Afghan National Army Master Sgt. Sediq Kamran (*left*) talks with Sal Jan (*center*), a U.S. Department of Defense civilian, and U.S. Army Sgt. Kartton Killebrew from the 344th Psychological Operations Company 28 October 2010 at Camp Lindsey, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. Killebrew discussed propaganda created by his unit to express a message of peace to area residents. (U.S. Army photo by Cpl. Robert Thaler)

"The Last Three Feet," Reinvesting in Tactical Information Operations

Lt. Col. Gregory M. Tomlin, PhD, U.S. Army

It has always seemed to me the real art in this business is not so much moving information or guidance or policy five or ten thousand miles. That is an electronic problem. The real art is to move it the last three feet in face-to-face conversation. —Edward R. Murrow

Leaders in any unit occupying a forward operating base (FOB) for the first time will walk the surrounding terrain to lay obstacles and create standoff distance from any would-be suicide bomber. Soldiers construct watch towers, develop sector sketches

for crew-served weapons, register howitzers for counterbattery, and rehearse quick-reaction drills against potential enemy attacks. Prior to every guard shift, squads receive an intelligence update to ensure that they understand the current enemy situation. Commanders implement these force protection measures to allow those living inside the FOB to focus on other critical tasks and, when not on duty, sleep soundly.

Now for a moment, consider eliminating one or more of these security measures. As nonsensical as that sounds, the Army's 2016 Modification Table of Organization and Equipment (MTOE) did just that, by reducing the ability of a brigade combat team (BCT) to maximize standoff distance around a FOB.[1] The MTOE change did not affect the inventory of weapons or engineering assets available to a BCT commander. Rather, the revised MTOE eliminated the information operations (IO) officer billet from the brigade staff, thus centralizing IO planning at the division level. This decision seriously jeopardizes a BCT's ability to engage the local population who, in turn, informs friendly forces about suspicious behavior or denies enemy forces sanctuary in the brigade's area of operations. Indeed, the tangible results of tactical-level IO can include generating standoff distance from adversaries by influencing the local populace to support the mission of the deployed unit.

From the Balkans to the Middle East and Afghanistan, modular BCTs often occupy noncontiguous operational environments with considerable autonomy from division headquarters. For nearly two decades, the desire to provide a BCT commander with more organic resources—including intelligence, signal, and engineering components—led to significant MTOE changes. In 2000, then Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric Shinseki lauded the Initial Brigade Combat Team program as "a milestone on the road to transforming the entire Army into a force that is strategically responsive and dominant at every point on the spectrum of operations."[2] Given current and potential future mission requirements, the need to conduct tactical-level IO remains essential for dominating the entire spectrum involved in multi-domain operations. Underscoring its relevance, Defense Secretary James Mattis established information as the seventh joint function in 2017.[3] This article advocates that in the next round of MTOE adjustments, the Army should reestablish the brigade IO officer to empower BCTs to refine their information campaign to the same level of granularity as their maneuver, fires, and sustainment operations.

Forget Cyber (for a Moment)

During the Cold War, the U.S. Information Agency coordinated public diplomacy and strategic communications on behalf of the U.S. government. For four decades, the agency grappled with how to adopt emerging technologies—from shortwave radio to satellite television and the internet—into efforts to advance U.S. policy by engaging with foreign publics. The agency's most celebrated director, journalist Edward R. Murrow, cautioned his staff against fixating on new media platforms and to focus instead on tailoring messages for specific audiences around the world. Carrying the message the "last three feet" often required U.S. Information Agency employees to personally engage in conversation with inquisitive visitors to U.S. embassies, consulates, or one of more than a hundred libraries operated overseas by the agency. Through one-on-one dialogue, many foreigners began to discern the differences between the empty promises of communist utopia and the real potential for progress offered in the American model.

Since the formation of U.S. Cyber Command in 2009, captivation with cyberwarfare has dominated Army discussions on how to prioritize IO efforts. Certainly the intrigue surrounding Russian disinformation campaigns and the prolific use of social media by al-Qaida and the Islamic State to recruit foreign fighters necessitates investing in defensive cyber measures. However, by shifting resources so heavily toward 2nd Army (the service component to U.S. Cyber Command), senior leaders have implied that IO is preponderantly strategic in nature. Removal of the brigade IO officer from the MTOE further implies that

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U.S. Army 1st Lt. John Dundee (*left*), a platoon leader in Company A, 1st Battalion, 133rd Infantry Regiment, and Afghan National Army Lt. Rastum (*right*), 1st Company, 1st Battalion, 201st Afghan National Army Regiment, talk with a citizen 26 December 2010 in Ghaziabad, Afghanistan. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Ryan C. Matson, Task Force Red Bulls)

the information domain cannot be influenced significantly by those with boots on the ground—those most capable of carrying the message the "last three feet" to a host-nation populace.

