NATO Strategic Communications (StratCom) has evolved a great deal in recent years. Several of the policies and doctrines governing the communication disciplines contained in the StratCom definition have been revised, and new core documents are being developed to even further establish StratCom as a core function in NATO policies and operations. This applies to Public Affairs (PA), Psychological Operations (PsyOps), and Information Operations (Info Ops) alike. Furthermore, work on a StratCom handbook is underway and processes have been initiated to draft both a Military Committee (MC) policy for StratCom and a military doctrine for Operational Security (OPSEC) and Military Deception (MILDEC).

These revisions and developments are derived from lessons identified from the Afghanistan mission (ISAF) and the current crisis in Ukraine, amongst others. One common factor in all this is the integration of the concept of “Strategic Narratives” in policy and doctrine. Another factor is that of how to adapt to new technologies that affect the information environment and the social media in particular.

There are still several challenges associated with the latter. These include issues with planning authorities and command and control, and not least, on how to control the narrative and associated messaging in a profoundly uncontrollable domain. Here is where the concept of empowerment, or “mission command” to use the military jargon, (and also coping with the fact that “having less control” in certain situations), come into play.

Dr Neil Verrall from the UK Defence Science and Technology Laboratory also questions whether “military commanders fully understand and appreciate the range of activities where social media could provide added value and demonstrate operational impact,” implying that military organisations, such as NATO, still have some work ahead of them. What, then, is the consequence of applying a novel concept, such as the Strategic Narrative in a social media domain for which there is no definite agreement on policy and doctrine, while at the same time dealing with those expectations for maintaining control over the messaging?

In an era of media convergence that makes the flow of content across multiple social media channels and platforms almost inevitable, it is important to look at the characteristics and definition of social media in order to fully understand its role in StratCom and how it is used. It is also beneficial to take a look at the evolving methods of Cross Media Communication (CMC) and how Strategic Narratives are projected in social media, and consequently, how these two concepts can contribute to understanding the military use of social media in modern conflicts. So as not to confuse them, let us first examine these two concepts of social media — Strategic Narratives and Cross Media Communication — within the context of StratCom and attempt to identify solutions.

#SocialMedia #CrossMedia — a game changer?

As social media evolves, and its usage changes and expands, so do its characteristics. This is in part due to the fact that social media is linked to technologies and platforms that enable connectivity and creation of interactive web content as well as collaboration and exchange among participants, the public and the media.

As platforms and software change, so do their functions and the ways in which we utilize them. Nonetheless, it is possible to...
single out certain fundamental characteristics thereof. Social media is comprised of online technologies and practices that people use to share content, opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives as well as media. It is characterised by easy access, global reach, and the rapid (near to real time) flow of multimedia information. This results in an aggregation of users with common interests who are able to conduct one-to-one and one-to-many two-way conversations. Social media has virtually an unlimited reach with respect to time and space, providing an effective platform to conveniently aggregate common interests across a broad demographic spectrum. This includes new aggregated network configurations, which might not have crossed, had it not been for social media. This, in turn, allows for the emergence of new and different types of (target) audiences. Social media is, in other words, media for social interaction, and can therefore also be utilized to inform and influence.

Furthermore, it is inexpensive to develop and maintain an online presence, which thereby reduces the common barriers for wide-spread technology. Social media can be accessed from other inexpensive platforms, such as mobile telephones and other mobile devices. These platforms have an inherent tendency to spread and become available to large groups of people, including people in areas with otherwise limited resources, such as those in developing countries and conflict areas. Social media, therefore, allows for information and commentaries to reach a broader audience, bypassing geographical limitations, making it one of the most permeating features of the global information environment. Other characteristics include its potential for automation, repetition of information and permutation of content and the creation of User Generated Content (UGC) based on “self”-generated content as well as on other users’ updates, postings, tweets etc. over various combinations of channels. Social media also opens up possibilities for anonymity, impersonation, and distortion of content to such a degree that it (intentionally) misrepresents the original intent. All of these characteristics help us to define social media in a military context such as the one below:

"Social network media refers to internet connected platforms and software used to collect, store, aggregate, share, process, discuss or deliver user-generated and general media content, that can influence knowledge and perceptions and thereby directly or indirectly prompt behaviour as a result of social interaction within networks."[3]

DESPITE THE FACT that social media is an integral part of the information environment, it has been a subject of debate in NATO for years. The question is: does it really present anything new for the Alliance? Most would probably say no, but this is about where the agreement ends. NATO continues to debate over fundamental issues that would allow for clear policy and doctrine concerning social media. Is it an “information activity” in its own right, or nothing more than a new communication platform? Who has planning authority and where does it sit in the Operational Planning Process, and, in order to achieve which effects? Is social media to be used only to monitor, inform, and influence, or perhaps more?

