



Sgt. Rahjeem Dixon (left), a broadcast specialist assigned to 22nd Mobile Public Affairs Detachment, XVIII Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, walks down a trail with Capt. Orlandon Howard, public affairs officer for 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, during an Allied Spirit VII training exercise at Grafenwoehr, Germany, on 18 November 2017. (Photo by Spc. Dustin D. Biven, U.S. Army)

Communication Strategy

Rethinking Strategic Communication for U.S. Military Public Affairs

Lt. Col. Orlandon Howard, U.S. Army

Military public affairs contribute to defense security by communicating information and fostering productive relationships with internal and external stakeholders to affect their knowledge, attitude, opinions, or behavior toward the organization's strategic goals. Its relevance spans the entire conflict continuum from peace to war because words and images wield more power than weapons, and relationships are significant force multipliers.

Nevertheless, history has shown that military public affairs, as the United States designed it, is too meager to be effective in hotly contested information environments. It's a knife in a machine-gun fight. The military should trade its public affairs doctrine for a new version of strategic communication to enable it to live up to its potential.

Public Affairs' Emergence

Military public affairs officially began in 1946.¹ It was born out of World War II lessons that highlighted the need for increased competency within the military ranks in conducting mass communication activities for internal and external audiences. Before the war, the military depended on civilians with different com-

munication skills who served as reservists to conduct public information activities. The value of their activities during the war convinced the military it needed more full-time in-house capabilities.²

Over time, the military transitioned from using "public information" to "public affairs" to better reflect the field's expanding responsibilities.³ The discipline's scope grew beyond activities like media relations and journalism. It started to include internal relations and community and civic relations,

more closely resembling the civilian sector's version of public relations. However, public relations was off-limits to the military due to its association with publicity and propaganda in public perception.⁴ The 1913 Gillett Amendment prohibited the government from using resources for these activities.⁵ Public affairs offered a middle ground between public information and public relations in terms of its associated activities. Public affairs could do more than deliver basic facts. It could communicate for various objectives as long as it avoided self-promotional or propagandizing activities.

Public Affairs' Operational Potential

Soon, the military realized it could also use public affairs to achieve operational objectives. As the operational and information environments became more complex, so did expectations of public affairs.

In 2000, John F. Kirby, a U.S. Navy officer who later became the national security coordinator for strategic communications at the National Security Council, published an essay titled "Public Affairs as an Operational Function."⁶ Against the backdrop of the Yugoslav wars and U.S. interventions in Somalia and Haiti, Kirby argued that public affairs was a critical force multiplier that needed to be operationalized for a military operation to thrive in a fiercely contested information environment. He quoted a senior officer who poignantly captured the sentiment: "We need to have PAO [public affairs officer] warfighters, folks, and a plan that are as nasty as the enemy."⁷

The sentiment spread during the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Military and civilian leaders realized they needed more than public affairs as it was conceived to achieve their strategic objectives. Hearts and minds became critical domains in the combat theater, on the international stage, and, most importantly, at home.⁸

Public Affairs' Weak Sauce

Despite the supposed Goldilocks position public affairs negotiated between public information and public relations, Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense during the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, complained that public affairs was ineffective at communicating and managing the United States' reputation surrounding the wars.⁹ He suggested public affairs was conditioned to be reactive and sterile. Rumsfeld wanted

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more proactive and sophisticated communication initiatives to navigate the complex information environment it faced.

Rumsfeld's concern became palpable when support for the Iraq war quickly atrophied after the initial euphoria. In the early weeks, a Pew Research survey reported 90 percent of respondents believed the war was going well.¹⁰ However, only 60 percent felt the same way several months later. The insurgency and the prospect of a prolonged conflict led to widespread disillusionment. Soon after, the United States' perception-management problems surrounding the conflict worsened. One year after the invasion, a pair of events captured on video and photos gained widespread attention through television and the internet, further damaging perceptions of the war effort.

The initial incident happened in March 2004, when four American contractors were brutally murdered and their corpses desecrated in a savage display of anti-American hostility in Iraq.¹¹ The other event came to light two months later in May, when pictures emerged of U.S. forces abusing prisoners in the Iraqi prison, Abu Ghraib. A poll conducted later that month assessing public opinion on the war revealed a decline below 50 percent of Americans who believed the conflict was going "at least fairly well," according to Pew Research (see figure 1).¹²

Digital Mass Media Revolution—Seismic Changes to the Information Environment

A new digital media revolution had emerged during the Iraq War, significantly influencing the conflict and shaping war perceptions. This era marked the onset of hyperportability, shareability, and viewability of media content. Videos and images could be downloaded, shared, and viewed at will, countless times, by anyone with internet access. Internet users also increased from under five hundred million in 2001 to one billion in 2005, with Asia being the fastest-growing region.¹³

The steep decline of Iraq war sentiment was caused by the speed, range, and force of the media reporting enabled by ubiquitous television and internet access. A few low-level war crimes took center stage in a global theater because they happened in a new digital media era where portable media access was diffused across the globe.¹⁴

The new era was also marked by a global twenty-four-hour news cycle fueled by freshly minted media organizations in fierce competition for viewers and advertisers. They straddled traditional and digital media vehicles to propagate their news, multiplying their media consumers.