The foundation for tactical IO remains face-to-face engagements between soldiers on patrol and local residents as well as those between commanders and indigenous leaders. IO messages developed by the division staff provide a starting point for preparing a platoon leader to speak with villagers during a patrol or for a company commander to meet with a civic administrator. However, just as junior officers must develop their own scheme of maneuver based on a battalion operations order, they should prepare their own information messages nested with their higher headquarters' IO themes to ensure they will help achieve the commander's intent. Since brigade commanders would never authorize a lethal strike until the fire support officer refines the target location published in a fires plan from division headquarters, they should not accept generic messages for nonlethal engagements in their area of operations either.

Effective IO requires more than broadcasting radio infomercials or plastering walls with eye-catching posters encouraging the local populace to support the rule of law. For IO themes to influence behavioral change—to persuade individuals to reject the allure of the enemy's information campaign—they must be delivered in a manner that resonates on a personal level. Gaining credibility with people already suspicious of the intentions of U.S. forces operating in their community requires a willingness for soldiers to engage them in dialogue and feel comfortable responding to their questions. Too often IO officers develop messages in reaction to a crisis or to counter the enemy's latest false accusation about U.S. operations. Such platitudes ring hollow if the BCT fails to develop a rapport with the inhabitants before the need arises to react to disinformation.

Refining tactical-level messages should be done in information working groups at the BCT level, where the brigade IO officer can collaborate with battalion representatives. Regular input from the battalions about local demographics, security concerns,

economic frustrations, and political viewpoints will improve the substance of IO messages disseminated to soldiers for use when conducting patrols. In addition, feedback on earlier engagements will inform the brigade staff about the reception of specific themes by the populace, an invaluable planning consideration for future IO efforts. By continuously assessing the effectiveness of messaging, the BCT can develop relatable talking points and questions for soldiers to use to spark conversations with indigenous people, rather than to speak *at* them.

Once locals feel comfortable asking soldiers about their mission or the larger goals of a coalition operation, soldiers have an opportunity to share more about themselves as individuals. Sharing personal stories about life back home in the United States to a group of teenagers on a soccer field, to women in a market, or to village elders in a café may humanize IO efforts and improve the likelihood of fomenting trust. In *As Terrorism Evolves*, Philip Seib describes the value of this "think smaller" approach: "Such projects, multiplied a thousand-fold, might help make extremist activity less alluring because the targets of recruitment would decide that their lives, although far from ideal, have a chance to become better."[4]

As a force multiplier, key leader engagements remain a critical face-to-face technique for BCT leaders to collaborate with respected community members to amplify IO messages on behalf of the unit. Individuals wary of listening to U.S. soldiers may be more inclined to trust their own cleric who condemns violence during a sermon, or their mayor who encourages constituents to report the location of a terrorist cell to the police. This requires members of the unit to convince local leaders that it is in their best interest to amplify the command's messages. The absence of a brigade IO officer limits the command's ability to build and maintain an exhaustive list of key leaders, often referred to as "spheres of influence," across the area of operations.

Maintaining a listing of key leaders and their designated BCT counterparts, from the brigade commander to the platoon leader, helps to prevent "information fratricide." This form of unintentional damage occurs when two members of the same unit engage a local individual separately without strategizing their messages in advance. For example, if the battalion and company commanders meet independently with the district police chief, they may agree to contradictory promises on behalf of the unit. Alternatively, if a battalion commander meets with the police chief first, the chief may not accept meeting with a company commander for the remainder of the deployment because of the perception of losing prestige by speaking with a more junior officer. The IO officer's involvement in scheduling key leader engagements aids in scoping the focus of each meeting and prepares the unit representative to address defined goals. While BCTs rotate through the area of operations, local leaders reside there and will remain invested in the community for a lifetime, which means that they can provide continuity as new units acquaint themselves with the environment.