"All communication informs. All communication conducted with intent does more than merely inform. It educates, reveals, restricts, and can elicit strong emotion. Most important, information as an element of national power, also influences and can powerfully inform governments, direct public opinion, affect international relations, result in military action, and build or deny support.” — Major General (Rtd.) Mari K. Eder, December 2011
NATO continues to debate over fundamental issues that would allow for clear policy and doctrine concerning social media. Is it an information activity in its own right, or is it to be used to influence, or perhaps more?

One thing is for sure: although social media challenges the traditional, doctrinal firewalls between others, PA and PsyOps are still maintained in the current policy. One could, in fact, argue that this “division of labour” becomes increasingly artificial with the convergence of various social media platforms and audiences. So, social media should therefore be viewed in the broader framework of StratCom and employed in line with the Strategic Narrative.

**Strategic Communications and Strategic Narratives**

As previously mentioned, several of the policies and doctrines governing NATO communication disciplines are either currently undergoing revision, or have recently been revised. A major factor here is the introduction of the concept of Strategic Narratives in policy as well as in doctrine. Strategic Narrative in NATO is now defined as: “A concise but comprehensive written statement of an organization’s situation and purpose, which can stand on its own as the principle context to strategic planning directives or be used to support the creation of individual, culturally attuned stories that will resonate with particular audiences and foster cohesion within the organization.”

Strategic Narratives can also be explained as "(...) a system of stories that share common themes, forms, events, and participants, and create expectations for how those elements can be assembled to satisfy a desire that is rooted on conflict.”

This approach to Strategic Narratives indicates that they are not just single stories, but several stories that together make up, or support the narrative. This factor is of particular importance when looking at narrative projection in social media, which we will return to later. Furthermore, this approach indicates that all actions taken as part of a strategy or operation are "storied", thereby becoming part of a larger, overarching strategic narrative, and that these actions also have communicative effect(s). It also stresses that the interaction between these stories is complex and can lead to unintended consequences that may potentially undermine the strategic narrative if not coherently constructed in support of strategy. This is also a highly relevant point to consider when looking at social media.

Strategic Narratives, therefore, help both to inform strategy formulation and communicate actions. Informing the strategy and its associated actions (e.g. military operations) ensures coherence with political intentions. In other words, this ensures coherence between words and deeds (even though the Strategic Narrative is normally constructed as an integral part of the strategy formulation process). Communication (through information activities) explains why the actor is actively involved in a conflict, which other entities the actor is up against, how the actor seeks to resolve the conflict, or what the actor hopes to achieve. Thus, the basic concept of a Strategic Narrative is that it offers a framework through which information activities that explain the conflicts’ past, present, and future can be structured.

However, an actor cannot hope to have a monopoly on telling the story. There is a competition between the Strategic Narratives of several actors involved in a given conflict. As also noted in a UK military doctrine on Strategic Communication: "In the global information environment it is very easy for competing narratives also to be heard. Some may be deliberately combative — our adversaries for example, or perhaps hostile media. Where our narrative meets the competing narratives is referred to as the 'battle of narratives', although the reality is that this is an enduring competition rather than a battle with winners and losers.”
Strategic Narratives should therefore focus on alternative futures, based in the present situation and informed by the past, taking the audiences’ current views and expectations into account (existing narratives), rather than focusing on the differences between the competing narratives. On the other hand, we may find existing narratives that relevant stakeholders (local or international) use as a framework to make sense of the world around them — existing narratives that the strategic narrative should both tap into and seek to influence, preferably in an emotional manner. Strategic Narratives are therefore used by actors as a tool through which they can articulate their interests, values and aspirations for the international system and to change the environment in which they operate, manage expectations, and extend their influence.

Essentially, narratives function as frameworks that allow people to make sense of the world, policies, events, and interactions. As the strategic narrative is a “guiding” framework for information activities (e.g. PA, PsyOps etc.) and other actions, and not a piece of messaging in itself, it will be projected in individual — Target Audience Analysis-based — media products. These products could traditionally be, to some extent, controlled by the author or sender. This is by far always the case when using social media. Here, we have to look at other approaches to projecting our narrative, and we also have to expect others to have the ability to co-author our narrative.