Cable news networks like Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC saw massive surges in viewership by more than 300 percent in 2003.¹⁵ They overtook traditional networks as go-to news sources on the war.¹⁶ CNN had ninety million U.S. viewers within two weeks after the start of the invasion of Iraq, Fox News had sixty-seven million, and MSNBC had fifty-seven million.¹⁷ To put it in context, the numbers dwarfed the total viewers that watched television news after the 11 September attacks.¹⁸

The Qatar-based media organization Al Jazeera also became prominent covering the U.S. GWOT.¹⁹ It was a major detractor of U.S. Middle East policy. By 2004, Al Jazeera had fifty million viewers worldwide, making it the Arab world's most-watched television network.²⁰ Outside the United States, it became a trusted source because it looked more objective and portrayed the war's realities more vividly and viscerally.

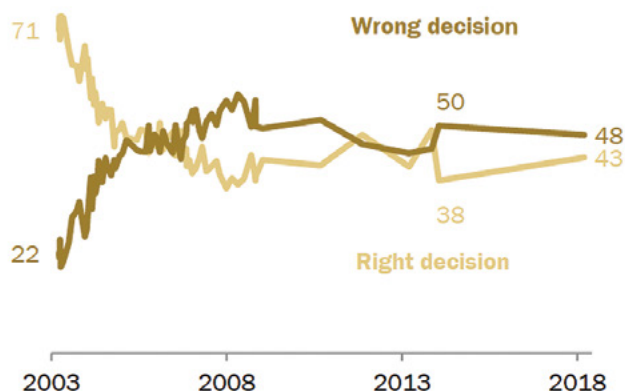
Social Media Revolution—Seismic Changes to the Information Environment Again

Before the United States could catch its footing, its runaway narrative problems were exacerbated by another media revolution in online communication brought about by social media. Social media dawned a new phase of the internet age characterized by the democratization of being seen and heard by large audiences. It brought a massive increase in networkability and reach by anyone with internet access via mobile or desktop devices. It also redistributed communication power, allowing people from around the globe to join the global conversation about current events.

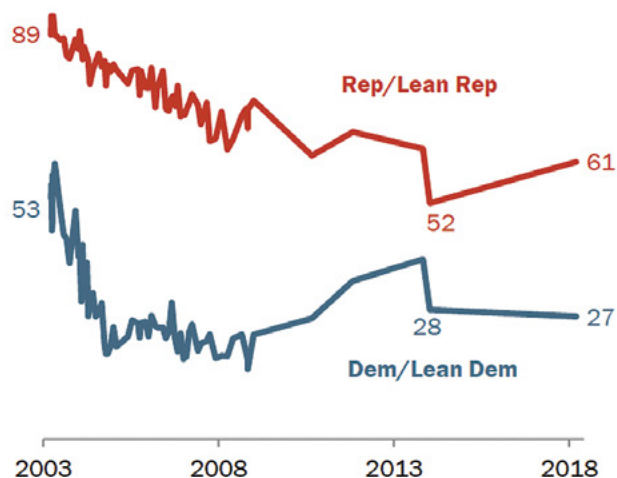
The changes in the media environment made it nearly impossible for the U.S. government to control the narrative because it could no longer control the media as it was accustomed to. In *Manufacturing Consent*, Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman suggested the U.S. Defense and State Departments often force-fed their narratives, influenced, and even coerced media to circumscribe their reporting through patriotic

As Iraq War continued, fewer Americans endorsed the initial decision to use force

% who said the U.S. made the ____ in using military force in Iraq



% who said the U.S. made the **right decision** in using military force in Iraq among ____



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 7-14, 2018.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

(Figure from Carroll Doherty and Jocelyn Kiley, "A Look Back at How Fear and False Beliefs Bolstered U.S. Public Support for War in Iraq," Pew Research Center)

Figure 1. Pew Research Survey Measuring U.S. Adults' Sentiment About the U.S. Decision to Invade Iraq

pressure.²¹ However, a new multipolar and asymmetrical media environment overtook the government's golden era of hub-spoke media control. Adversaries, detractors, and skeptics gained rival power to influence the media. They used mass media and social media with significant competency to thwart the U.S. campaign aims in Iraq and Afghanistan.

