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Molding Perceptions: A Response

Cliff W. Gilmore

In his *Small Wars Journal* article titled “Molding Perceptions: American Engagement with the Media after the bin Laden Raid”, Marno de Boer identified a basic problem associated with U.S. public communication in the days immediately following the bin Laden operation: “During the first 48 hours after the raid,” he states, “U.S. officials did not yet have a complete picture of what had happened inside the Abbottabad (sic) complex.” This statement raises several significant questions, including:

- Why didn’t U.S. officials have a complete picture of what happened inside the complex?
- Why was U.S. public communication about the raid jumbled and frequently inaccurate?
- Why did U.S. public communication about the raid originate from the top of a hierarchy geographically removed from the event?
- Why was comprehensive, deliberate, timely public-communication not an integral part of planning for the raid?

Finally why, when closing on an established long-term goal following more than a decade of persistent warfare in which public perception plays an increasingly critical role, was the U.S. unprepared to shape the strategic narrative?

Perhaps ironically, insight into answers to these questions can be gained in noting how de Boer overlooks them and focuses instead on White House counter-terror advisor John Brennan’s apparent success in rapid delivery of frequently inaccurate information to the media. In taking that approach he highlights the communication mindset common throughout the U.S. military, government, and arguably Western civilization as a whole. It is a mindset characterized by habitual info- and media-centrism, which can lead to the deceptively rational conclusion that speed is more important than accuracy and, more perilous in perception warfare, that lying is a beneficial communication strategy. This way of thinking, coupled with a lumbering bureaucratic hierarchy, negates the technological advantage of the U.S. and, no matter how well reasoned, erodes organizational credibility, violates public trust, and - despite that rare celebratory occasion when the U.S. manages to communicate more rapidly than its enemies - will ultimately result in failure.

Success of the United States in perception warfare amidst a rapidly evolving communication environment will require new thinking, not merely thinking about new things in old ways. The

Departments of Defense, State, Homeland Security, and indeed the whole of interagency must begin to think of communication as a social process of human interaction rather than a technical process of information control and delivery, dissolve their marriage to bureaucratic hierarchy and weave communication into a decentralized operations model.

The purpose of this article is to propose actions that can be taken across the interagency¹ to make communication related to U.S. military operations both more efficient and more effective. None of these actions involve the need to lie or to convince ourselves that lying is acceptable. To the contrary, with an appropriate shift in mindset we will find our enemy's willingness to lie is in fact a strategic liability we can turn to our advantage rather than emulate.

The four actions proposed here to guide mindset change are:

- Adopt the lexicon of communication rather than communications.
- Re-imagine a guiding purpose of military operations intended to establish, preserve and strengthen the credibility of and public trust in the military.
- Shift our operational focus from the enemy to Key Publics.
- Organize, operate – and *communicate* – according to a decentralized rather than hierarchical model.

We Do as We Think and Think as We Do

Language both reflects and is reflected by an organization's mindset: The mindset demonstrated by de Boer (and as mentioned in fairness both to him and Mr. Brennan, prevalent throughout much of Western culture) is distinctly info- and media-centric. During a so-called *information* age we plan and execute *information* operations guided at least nominally by Principles of *Information* amidst an *information* environment. When we do manage to overcome this fixation on information our attention inevitably shifts to media engagement through which we attempt to deliver messages to target audiences.

Communications and communication (sans “s”) are distinctly different schools of thought, theory and practice. The former refers to the technical process of information control and delivery that emphasizes the information and medium elements of the communication process. The latter refers to the social process of human interaction and places emphasis on the people engaged in that interaction. In a world increasingly characterized by the ease and frequency of human interaction the U.S. interagency remains focused on information control and delivery, on data and the medium through which it travels.

We tend to speak, write and therefore think and act in terms of communications rather than communication. Likewise, we generally think, act, and therefore speak and write in these terms. Examples abound. Consider the title of de Boer's article: “Molding Perceptions: American Engagement with the *Media* after the bin Laden Raid.” (Emphasis added) Perhaps more revealing, when we contemplate social media, we emphasize social *media* and think of it in terms of the speed, ubiquity and mobility of information, in contrast with *social* media which is

¹ United States Government agencies and departments, including the Department of Defense.

about the speed, ubiquity and mobility of human interaction.

Undoubtedly there are those who will say in one breath, "words have meaning" and insist in the next that the difference between communications and communication is a matter of mere semantics. Those afflicted with this particular brand of schizophrenia - communication practitioners in particular - should perhaps be re-assigned to political campaigns for they are the people most likely to espouse the well-intentioned yet insidious idea that deliberate and rapid delivery of inaccurate information makes perfect sense while simultaneously insisting they would never lie. You see, there is nothing "mere" about semantics.

Assuming the meaning of words is in fact significant, a mindset transition from the technical communications to the social communication school of thought, theory and practice can be influenced to some degree through deliberate word swaps. For example, information age, information operations, principles of information and information environment might become communication age, communication operations, principles of communication and communication environment. Ultimately however, truly new thinking about communication will require a mindset that emphasizes people rather than information and the medium. So long as military leaders, planners and communication practitioners continue think of those with whom they intend to interact as targets rather than as people any change in semantics will be a mere exercise in wordplay.

Perhaps the most important shift in semantics must be from the term *target audiences* to *key publics*. A target is something to hit while a public is something with which an organization interacts. That is, we communicate *to* or *at* target but *with* people who are as it happens typically displeased to be labeled as targets. This of course requires a definition for the term *public*, which appears thousands of times in U.S. military doctrine, orders, directives, policies, etc., yet is not defined in any of those documents. Fortunately such a definition does exist in communication literature and generally refers to one or more people who share an interest in a given issue. Key publics are those most likely to influence the military's ability to achieve its goals.