Similarly, the IO officer can assist senior leaders with conducting negotiations, a more sophisticated meeting than an ordinary key leader engagement. As William Wunderle argued in a 2007 *Military Review* article, the prenegotiation preparation may be the most critical step for achieving an outcome advantageous to the unit. In the lead-up to the meeting, each party "identifies its strengths, assesses its interests, and works to understand the negotiation's wider context."[5] Certainly the brigade intelligence officer should provide background on the local individual's personality and viewpoints. However, the IO officer would be better suited to arrange a preparation session for the senior leader to review the goals of the negotiation, practice responding to anticipated questions, and gain confidence in speaking through an interpreter—an underrated but essential skill for bilingual conversations. Whether in attendance during the actual negotiation or not, the IO officer should schedule a postnegotiation out brief with the senior leader to assess how the outcome of the engagement should shape future messages.

Integrating All Capabilities

Joint Publication 3-13, *Information Operations*, emphasizes that in IO planning and execution, "it is not the ownership of the capabilities and techniques that is important, but rather their integrated application."[6] From civil affairs (CA) to psychological operations (PSYOP) and electronic warfare, BCTs receive a variety of enablers for a deployment, with attachments often arriving for the brigade's training exercise at a

An Afghan disk jockey for Radio Unity in Logar Province, Afghanistan, delivers a broadcast via Radio in a Box (RIAB), a portable radio transmitting system. The RIAB system helps communicate with local residents and counter enemy propaganda campaigns, especially in remote regions. (Photo by Sgt. William Begley, U.S. Army)

combat training center prior to departure. When the brigade commander and staff fail to integrate these unique elements into their operations during training, the BCT arrives in theater suffering from an avoidable tactical disadvantage. Without clear guidance from the brigade, attached units may receive direction from division-level authorities on how to operate within the brigade's sector, and this can lead to unnecessary friction between well-meaning attachments and the brigade's leadership. It may take months into the deployment for the commander and staff to realize their mistake prior to integrating IO enablers into the information campaign and regain the momentum lost by the setback.

Through no fault of their own, most BCT operations officers from the armor or infantry branches possess limited knowledge about IO enablers, particularly since most attachments hail from the National Guard or Army Reserve. When pressed to publish an operations order in time for a briefing or rehearsal, combat arms officers can easily dismiss the information function in favor of the more familiar tasks of integrating the command-and-control and movement-and-maneuver functions. Brigade staff primaries include field grade officers to develop the intelligence, fires, protection, and sustainment annexes of an order, but with the lack of an IO officer, the staff may never write an information annex. Without providing a task and purpose for each IO enabler or refining division-level messages, the brigade will struggle to incorporate the information function into its overall synchronization matrix for operations.

Although CA has its own annex in an operations order, a CA detachment should not operate in a BCT's area of operations without understanding the brigade's information messages. Working with nongovernmental organizations, provincial officials, and host-nation community groups, CA soldiers coordinate humanitarian aid distribution, education programs, and the construction of public infrastructure. High-profile events, such as the groundbreaking ceremony for a new hospital, draw crowds and the local press. However, the brigade loses the opportunity to influence the population when the staff fails to prepare the CA commander to speak to the captive audience about other topics critical to changing their perceptions about the U.S. or coalition mission. Just as the IO officer could prepare brigade leaders for key leader engagements, the CA commander should confer with the IO officer prior to meeting with local officials about the timing and location of development aid projects.

To further amplify brigade messages, PSYOP teams perform a unique information function, not only for stability operations but also for high-intensity conflict. Whether the team arrives with a speaker-mounted vehicle or its own handbill printing capability, PSYOP can deliver mass or surgical effects to inform the population. During the brigade planning process, the IO officer could ensure that courses of action consider

leveraging PSYOP techniques to clear routes of civilian traffic for tactical convoys or to deceive adversaries about the location of the brigade's main effort. The IO planning ensures that the PSYOP team appears on the synchronization matrix managed by the operations officer, that the team leader participates in BCT rehearsals, and that maneuver battalion commanders acknowledge their requirement to provide the team with force protection.

The IO officer should also integrate the public affairs officer into the information campaign. The reliance on internet-based information sources blurs the line between IO and public affairs, making it impossible to bifurcate the two staff functions during multi-domain operations. As Walter Richter observed in his 2009 *Military Review* article, "While each environment has its own characteristics, IO can no longer consider these environments simply as friend or foe."[7] Add to this complexity the near-instantaneous impact of tweets and YouTube videos released by adversaries that elicit emotional responses from the local populace, and the brigade must consider its online presence and ability to engage the indigenous population through the virtual domain.