STRATCOM Proposed as a Superweapon

To survive the media revolutions and recover from these crises and the ensuing support decline, the United States and its military needed reputational management operations that were much more potent than traditional public affairs, which seemed to be focused on informing and educating stakeholders on an as-needed basis. Rumsfeld, who was also the secretary of defense when the Vietnam War ended in 1975, wanted to stem the tide of deteriorating public opinion of the GWOT, which had ominous parallels with Vietnam.

His solution was to adopt strategic communication, also known as STRATCOM, to replace the traditional public affairs model.²²

It was a paradigm shift toward a more aggressive approach to managing perceptions of the United States' image, operations, and intents and countering adversaries' information operations. Rumsfeld wanted public relations tailored for war. Public affairs could still focus on informing and educating, but its purposes, targeting, and tactics needed to be recalibrated to accomplish his intent. He wanted shrewder tactics, focused on winning the hearts and minds of the right people and preempting and countering adverse narratives.

STRATCOM's Defining Woes

However, defense policymakers altered Rumsfeld's nimble construct probably because his idea seemed too basic. They added more bureaucratic heft to its definition and drastically broadened its scope. They formally conceived of STRATCOM as a grand strategic or

national strategic-level concept involving deliberate communication plans and activities that further national interests. It aimed to integrate the U.S. national instruments of power—diplomacy, information, military, and economic—use a whole-of-government approach, and leverage private-sector capabilities to execute the concept.²³

Unfortunately, the new definition made the concept overly ambitious. It was doomed to collapse under the weight of the requirements it would take to achieve it or never uncoil from the perplexity of its proposed endeavor. Also, despite the robust definition, it was still unclear what it meant. How could all those disparate elements be integrated to execute STRATCOM coherently and consistently? Even if a viable methodology existed, it would have been severely challenged in governability, scalability, sustainability, and even the ability to scope the requirements.

Moreover, despite STRATCOM's cool name, the words were too ambiguous for it to survive in its intended form. STRATCOM did not evoke any of the meanings the concept proponents intended such as cross-integration or synchronized messaging, or even that it was a national strategic-level endeavor. Neither of the words carry those meanings. In everyday parlance, strategic communication typically refers to clever communication designed to achieve preconceived objectives that can happen at any level.

The term's ambiguity led to its usage quickly devolving and ensuing confusion in the force over what it meant. Despite the stuffy codified definition, the layman's connotation turned STRATCOM into something that could be sprinkled on anything. For example, if a military unit hosted a ball, they wanted STRATCOM to convince their reluctant troops to attend. Thus, a turf war ensued between the term's originators and how everyone else used it.²⁴

STRATCOM's Declining Reputation

STRATCOM also quickly acquired negative connotations related to its public relations tactics.²⁵ Rumsfeld saw these efforts as innovations that public affairs needed to gain information and cognitive advantages. However, critics contended they were dubious efforts akin to information operations, psyops, or propaganda. They seemed to expect the U.S. military to take a laissez-faire approach to communicating about the war despite the antagonistic

information environment at the time. They expected the U.S. military to stick to traditional public affairs. Their opposition was withering. Rumsfeld lamented that the criticisms hamstrung public affairs and had a chilling effect on their proactiveness and innovation.²⁶

Some detractors also saw STRATCOM as word-washing, accusing the United States of disingenuous attempts to cover up problems. The criticism led to much discussion about the United States' say-do gaps in Iraq and Afghanistan. A say-do gap refers to the hypocrisy of saying or purporting one thing and doing the opposite. Actions with consequences that are counterproductive to purported aims also qualify.

In a 2009 *Joint Force Quarterly* essay, Adm. Michael Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, expressed frustration with the futility of STRATCOM efforts amid say-do gaps.²⁷ He suggested that the U.S. military dispense with STRATCOM efforts intended to mitigate unproductive actions in theater and focus on actions productive to strategic objectives, which he believed mattered the most. His position was hard to refute and proved devastating to the perception of STRATCOM in the Department of Defense. The term was eventually purged from its official lexicon.²⁸

STRATCOM's Abiding Utility

The U.S. military overreacted to criticism that was probably unjustified or where refinements could have been made to address the associated risks and challenges. STRATCOM is a salvageable concept that the United States still needs, and it is growing increasingly valuable. The political nature of war makes it a fundamental element of military power as demonstrated even in current headlines.