Cross-Media Narratives
Cross-Media Narratives are stories projected through social media. They are different in character compared to the more classical, linear storytelling that has been symptomatic for StratCom and mainstream media. Bryan Alexander and Alan Levine also touch on this when they note that: “Today, with digital networks and social media, [this pattern] is changing. Stories are now open-ended, branching, hyperlinked, cross-media, participatory, and unpredictable. And, they are told in new ways: Web 2.0 storytelling picks up these new types of stories and run with them, accelerating the pace of creation and participation while revealing new directions for narratives to flow.”

This is also evident when looking at what Jeff Gomez defines as a trans-media narrative: “a process of conveying messages, themes, or storylines to a mass audience through the artful and well-planned use of multimedia platforms.”

Put differently, it is a question of a single narrative being supported by a story element or components told through different media. Cross-Media Narratives are, in essence, characterized by being centred on social media characteristics and supporting stories that are self-contained and smaller in scale. In other words, we might describe these stories as “micro-content”. Each of these self-contained “micro-content” stories is able to project a core piece of the overall narrative either directly or indirectly. This is due in part to the fact that they are developed or designed to be re-distributed across multiple platforms, and also because they are specifically designed for social media. The fact that they are designed to be re-distributed across multiple social media platforms also results in audience participation and to some extent co-creation of the narrative through content-associated conversations, as it spreads throughout networks or goes viral.
also includes # tagging and bookmarking the content so other networks or audiences can find the content and be exposed to the narrative or at least stand-alone, core parts of it. The narrative can also be distributed through hyper-texting, which again creates new ways of exposing the audience to the narrative. This also points to another characteristic of Cross-Media Narratives: distributed storytelling. The narrative’s supporting stories are told through multiple sites or platforms and from different angles. This might involve either official accounts (e.g. Facebook or Twitter) and blogs or micro-content uploaded onto existing platforms in relevant networks or personal accounts.

This way of creating narratives in social media also, of course, involves risks. Audiences can, due to co-creation and UGC, alter the story and add content directly or through commenting or replying to the original story, thus altering the experience for other participants in the conversation. It is thereby possible to deprive the author of control over the narrative, at least partially. This, in turn, also affects the narrative as a framework for sense-making when the narrative and its supporting stories become open-ended as the “story-world” loses its boundaries. It, therefore, becomes hard to control just how far the story goes.\(^{(12)}\)

We may also find challenges on a more technical level. For the most part, these come as a host of information design challenges as the individual story elements or components (text, images, video and other media) all require different product development styles and have different production cultures assigned to them, as Jenkins et al. also highlight: “Each medium has its own affordances, its own systems of representation, its own strategies for producing and organizing knowledge. Participants in the new media landscape learn to navigate these different and sometimes conflicting modes of representation and to make meaningful choices about the best ways to express their ideas in each context.”\(^{(13)}\)

This latter point often presents a challenge for more “linearly thinking” entities (e.g. PA, PsyOps, Info Ops) and organizations. Lastly, the question of how to maintain audience interest in a narrative scattered across multiple platforms and design is also a challenge when projecting a narrative in social media. Despite the challenges involved with working with Cross-Media Narratives in social media, it is still possible to create effects in support of the strategic narrative and the broader StratCom effort and still retain some control.

@ Narrative-led Operations — retaining (some) control! Although developed for more traditional operational and communications planning, the concept of Narrative-led Operations may also be applied when it comes to “information activities” in order to create “information effects” in and through social media.

“Narrative-led Operations are the purposeful strategic narrative-led analysis, planning and execution of operations for the purpose of creating a clear linkage between the strategic intent and the campaign design in order to ensure that the words of the political level are matched by the deeds, images and words of the joint force.”\(^{(14)}\) It does, however, require appreciations (\textit{appreciations is a military planning term for operational planning considerations: Ed.}) in regards to how staffs are organized and the processes governing their planning and execution of operations and activities in social media. When it comes to planning, communication planners need to think in cross-media terms and create hyper-linked, visual and highly emotional media products that are specifically tailored to the relevant social media platforms. These media products also need to focus more on the general trend and accumulated impression left behind from multiple “micro-stories” and on controlling specific messages, when projecting the strategic narrative. A large part of these appreciations also has to do with the adaptation of organizational structure. This is necessary in order to enable them to cope with the requirements of narrow OODA (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act)-loops; agile, flexible and fast approval processes and mission command (empowerment), using the Strategic Narrative as a framework, as it is required to work effectively with social media in contemporary conflicts (both as a sensor and as an effector).

This, however, will require a complete overhaul of NATO policy on social media. +

END NOTES:

(6) Ibid.
(7) UK MoD: Joint Doctrine Note 12/1: Defence Contribution to Strategic Communication, Pp. 2-10.