



The Information Revolution

HOW TECHNOLOGY CHANGES
THE WAY WE COMMUNICATE

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"Facebook didn't exist. Twitter was still a sound. The cloud was still in the sky. 4G was a parking place. LinkedIn was a prison. Applications were what you sent to college. Big Data was an obscure rap star. And Skype was a typographical error."

Thomas L. Friedman
New York Times commentator,
 describing the world in 2006



SINCE THE END of the Cold War, the world has changed rapidly and continues to change faster than ever. For NATO, it is important to study these changes to see how it can best address and cope with them. One of the consequences of this is, for example, that the boundaries between crisis, conflict and peace are now blurred, which makes preparing for evolving threats in the future more difficult. Although most changes are associated with challenges, this does not mean they can't provide opportunities too. In this article, I would like to address one of the challenges NATO is facing, which is the changing way in which we communicate and how NATO responds to it, as well as the opportunities these changes provide.

The way we communicate is indeed changing, and the driver of this change is the internet. Until the end of the Cold War, communication channels and the way we received information was through what is now referred to as the traditional media. The traditional media like newspapers, radio, and television mostly focused on local and regional news. The news and information provided by these media were limited in scope, and in most cases dominated by single view or opinion on specific topics and news items. Most people were not able to gather news beyond their region or hear about opposing views on the topics presented by the traditional media. Information-wise, people were quite isolated.

With the internet came a completely different way of collecting news and development

of the public opinion. Nowadays, we refer to this enormous change as "information revolution". One of the first great changes through the use of internet is a more global information environment. Instead of a focus on local and regional information, the internet provided people with information from all over the world by connecting the different information environments to create one global environment. This development is sometimes referred to as "Internet 1.0". This evolution of the information environments into one global interconnected information environment being the basis for a global 24/7 information cycle is often called the "CNN effect".

This developed into the current information environment where globally people are consumers as well as providers of information without limitations. The driver of this development is the smart phone. Smart phones provide people with a tool to choose the information they want to see, but also provides them the opportunity to upload the text, video and images they want to share with others. This is often defined as citizen journalism, or "Internet 2.0". Nowadays, everything that is happening can be seen and shared with others, anytime and anywhere; blind spots do no longer exist. People can upload anything on social media platforms and share this with others. These social media platforms provide a platform to all users. These users or actors can be ordinary people, but also state and non-state actors with specific interests and objectives. To achieve these objectives that support their interests, they need to influence the *perception* and *understanding* of their tar-

get audience. They can do this conventionally, unconventionally, or using a mix of legal and illegal methods including hostile propaganda, manipulation and disinformation. All with the aim of being the dominant voice in the information environment.

I WOULD FIRST like to take a closer look at the information environment, the challenges and opportunities it offers, and the way NATO is addressing them through a comprehensive, inclusive and integrated approach called "Strategic Communications".

"A new type of war has emerged, in which armed warfare has given up its decisive place in the achievement of the military and political objectives of war to another kind of warfare — information warfare."

Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov
 Former Spetsnaz' officer