NATO countries have upheld their STRATCOM doctrine with greater coherence and rigor than the United States.²⁹ They face more acute risks, having been victims of Russian information warfare for decades. As a result, several European NATO nations established the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga, Latvia, in 2014. It is an intellectual hub providing allies with STRATCOM-related research and analysis as well as a simulation training platform powered by artificial intelligence called the Information Environment Simulation Range (InfoRange).³⁰

Ukraine owes much of its miraculous survival to STRATCOM.³¹ It has secured prolific and sustained



tangible and intangible global support and boosted its own population's morale to maintain the will to fight through effective communication. In contrast, Israel invariably suffers severe reputational damage in its campaigns against Hamas and Hezbollah. Civilian casualties and infrastructure damage play a significant role. However, Israel has been reluctant to develop a comprehensive communication framework like STRATCOM to anticipate, inoculate, and mitigate the fallout from such incidents.³² It has preferred traditional public affairs damage control methods and "creative improvisation."

The United States cannot afford to leave its reputation and communication objectives to chance or reactive responses. It can likely anticipate an information landscape that falls between the dynamics of the Ukraine conflict and Israel's current war. The narrative that is clear in the Russia-Ukraine war may not be as straightforward in the conflicts the United States engages in. It must be ready for more critical coverage on all fronts early on, questioning the justness of a conflict and its related actions, especially in the aftermath of the Iraq War. The United States' information advantage efforts will also have to navigate a multitude of online commentaries from both humans and bots, a

Members of the Jordanian media pool cover a chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear demonstration on 18 May 2016 during Exercise Eager Lion 16 at a training site just outside of Amman, Jordan. (Photo by Master Sgt. William Price, U.S. Marine Corps Forces Central Command)

comprehensive tracking of every visible action it takes and its ensuing consequences, and an unyielding stream of misinformation and disinformation.

STRATCOM's Soft Return

It's no surprise that STRATCOM is already making a soft comeback in the U.S. military under various guises. The demand for the fundamental concept seems inescapable, no matter what it is called.

In 2018, the Marine Corps changed its public affairs designation to "communication strategy and operations," now known as COMMSTRAT.³³ This change marked a subtle shift from traditional public affairs to operationalizing communication capabilities. However, the Marines warned that COMMSTRAT should not be confused with STRATCOM despite the similarities. Yet, they have not developed a detailed doctrine, leaving uncertainty about its meaning beyond operationalized public affairs.

However, a 2016 paper on communication strategy and synchronization signed by Marine Brig. Gen. William Journey may provide clues about its conception. The paper, “Communication Strategy and Synchronization,” defined communication strategy as a commander-centric activity that aligns and nests communication efforts within an overall strategy.³⁴ It also highlighted communication synchronization as a core element, calling it an organization and a process focused on synchronizing and directing information-related capabilities and words with actions to achieve desired effects. The concept resembled a blend of STRATCOM and information operations.

In 2022, the Army followed the Marines’ lead and published a new version of its Field Manual 3-61 titled *Communication Strategy and Public Affairs Operations*.³⁵ The manual’s title was revised to include communication strategy in what was formerly only labeled public affairs operations. Yet, like the Marines, the Army basically defined communication strategy as public affairs. The more significant change to their doctrine was incorporating the joint concept of commander’s communication synchronization (CCS), which the Army said was formerly called STRATCOM.³⁶ It adopted STRATCOM as part of its new public affairs doctrine under the CCS guise.

Joint Doctrine Note 2-13, *Commander’s Communication Synchronization*, defined CCS as “the process for coordinating and synchronizing themes, messages, images, operations, and actions to support strategic communication-related objectives and ensure the integrity and consistency of themes and messages to the lowest tactical level through the integration and synchronization of all relevant communication activities.”³⁷ It portrays CCS as STRATCOM orchestrated through an information operations working group process. It is a descriptive and instructive framework for understanding what STRATCOM is and how it can be operationalized. Yet, it has struggled to become institutionalized across the military services. STRATCOM still suffers from the challenges of its former ego in scoping the requirements, governing the process, and scaling it across the enterprise.

STRATCOM Rebrand to Integrated Communication Strategy

The U.S. military needs to commit to a vigorous communication concept that is effective in complex

and contested environments and can be operationalized for scalable effects. It should also streamline its communication concepts but adopt a more self-evident term that captures all the major elements involved in STRATCOM. The term STRATCOM should be avoided due to its ambiguity and the connotative baggage it carries in the U.S. military. It needs a rebrand with a new name and even a new definition. The new name should be *integrated communication strategy* (ICS). It maintains the fundamentals of STRATCOM, clarifies the meaning with more descriptive words, and allows the continuity of terms that the Marine Corps and the Army are already using.