Of note, "public" is a neutral term. A public can be friendly, neutral or hostile. While some publics are enemies who, once identified as such, may need to be singled out and killed, most publics are *not* enemies and, more importantly, should not be made to become one. This is the heart of the counterinsurgency-based argument that takes us to the edge of accepting that the enemy is quite simply *not* the most influential public on the street.

A shift in lexicon will help shape the interagency's communication mindset but will require a corresponding shift in the military's guiding purpose for, whether we like it or not, the days of saying, "...the single-minded purpose of the military is to kill people and blow shit up..." are gone.

It's the Population, Stupid

It is commonly acknowledged that America creates several new enemies for each one it kills while, as can be inferred from U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine, creation of public trust will over time render the enemy unappealing to the general population, eventually unacceptable, and

finally irrelevant. This is the central theme of the Petraeus-Mattis opus: *It's the population, stupid*. Unfortunately we have yet to make the mental leap to accept this as true and comprehensively change the way we think, plan and operate. Our thinking still begins with the purpose of killing the enemy, therefore we naturally consider our non-enemies in that context. We pay lip service to the population but in practice label them “target audiences” and treat them as bystanders because, quite simply, they are not our priority. This persistent inconsistency between what we say and what we do undermines our credibility and violates the trust of those who matter most.

The purpose of military operations in which the perceptions of the population are deemed more important than the destruction of an enemy might be “...to establish, preserve and strengthen the credibility of and public trust in the U.S. military.” This is not to suggest there is no longer a need to kill our steadfast enemies, but that we should kill them at times and in ways that support the purpose of shaping public perception rather than trying to shape public perception about the people we kill. That is, the military should prioritize engagement with key publics and account for enemies as a secondary concern.

Adoption of a communication lexicon, a re-imagined military purpose to establish, preserve and strengthen credibility and trust, and a focus on key publics rather than the enemy will set the groundwork for the new thinking necessary to assure U.S. success in the rapidly evolving communication environment. But ultimate victory will require the military and indeed the whole of government to embrace one final concept to which they currently pay only lip service: decentralized communication in operations.

“I @\$%#ing Shot bin Laden!!!!”²

Returning now to the bin Laden raid as an example of the new mindset applied to contemporary military missions, we might reasonably conclude it is ridiculous that a senior leader at the top of the hierarchical pyramid should be the point of origin for public communication regarding a real-time operation. Such behavior is the outcome of habitual info-centric communications-based thinking that defies both the reality and the potential of a rapidly evolving communication environment. We possess the technology today to rapidly deliver information *to* a target audience – what we seem to lack is the imagination, the nerve and the will to plan and engage in timely, accurate communication *with* our key publics.

When planning the bin Laden raid we had the advantage of surprise. We engaged an enemy at the time of our choosing. And, yes, when it comes to information control and speed of delivery, we were first and fastest this time around. But, no, we didn't get it right.

Perception warfare is not about fast communications - it requires timely and accurate communication supported by fast communications technology. More important, it requires organizational credibility and public trust, both of which are weakened rather than strengthened

² *The Navy Seal Who Killed Osama Bin Laden*, Funny or Die comedy video by Rob Riggle.

when the most technologically advanced nation in the world has to say, “Oops. No. Waitaminit. My bad. That was incorrect. What really happened was...” Undoubtedly first impressions are powerful – but damage to credibility and trust endures and in the long term few are willing to trust those who change their story along the way.

Five minutes after the successful raid team touched down aboard the U.S.S. Carl Vinson, the world could have read a brief but accurate initial summary of the operation posted to the Department of Defense website. Rather than appearing as a short comedy video on Funny or Die, the claim “I @\$%#ing shot bin Laden!!!!” could have come from the source and established first truth of an unassailably accurate narrative. Every senior U.S. leader, military or civilian, and every public affairs officer throughout the interagency could have been poised to respond credibly to queries from the public (including from civilian media representatives) with the trust-building confidence of, “Yes. That’s accurate. Keep your eye on the website for updates.”

Instead, initial announcement of the successful raid was delayed while senior leaders confirmed basic facts and crafted their message, as if perhaps they were surprised by what had occurred. Within 48 hours a high-level U.S. representative accepted the risk of releasing inaccurate information to the public and became de facto lead spokesperson responsible for correcting the record.

Ten years into a long global war on terrorism we achieved a goal established on day one and ended up communicating about it with the public in the same way we always have: We scrambled to confirm the facts, develop talking points and craft messages, contributed directly to inaccurate reporting, controlled release authority at the highest levels, and failed to weave our experience and technological advantage into the plan. Sure, we did it fast the way, as de Boer pointed out, al Qaeda does it, but that just means we still have a long way to go before we can claim we have this communication thing figured out.

To succeed in perception warfare, the U.S. does not need to be faster and more like al Qaeda. We must be more credible and trustworthy than they are. This will require that we think in terms of communication as a social process of human interaction, plan and conduct operations for the purpose of establishing, preserving and strengthening our credibility and public trust in us, focus on the people who matter rather than the enemy who is a distraction, and let our people communicate with the public in real time.

If we can train, organize, equip and trust our most junior personnel to kill our enemies, we can most certainly train, organize, equip and trust them to communicate with the people who aren’t.

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