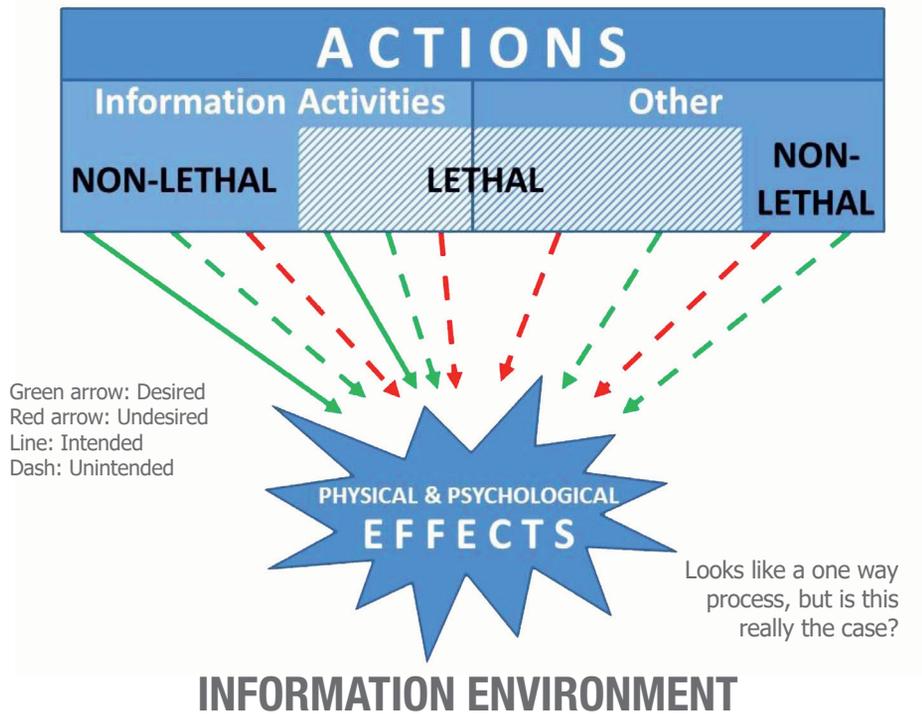
The Information Environment

Before going into more details about Strategic Communications, it is important to have a closer look at the information environment; what it really is, and why it is important to the NATO Alliance. NATO has defined the information environment as:

"An environment comprised of the information itself; the individuals, organizations and systems that receive, process and convey the information and the cognitive, virtual and physical space in which this occurs."²



ACTIVITIES AND EFFECTS



ABOVE: Graphic is from "Military Implementation of Strategic Communication in Coalition Operations: A Practitioners Handbook"

This is a very broad definition that actually describes a global environment that all people observe, orient, decide and act upon; in other words, a global environment, which forms the basis for human opinion building and deci-

“Today, kinetic operations are conducted in support of information activities and other asymmetric activities.”

sion making. The information environment is indeed global, overarching and multifaceted, with different layers. Moreover, the immense information flow and the massive number of populations that are able to release information at a low cost makes it impossible to control the information environment. Additionally, it also presents an opportunity to stay anonymous and not having to follow legal norms and regulations. Based on this, it is important that our messages reach the right audiences. Just sending a message and thinking that the right people will read our messages is useless. To reach your audiences you need the right timing, the right message and the right channel to communicate this message, as well as a way to measure if your messages have the desired effects. All of this requires an in-depth understanding of the information environment.

Understanding the information environment is important because this is the basis for effectively informing audiences. This aspect is well known and frequently exploited by our opponents who use the information environment as the new battlespace, and information as a weapon to influence perception and understanding. They even shifted their scope and

focus from using kinetic combat operations to non-kinetic information activities within the context of information warfare to achieve their strategic objectives; today, kinetic operations are conducted in support of information activities and other asymmetric activities.

FOR NATO, IT IS IMPORTANT to counter these asymmetric threats and to make sure that our key audiences are not affected by activities in an environment that is saturated by disinformation, distortion and "fake news". This requires a comprehensive, inclusive, and integrated approach encompassing all existing communication capabilities and information functions together with other military activities. It demands a quick, reliable, agile, pro-active and effective process to achieve consistent communication from the political down to the tactical level. This process, function and mind-set is called Strategic Communications.

"To put it simply, we need to worry a lot less about how to communicate our actions and much more about what our actions communicate. We need an Information Order with an Operations Annex!"

*Admiral (Ret.) Michael G. Mullen
U.S. Navy, the 17th Chairman of the
Joint Chiefs of Staff*

Strategic Communications

In NATO, Strategic Communications is a process, function and mind-set where communication capabilities and information function are coordinated with other military activities through an overarching process in order to achieve unified messaging to inform and influence audiences. Strategic Communications is not a tool, and it does not execute communication, but rather coordinates and synchronises methods and means of communication with other military activities.