ICS mirrors integrated marketing communications (IMC) used in the commercial sector to manage marketing strategies. West Virginia University defines IMC as “a strategic, collaborative, and promotional business function” that unifies all marketing communications to ensure target audiences perceive “consistent, persuasive, and reinforcing brand messaging” across all channels.³⁸ IMC orchestrates a comprehensive brand contact scheme that facilitates desired perceptions, actions, and outcomes and helps organizations achieve broader strategic objectives. It recognizes that all interactions with stakeholders, whether intentional, dynamic, or inadvertent, have the communicative power to shape the target audience’s perception and relationship with the brand. Therefore, it aims to influence those interactions directly and indirectly through strategic communication.

ICS adopts this definition and adds defense-related considerations to create a bespoke concept that accommodates Rumsfeld and Mullen’s positions while retaining the conceptual robustness of STRATCOM’s previous formal definition.

Defining Integration

Integration was a key STRATCOM element transliterated into ICS. It involves deliberate efforts to achieve coherence, synergy, consistency, and coordination when necessary, particularly among communication actors, activities, and messages.

Integrating communication actors. Integrating communication actors involves organizing, synchronizing, and sometimes managing organizations and people in communication initiatives. It can be top-down driven or formally managed, with higher levels setting communication objectives and directing

subordinates to align their communication programs. Alternatively, integration can be informally managed through working groups or ad hoc sharing of communication plans and priorities to secure informal support for a designated effort or to prevent communication contradictions.

Enterprise integration requires strategic guidance to establish a foundational framework for developing nested plans and initiatives that align with the strategic-level intent. One example would be to publish a *National Security Integrated Communication Strategy* as an appendix to the *National Security Strategy*. It should cast a vision for ICS for the entire government.

The guidance should be specific yet broad enough to enable each level and subordinate entity to develop their own strategies for how their particular missions and capabilities contribute to the overall mission. It should initiate the standard cascade of nested ICS at subordinate levels as corresponding appendices to documents such as the *National Military Strategy*, the military services' strategies, and the combatant commands' strategies, using the appropriate naming convention based on the level. This achieves omni-integration, which can be accomplished with or without a formal management mechanism.

The U.S. Department of Defense set an example by publishing its *Strategy for Operations in the Information Environment* in July 2023 to supplement its 2022 *National Defense Strategy*. Its stated purpose is to provide "a DoD-enterprise approach to ensure improved integration and oversight of information forces, capabilities, operations, activities, programs, and technologies."³⁹

Nevertheless, ICS deserves its own carved-out strategy. Standalone treatment is necessary to develop a robust, dedicated strategy and doctrine for addressing cognitive dimensions and avoiding getting crowded out by information operations dedicated to physical or technical dimensions like cyber.

Integrating communication activities. Integrating communication activities in ICS should mimic the commercial sector's methodology for activity integration, governed by the PESO model[®] framework created by Gini Dietrich. PESO is an acronym referring to communication activities categorized as paid, earned, shared, and owned (see figure 2).⁴⁰

Paid includes activities like advertising and sponsorships. *Earned* activities generate free publicity and

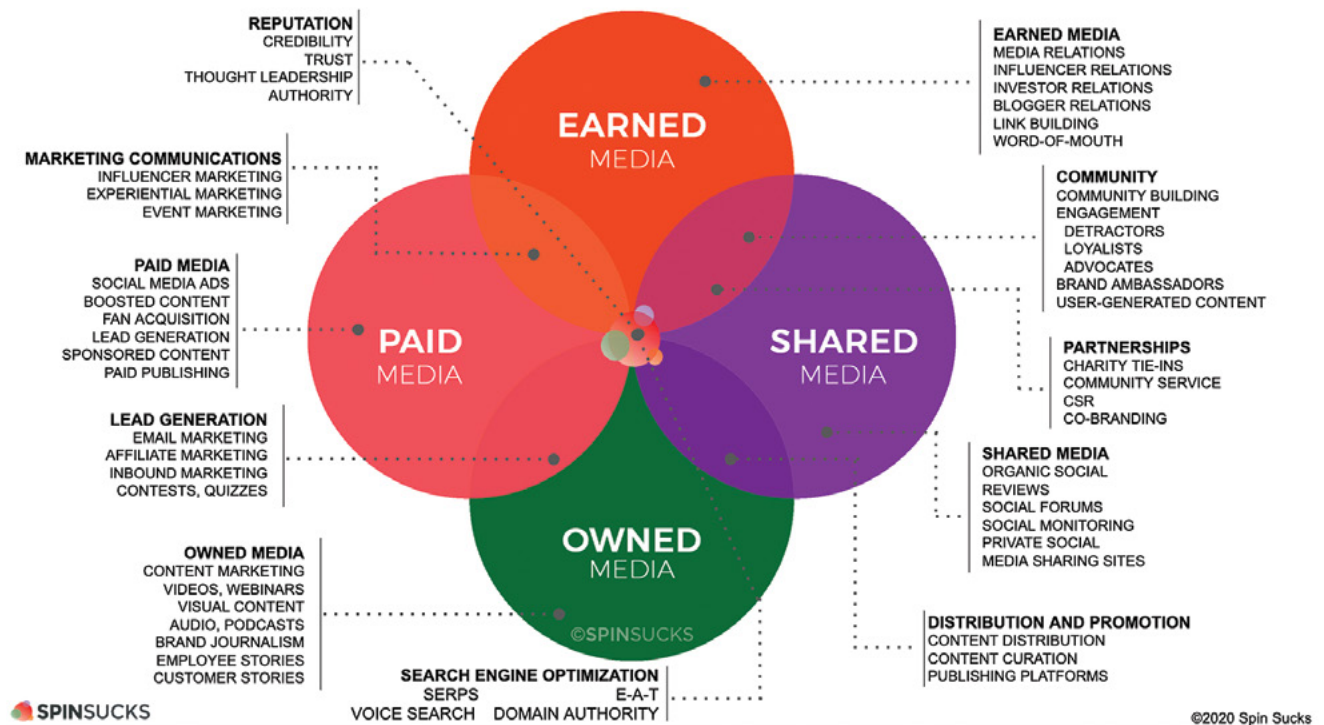
can include media coverage, product or service reviews, or word-of-mouth recommendations. *Shared* usually refers to activities on social media and other platforms the company doesn't own, subjecting it to their ecosystem and rules. *Owned* pertains to activities on platforms controlled by the company, such as its website, email, or podcasts. ICS can further add or adjust categories of activities based on its unique capabilities and relevant U.S. policies and values.

