a deliberate, calculated, and disciplined manner. This requires a centralized system where guidance is given to key leaders at every level of your organization concerning what message they are to deliver, to which target audience, by what means—and how often. In this same vein, it's important that units develop feedback mechanisms to track the delivery of messages to their key audiences. Such a feedback loop will allow your IO team to monitor the level of saturation you are achieving with messages and ensure that your subordinate units and leaders are executing their IO activities as designed.

To ensure that all messages and actions are supportive of the IO effort, directive guidance should also be given to those individuals in your organization charged with developing print products, radio and television commercials, and other dissemination means. In the 1st Armored Division, we centralized all message coordination in what we called the communications strategy (COMSTRAT) working group. The members were from the division's IO section, Civil-Military Operations section, Public Affairs Office, and the Military Information Support Operations section.

In an effort to emphasize the importance of this group and the priority of its duties, the division commander assigned a flag officer to chair its sessions.

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The primary purpose of this weekly meeting was to synchronize IO activities across all units and leaders in the division. Key agenda items included assessments concerning the quality of the messages we were using, when to change or update messages, when to transition from one theme to another, synchronization of all IO activities and assets, and organizational compliance with message delivery. At the conclusion of this meeting each week, we were able to ensure that every IO asset we had available in the division was being employed in a coordinated and synchronized manner designed to achieve message saturation with our key audiences.

Lack of a Feedback Loop

We found that one of the major impediments to achieving the repetitious delivery of messages to our key audiences was the failure of many units and leaders to execute IO tasks accurately or consistently. Generally, this was not due to willful disobedience on their part, but rather to the fact that units were often assigned requirements that exceeded their capacities. Under these conditions, commanders do what good commanders do—they prioritize.

In the case of our division, initially many of our units did not give sufficient priority to IO. To address this shortcoming in our execution strategy, the division created a set of detailed feedback mechanisms designed to track the execution of IO tasks by subordinate units and divisional staff sections. Each week in the COMSRAT working group, we would review a series of IO activity performance measures that units were required to execute. Examples of these measures included requiring every brigade in the division to hold one Arab press conference a month; reviewing any



(Photo courtesy of author)

The 1st Armored Division commander hosts a key leader engagement with senior civilian, military and tribal leaders in Baghdad.



(Photo courtesy of author)

The Baghdad Arab press corps at a 1st Armored Division press conference.

enemy activity that resulted in harm or suffering to the Iraqi people and confirming that corresponding IO measures were taken to discredit the enemy; confirmation that handbills and billboards with specific messages were delivered to an intended audience; identification of high-visibility future venues that would allow units to message large Iraqi audiences; and confirmation that senior leaders were conducting key leader engagements with the right people and consistent with the frequency we determined was necessary to ensure influence.

This list of performance measures is illustrative and far from exhaustive. I simply want to show the level of detail we tracked at division in an effort to ensure that all of our subordinate units and leaders were prioritizing the execution of their IO activities in accordance with our division commander's guidance. As noted, units don't intentionally neglect the execution of their IO tasks. They just don't generally make them a priority, and consequently those critical tasks are not executed consistently. However, consistency, accuracy, and most importantly, repetition are foundational elements of successful IO. Units thus need a feedback loop to ensure that foundation is solid.

The U.S. Army today is widely recognized as the world's preeminent counterinsurgency force. We have achieved our current level of expertise through a combination of experience on the battlefield and the ability to learn and adapt both as leaders and as an institution. In the last nine years, one of the most important lessons we have learned is the critical importance of IO in the operational environment. Having acknowledged that reality, we must ensure we execute IO strategies and concepts with the same degree of rigor and discipline that we are renowned for in conducting military operations. To control the center of gravity in counterinsurgency warfare, we must achieve the repetitious delivery of accurate and coordinated messages to key audiences to influence their attitudes and behavior. That means doing four things better: limiting the number of IO themes and messages we disseminate; ensuring allocation of sufficient time to deliver messages, planning in terms of months, not days or weeks; achieving unity of effort with every IO delivery asset we have; and finally, creating processes or systems in our organizations to guarantee that IO messages are delivered to the right audience, accurately, consistently, and most importantly, repetitiously. **MR**