NATO Strategic Communications starts with overall political guidance that needs to translate into concrete military activities. The outcome of this is a set of objectives requiring coordination of communication capabilities and information function with the other military activities. Strategic Communications



is therefore responsible for horizontal and vertical coordination within the military structures and the internal and external coordination with various political and military stakeholders. The military commanders working on the different levels of warfare (strategic, operational and tactical) are responsible for providing direction and guidance to be embedded in the overall political guidance from higher commands. The communication capabilities and information function that are coordinated with the other military activities through Strategic Communications are first divided into political and military levels. At the political level, it is the Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. The key responsibility of Public Diplomacy is to influence social attitudes and develop and implement policies; in other words, it is a combination of traditional diplomacy and international relations.

At the military level, coordinated by the Information Operations function, the capabilities and functions are, but not limited to, Psychological Operations, Civil-Military Cooperation, Electronic Warfare, Key Leader Engagement, Computer Network Operations, Operational Security and Military Public Affairs.



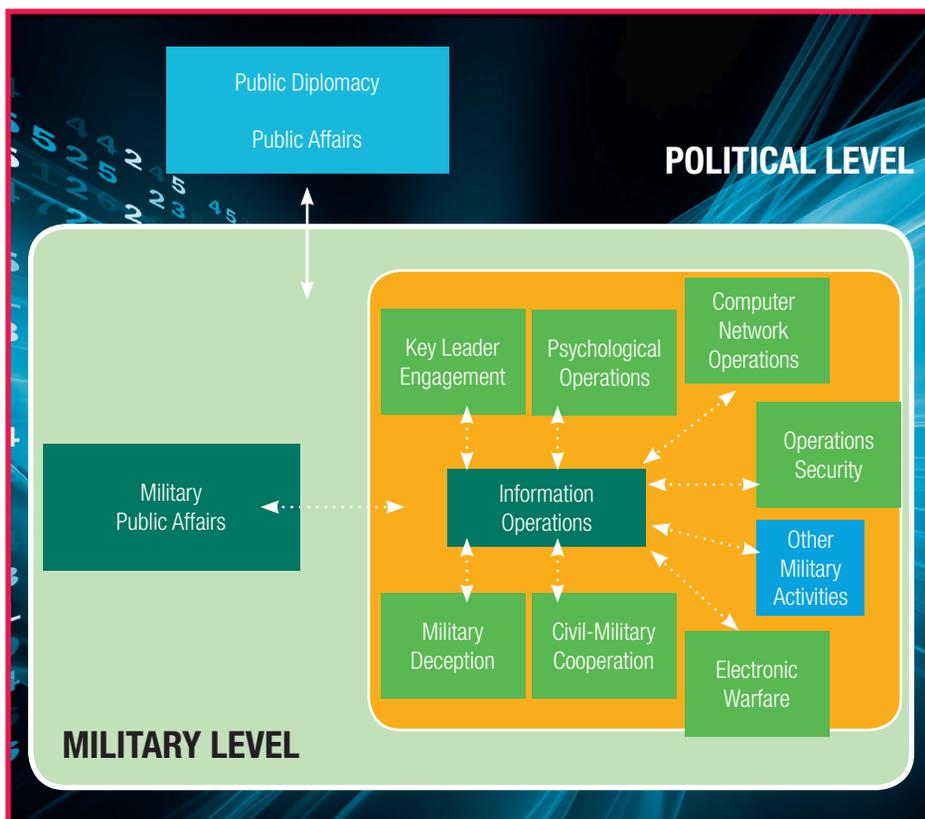
ABOVE: Everything we do communicates a message. Our values help countering false narratives. As the saying goes, "truth is the best medicine" and it is the only way to effectively counter propaganda and its influence. Truth can only be communicated with accurate information and there is no better way to fight propaganda. Here, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg addresses the conference "NATO Engages: Innovating the Alliance". Photo by NATO

Military Public Affairs has a special position within Strategic Communications. It is an integral part of Strategic Communications but with an independent advisory role and direct access to the commander for Public Affairs matters.