The PESO model also places reputation management at the core of the framework, which is instructive for ICS.⁴¹ It suggests that all activities should reflect and enhance the organization's reputation. However, it also illustrates the inverse, that the power of communication activities to achieve desired effects depends on the organization's reputation. The stronger the reputation and brand, the stronger the influence of the communication activities. Thus, reputation management should be a key consideration throughout the framework to ensure the integrity and viability of the broader integrated activity structure.

Its scope includes the organization's internal and external actions, operations, and policies. An organization's reputation will suffer if it claims to care about people, but the public discovers it treats its employees poorly. Likewise, the military's reputation can suffer if it claims to uphold just war principles but is perceived as violating the law of war. Sometimes even violating stakeholders' expectations can damage a reputation despite the actions having legal protection. Consistency across these areas averts the say-do gap.

Integrating communication messages. Integrating messages starts in message development when an organization decides what to say. It should involve synthesizing the communicating organization's and the target audiences' perspectives. Too often, messages are crafted with verbose, Pollyannish, or defensive rhetoric that falls on deaf ears. They overlook the audience's viewpoints and what matters to them.

In contrast, commercial marketers occasionally use a Venn diagram to identify the overlap between a company's strengths and value propositions and customers' needs and desires (see figure 3). This overlap provides a menu of messaging options that are most likely to resonate and achieve the company's objectives. Similarly, during communication crises, companies sometimes use stakeholder matrices to outline stakeholders'



(Figure from Gini Dietrich, "The Challenges and Solutions of the PESO Model," Spin Sucks)

Figure 2. PESO Model Media Activity Framework

concerns and develop and prioritize messaging and communications that address them.

Centralized key messages should also be disseminated among communication actors to enable nesting and coherent implementation. Key messages concentrate and package the main ideas organizations want to convey, making them easy for anyone to transmit. This puts the onus on communicators in the upper echelons to share their key messages with downstream and lateral elements so they can adapt their messages to align with or reinforce the top-level messages.

When planning activities, the ideas undergirding the messages should point to the kinds of mediums, activities, and content delivery approaches that best fit and can produce the desired impact. "The medium is the message," according to communication theorist Marshall McLuhan.⁴² It suggests the importance of selecting the right mediums and activities, given their influence over how messages are received and interpreted.

In the activity execution phase, communicators should employ a variety of activities to deliver messages widely, diversely, and repeatedly. It is also vital to

ensure they convey the messages effectively, minimizing the risks of them being lost, misinterpreted, or overshadowed. This also underscores the importance of time integration of activities. That means planning activity executions with an awareness of external factors that can impact the communication process.