Typically, BCTs maintain a Facebook page to share information with families back home about the unit's deployment, but adversaries and curious residents of the brigade's area of operations visit this publicly accessible site too. Without sacrificing operational security, an IO officer could assist the public affairs officer in considering the advantages of uploading specific pictures from key leader engagements or development aid projects, knowing that these images would make their way into the social media feeds of some locals. Photos with respected community leaders do not require captions translated into the host-nation language to make a favorable impression. Without compromising the credibility of the public affairs website by using it for deception operations, the inclusion of positive news stories could help indigenous residents who visit the page to navigate through the internet's "white noise" of propaganda spewed by adversaries and the wildly irrelevant stories intended to excoriate the U.S. or coalition mission. Just as brigades must build rapport through face-to-face conversations, establishing credibility in cyberspace requires daily interaction at the tactical level.

While divisions, joint task forces, and combatant commands maintain their own websites and social media accounts, the creation of brigade-level outlets would further advance the information campaign. During a deployment, BCTs have a responsibility to nest their messages with those developed by their higher echelons. However, beyond projecting enduring messages, the need to inform the local populace immediately after a tragedy, such as a suicide bomber killing dozens of civilians in a market, necessitates reporting on events without waiting to staff every tweet or Facebook post through a division for approval. In the absence of a timely and accurate report posted online by the BCT, an adversary can quickly plant a false narrative blaming the brigade for the atrocity. Even if the local population does not find the adversary's story convincing, the adversary succeeds in seeding doubt about the U.S. mission whenever the brigade fails to leverage the information domain as quickly as a platoon would react to an enemy ambush by establishing security and clearing the threat.

A Worthy Investment

Despite the sophistication of today's joint fires architecture, we would never consider centralizing fire support at the division level. Likewise, without an IO officer preparing leaders and synchronizing assets across the BCT to dynamically engage the local population, generic information messages will fail to influence perceptions, behavior, action, or inaction. The absence of an IO officer at the brigade level reinforces the misconception within the U.S. Army that information is a separate function, rather than a related capability—no different from intelligence or fires—to integrate, synchronize, and direct operations.

In the absence of an IO officer, who on the brigade staff is best suited to assume responsibility for the information function as an additional duty? Day-to-day priorities overwhelm the operations officer, and his small cadre of captains lack experience or formal training in IO. The fire support officer—a favorite surrogate since the Balkan peacekeeping missions of the 1990s—may seem like a logical selection, particularly during stability operations when few indirect fire platforms require synchronization. However, IO engagement is not the same as lethal targeting, and it would be incongruous to try to align nonlethal effects on the indigenous population with the joint targeting cycle's selection,

engagement, and assessment of targets. The joint targeting cycle used to shape the air tasking order should not be accepted as the best process for IO planning or assessments because of the extensive time required to build credibility and influence the local population. The success of IO often depends on engaging a host-nation population continuously over multiple BCT rotations, evidenced by ongoing operations in Afghanistan.

When Mattis established information as a joint function, he directed the Department of Defense to consider the implications across doctrine, organizations, education, and personnel. This article explored one dimension that the Army should address by updating the BCT MTOE to reestablish the permanent position for a field grade IO officer on the brigade staff. Regaining a principal staff officer formally trained in IO and designated by duty description to focus on the information function will empower the staff to more capably integrate IO capabilities and refine information messages for the brigade's area of operations. ■

Notes

Epigraph. Edward R. Murrow, transcript of *Issues and Answers*, ABC, 4 August 1963.

1. Account holders may access the current Modification Table of Organization and Equipment from the U.S. Army Force Management System website at https://fmsweb.fms.army.mil/protected/secure/req_account.asp.

2. Eric Shinseki, quoted in "Fort Lewis Brigades Begin Conversion to IBCTs," *Army Logistician* 32, no. 4 (July-August 2000): 56.

3. James Mattis, Memorandum to the Department of Defense, "Information as a Joint Function," 15 September 2017.

4. Philip Seib, *As Terrorism Evolves: Media, Religion, and Governance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 168.

5. William Wunderle, "How to Negotiate in the Middle East," *Military Review* 87, no. 2 (March-April 2007): 34.

6. Joint Publication 3-13, Information Operations (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 20 November 2014), I-5.

7. Walter E. Richter, "The Future of Information Operations," *Military Review* 89, no. 1 (January-February 2009): 109.

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