As a process, Strategic Communications is a campaign manager and process owner. This encompasses the use of resources and activities to be able to achieve the required effects based on efficient processes and procedures. It manages and provides the processes and procedures that empower staffs and personnel to engage with internal and external stakeholders.

Finally, "strategic communications" as a mind-set is probably the most important aspect of Strategic Communications. All NATO personnel, military and civilians alike, need to be aware of the fact that everything they do or say, or not do or say, *communicates a message* and has an effect on the audiences. Being aware of these effects is important to avoid undesired effects and support the achievement of desired effects. This mind-set is also important to raise awareness about avoiding activities and statements that can be exploited by our potential adversaries for misuse and propaganda.

Strategic Communications is all about creating desired effects on audiences through the coordination and integration of information activities with other military activities based on an in-depth understanding of the information environment. The overall aim is to contribute positively to the achievement of the military and political objectives, and, ultimately,





ABOVE: The author (left) during a JWC Training Advisory Group meeting at USS Mount Whitney, Exercise TRIDENT JUPITER 2019-1. Photo by JWC PAO

mission success. To sum up, effective Strategic Communications is able to influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviour of different audiences, and maintain the support of the public opinion through informing and shaping the information environment in a desired manner using credible, transparent, effective and efficient messaging that is accurate and truthful, which displays our real intentions. All activities and messages to influence and inform audiences need to be based on the basic principles of Strategic Communications, which are:

- All activities need to be founded on NATO values and driven by objectives derived from the NATO narrative and based on in-depth understanding of the overarching information environment,
- All levels should be empowered to communicate the NATO narrative and focus on achieving desired effects and outcomes, because communication is a collective and integrated effort,
- To gain and maintain trust and credibility we need to do what we say and say what we do; our words and actions need to be aligned.

Because of the importance of these activities and messages for achieving desired effects in

the information environment, Strategic Communications needs to be the primary focus of all planning, execution and assessments of an operation from the earliest stage on. Strategic Communications sets the framework for all actions and activities, including providing advice on the communicative effects of these actions. This framework is based upon the NATO narrative.

The Narrative

All actions and activities that NATO conduct are founded on the NATO values and are driven by defined objectives. These objectives are derived from the NATO narrative. A narrative is a way of communicating through storytelling, connecting information with emotion, that helps the audiences to understand and retain information. The narrative is a social construct using aspects like history, culture, symbols and belief systems in a way that is logical and resonates with audiences.

Narratives are born through the need of satisfying a desire. To satisfy this desire people develop actions and events. There is no one single, dominant narrative in the information environment. In fact, the information environment is a landscape filled with narratives; competing and complementing narratives. Understanding of the information environ-

ment and the potential impact of the different narratives is a key task of Strategic Communications. Based on this understanding, coherent communication and information activities can be planned and executed in a way so that they support the intended narratives but counter competing narratives. This is often referred to as the "battle of the narrative".

Information Activities

The term information activity is already mentioned a number of times in this article, but what is an information activity? NATO defines information activities as:

"Actions designed to affect information and/or information systems. They can be performed by any actor and include protection measures."³

Although this definition speaks about information and information systems, it would have been better to use the term information environment, because information activities are aimed at achieving an effect in the information environment through affecting information and information systems. To achieve these desired effects and avoid undesired effects, it is important to have an in-depth understanding of the information environment. But, as already stated earlier, the information environment is quite impossible to control. To be effective in the way that your messages are heard by the right audiences you have to analyze the audiences and find out what the best way is to shape and deliver your messages.

Nowadays, social media platforms play a dominant role in the way people gather and share information. As a consequence of this, if you want to understand the information environment, you need to understand and be present on these social media platforms. Information activities based on the NATO narrative need to be able to compete with other narratives on social media because that is where our audiences are, and social communication takes place.