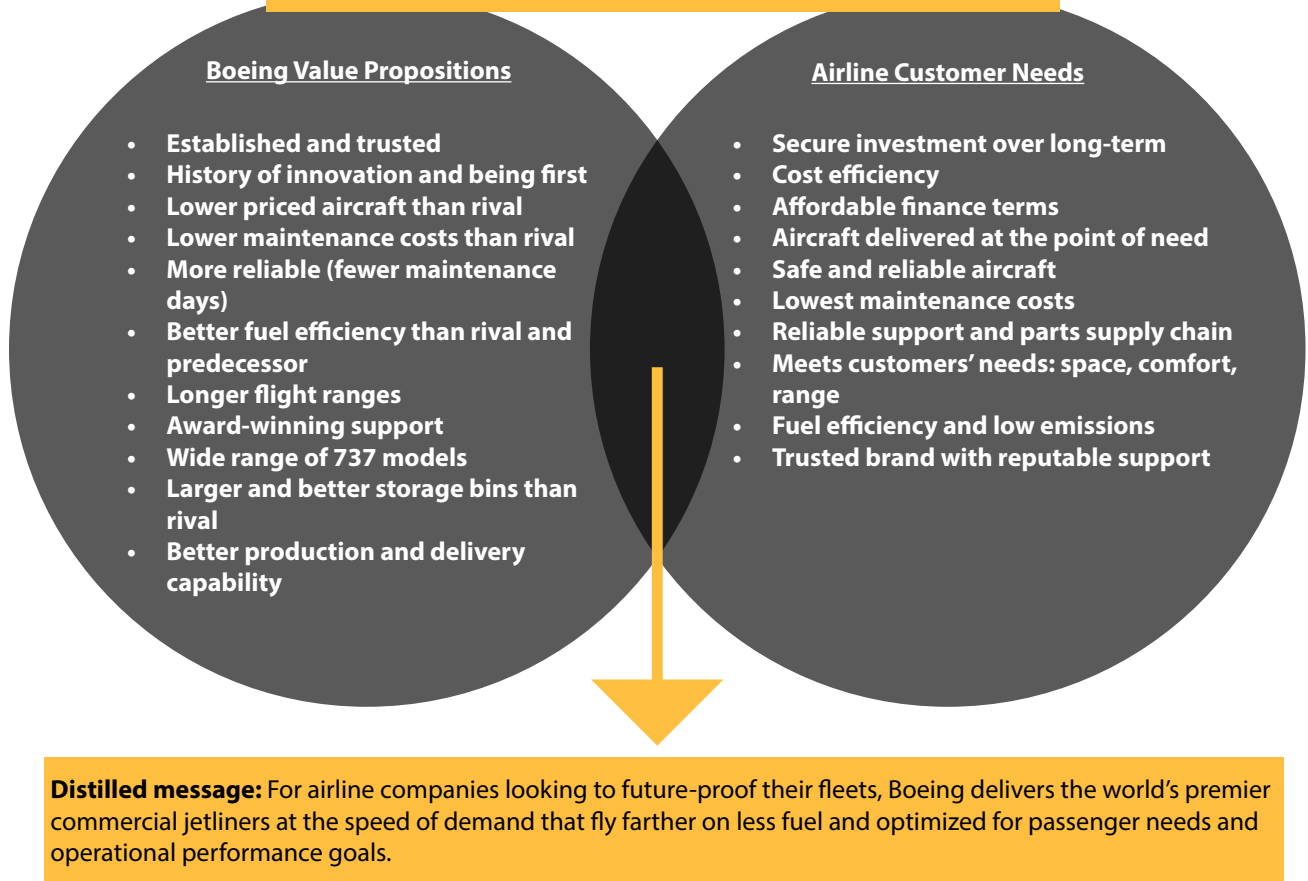
Defining Communication Strategy

In ICS, COMMSTRAT means more than public affairs or operationalizing public affairs as the Army and the Marines defined it. It also goes beyond describing it as public relations. Three primary tenets are offered here to define it.

COMMSTRAT theory of victory. Like any grand strategy, COMMSTRAT must have a theory of victory that explains what winning looks like and what it will take to win in an environment rife with competition and adversarial or frictional factors.

Defining winning in COMMSTRAT is predicting the minimum cognitive-related outcomes (e.g., changes in knowledge, attitude, opinion, and behavior) that facilitate the organization's strategic

Integrative Messaging for Boeing Airliner Sales



(Figure by author)

Figure 3. Example of an Integrative Messaging Venn Diagram

goals. For example, communicators might predict they must maintain a 50 percent approval rating of a military element's presence or operations among the key public or stakeholders for a year to maintain adequate conditions and risk levels for the unit to conduct sustained operations to achieve its broader strategic objectives.

To set realistic goals, COMMSTRAT professionals must conduct appropriate research, benchmarking, and logical extrapolations. Similarly, the goal must be measurable to ascertain victory by straightforward observation or using correlated proxy metrics as key performance indicators. COMMSTRAT elements must also ensure their desired outcomes are within their facility and purview. For example, it cannot be expected to reduce attacks. Yet, it can be expected to influence how people think about the attacks, which may help reduce

them. The former goal is the unit's winning criteria, while the latter is the COMMSTRAT's winning criteria that supports the unit's goal.

Defining what it will take to win involves developing broad-stroke propositions that outline how to secure and maintain a relative advantage toward achieving desired outcomes in a competitive environment. The propositions should read like task and purpose statements, and the purpose clause should suggest how the task secures a relative advantage. They can be organized into lines of effort, with various elements responsible for each.

An example proposition may read like this: "Leverage the communicative platforms, influence, and credibility of influencers and opinion leaders to boost the reach, reception, and effects of designated key messages with select key publics beyond the

capacity the supported communicating element can produce itself.” An adversary-focused proposition might read like this: “Neutralize the most consequential opposition communications and communication actors to reduce their effects on friendly communication objectives and maintain an advantageous share of voice and influence on the information environment and key audiences.”

COMMSTRAT strategized and operationalized. COMMSTRAT must also entail using the military’s ends-ways-means strategy framework to enable detailed planning and executing of communication operations. A theory of winning accounts for two-thirds of a comprehensive strategy. Its vision of success and delineated paths to get there provide the strategy’s ends and ways. Then, the strategist must flesh out each line of effort with more detail about the ways and identify the required means to make it executable and operational.

In COMMSTRAT, this means identifying communication tactics that make up the lines of effort such as holding joint press conferences with other government leaders to leverage their influence. It requires pinpointing the means or resources necessary to implement and execute the strategy such as personnel, organizations, capabilities, tools, or instruments. For instance, a theater public affairs support element may be needed to orchestrate the joint press conference.

The PESO framework provides the methodology for developing and organizing tactics and managing associated resources. In practice, COMMSTRAT equals the PESO framework with built-in integration requirements and a clear direction toward an established strategic goal. In more doctrinal terms, it is a multidimensional, cognitive-focused communication system of operations and structures that deliberately integrates, coordinates, and converges various capabilities, channels, and activities to achieve communication goals aligned with operational and strategic goals.

COMMSTRAT should be a coherent drone swarm of communication actors and activities with designated lanes, message payloads, and objectives directed toward strategic goals. It also incorporates public affairs, public diplomacy, psychological operations, civil affairs, web operations, and other relevant information capabilities (including the private

sector), used prolifically and judiciously, consistent with applicable policy.

COMMSTRAT efforts should also be continually assessed for effectiveness in achieving those goals. Similarly, it requires iterating, innovating, and optimizing aspects of the PESO system. The operational and informational environment should also be assessed regularly to ensure that the goals and PESO configuration remain relevant and appropriate for their intended purpose.

COMMSTRAT game theory. COMMSTRAT should also retain STRATCOM’s colloquial connotation of just being strategic about communications as a core tenet. Yet, a word of caution is warranted. Crude attempts to reduce this tenet to clever tactics or words should be rejected. Haphazard activities employed reactively or indiscriminately won’t cut it in an increasingly complex information environment.

Despite its apparent simplicity, COMMSTRAT, even with its colloquial meaning, resembles a sophisticated game theory that relies on probabilistic predictions of outcomes involving many actors, foes, allies, and everything in between, who can be swayed toward or away from one’s goals based on communicative decisions. It requires the military to communicate more intentionally, proactively, shrewdly, and sustainably, with a sharp estimate of likely outcomes—how actors and the relevant environment might respond to communicative actions or inaction.

It also implies being goal-driven rather than action-, tactic-, or message-driven. Furthermore, it involves treating audiences as the focal point and increasing understanding of them and their environments. This encourages the innovation of best practices that guide audiences toward the organization’s desired goals. The substantial diversity among audiences necessitates highly targeted, tailored, and compelling communications to produce the intended effects. Nevertheless, limitations in resources or influence also require prioritizing which audiences to target. This may depend on the audiences’ varying capacity to facilitate strategic goals or the organization’s ability or resources to guide them toward its goals.

Conclusion

STRATCOM has always been as critical to defense security as violence. Contemporary and future

competition and conflict will demand it even more. To contest the information environment at scale, the U.S. military must increase its STRATCOM competency and capability within its conventional military institutions. Adopting ICS doctrine as an upgraded version of STRATCOM is a critical modernization for the cognitive dimension of information advantage.

Public affairs' flexibility, expansiveness, and political palatability make it the military's most accessible and valuable cognitive communication capability to lead the effort. It must adapt and grow to meet the requirements of ICS, which will be critical for the success of all military campaigns and operations, both foreign and domestic. ■

Notes

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