Social media provides challenges and opportunities for NATO. On the one hand, social media is used by our opponents to disseminate disinformation, manipulate and spread propaganda, for example to affect NATO's credibility and decision-making ability. On the other hand, it is a venue for NATO to communicate, interact, share information, and counter disinformation and rumours. Furthermore, social media



can be used as a sensor for gaining and maintaining situational awareness. Reaching the audiences in social media can be a challenge because people gather and share information in so-called echo chambers. Echo chambers, or information bubbles, are virtual places on social media platforms where people with like-minded opinions and ideas share information with each other. This can, and in most cases will, lead to a situation where differing opinions are not heard. Besides that, there is also the fact that the message you send needs to be attractive enough to get immediate attention. Additionally, on social media, the decision to pay attention to a message is made in a few seconds. These few seconds decide whether your message will reach the target audience or not.

"The information space opens wide asymmetrical possibilities for reducing the fighting potential of the enemy... it's necessary to perfect activities in the information space, including the defence of our own objects."

*General Gerasimov
Chief of the General Staff of the
Armed Forces of Russia*

Summary

The internet made it possible for people to expand their possibilities to gather information

on a large scale; from the traditional, local and regional sources of information to a global outreach. At the same time people now also have the opportunity to globally upload and share information using social media platforms, leaving no more "blind spots". This development, however, has also a negative side, because state and non-state actors are able to use the social media platforms to spread propaganda, disinformation and manipulate people. They use information as a weapon with the information environment as the new battleground.

All these forms of communicating, informing and influencing take place in the information environment. People observe, orient, decide, and act upon the information they understand and perceive in the information environment. The information environment is a multifaceted, overarching global environment, that is uncontrollable and without proper norms and regulations. So, to be able to get your message across to your audiences, it is important to use the right channel and tone in a timely manner, which is only possible after developing an in-depth understanding of the information environment. The coordination and synchronisation of these activities is the primary responsibility for Strategic Communications. All these information activities are aligned with and based upon political guidance that is translated by commanders into military direction and guidance on all military

levels, from strategic down to the tactical level. For that reason, Strategic Communications needs to be in the heart of all military planning and execution, from the earliest stages on: all military planning and execution need to be narrative driven.

The NATO narrative is a social construct that provide insight and understanding about our intentions and actions. It must convince people that we are doing the right thing for the right people at the right moment. But there is no one single narrative in the information environment. There are competing and complementing narratives, all trying to create desired effects in support of objectives. This complex landscape of narratives, where actors want their narratives to be heard by their target audiences, is often referred to as the "battle of the narrative". This battle of the narrative is taking place where most people gather and share information, namely on social media. ✦

PLUS

For more articles about NATO and Strategic Communications (MC 0628) as well as information war visit www.jwc.nato.int/selected-articles

ENDNOTES:

- 1 V. Kvachkov, Спецназ России (Russia's Special Purpose Forces), Voyennaya Literatura, 2004, http://militera.lib.ru/science/kvachkov_vv/index.html (accessed 21 July 2016). Vladimir Kvachkov is a former GRU officer, whose "theory of special operations," including information operations, has reportedly been adopted as the basis for Russian military instructional and training materials.
- 2 NATO AJP 3.10 Allied Joint Doctrine for Information Operations, 2015
- 3 MC 0422/5, NATO Military Policy on Information Operations, February 2015

REFERENCES:

- 1 Multinational Information Operations Experiment (MNIOE) Applied Concept "Analysis and Assessment of the Information Environment"
- 2 MC 0628 NATO Military policy on Strategic Communications
- 3 NATO Strategic Communications Handbook



ABOVE: EUvsDisinfo was established in 2015 to better forecast, address, and respond to the Russian Federation's ongoing disinformation campaigns affecting the European Union, its Member States, and countries in the shared neighbourhood. Read more <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/about/>. Photo by Jarretera/Shutterstock