

Strategic Communication in the Present and Future Military Enterprise

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Abstract

In the context of an information environment that is increasingly participatory and permeable, contemporary conflicts are being “shaped more by narratives than by traditional weapons.” To compete, militaries from liberal democratic countries such as Canada must develop strategic communications (StratCom) functions capable of contending in global narrative warfare in a manner that demonstrates and befits their values, including sincerity, transparency and respect for a rules-based international order. Requirements for these functions include implementing powerful capabilities of real-time global information environment (IE) narrative monitoring and sensemaking. Also required is an improvement in the capability and permission of tactical communications operators to dynamically respond to narratives circulating in the IE in spontaneous and culturally engaging ways, in keeping with carefully-honed StratCom narratives concerning military operations and relevant issues. Building effective StratCom can, in turn, elevate military culture as a whole, encouraging the more tangible and consistent coordination of kinetic as well as non-kinetic warfare in the support of defensible narratives. The example of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) communication during the early stages of the Operation Laser deployment to support provinces and territories in the COVID-19 crisis is examined as an example of auspicious developments towards StratCom institutionalization in the CAF.

Keywords

Narrative Warfare, Strategic Communications, Information Environment Analysis

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THE SPECTACULARITY OF WAR

War has always been understood as at least partly “spectacle”.ⁱ Ever since Sun Tzu wrote “the best way to achieve victory is to conquer an enemy that is already defeated,” the military ability to impress and intimidate has been seen as important as to destroy and kill.ⁱⁱ As the reach of information environments has grown, the spectacular aspect of war has become even more dominant.ⁱⁱⁱ Examples from the early 21st century are the 9/11 attacks and Second Gulf War’s ‘Shock and Awe’ preamble, each scripted for 24/7 television news cycle audiences.^{iv}

More recently, with information environments growing increasingly permeable and participatory, war has become refracted into multiple spectacles that are themselves contested.^v In “hybrid warfare,” militaries fight not only in air, ground, and sea, but also in cyberspace and the information environment, to determine who delivers the authoritative spectacle for the largest and most dispersed audiences.^{vi} ISIS used cellphone video, high-quality editing and participatory distribution networks to inflate their prowess, asymmetrically tilting the spectacular battleground.^{vii} Russia leverages social media to camouflage information operators as local influencers, softening up populations to military, political, or economic invasion.^{viii}

Closer to home, cognitive defences against grey zone operations are increasingly seen as necessary as physical ones. Conventional planning is being upgraded into “Joint Targeting”, which couples kinetic with non-kinetic capabilities to create resonant effects on adversaries.^{ix} Nonetheless, Allied nations have been criticized as lagging in informational strategies, with military attentions largely focused on boosting lethal arsenals, and liberal democracies limited in measures they can take, such as blocking foreign propaganda.^x Digital literacy programs can build resilience against information operations, but there is little indication how to do so at scale among populations not primed to believe they are being targeted, such as Canada’s.^{xi} Yet to counter information campaigns in kind through large-scale deceptive practices against other countries’ citizens would sabotage key moral advantages over adversaries.^{xii}

NARRATIVE COMPETITION

Solutions to these rankling problems emerge, however, when it is understood that the scaffolding under most information warfare is narrative warfare.^{xiii} The pseudo-events and memes of spectacular war do not act on observers in an isolated fashion, but are in keeping with broad narratives that organize meaning-making and determine how these phenomena are received in individual and collective minds.^{xiv} Indeed, it has been said that conflicts with both state and non-state actors that are faced currently by Allied forces, are “shaped more by narratives than by traditional weapons,” indicating the need for a sharp revision in the conventional consideration of what tools belong in the military arsenal.^{xv}

Some military narratives are endogenous, reflecting elements of groups’ religion, history, culture, and capture longstanding experiences and conflicts. But military narratives can also be

‘weaponized’—hollowed out versions of local concerns and viewpoints that are occupied like Trojan Horses by others who use these narratives to advance their own agendas. In a notorious example, the Russian Internet Research Agency in 2016 conducted Facebook campaigns to get members of Black communities to refrain from voting for Hillary Clinton.^{xvi} In Facebook posts, Russian agents essentially camouflaged themselves as African Americans, pretending to speak their language and tell their stories, but in the meantime actually advancing their own interests of derailing Clinton’s campaign because she was viewed as a candidate hostile to Russian interests.^{xvii} Again in 2020, Russia appears to be using its previously successful tactics to target supporters and detractors of the Black Lives Matter movement, capitalizing on the climate of political polarization and a deep racial divide in America.^{xviii} China has also awakened to the usefulness of riling up the volatile situation in the US, animating bot networks of fake social media accounts to criticize American police violence against protesters as an indication of that country’s hypocrisy in condemning Chinese actions in Hong Kong.^{xix}

Yet if an institution has relatively good and true stories to tell, deceptive and unattributed forms of narrative weaponization are not necessary. Indeed, narrative competition by allied forces can help illuminate how narratives have been unscrupulously weaponized by others—for example when extremists “don’t, in fact, share common identities, interests, or objectives with the audiences they are trying to control”.^{xx} To this end, Ajit Maan describes how strategic narratives oriented at audiences targeted for support by terrorist groups such as ISIS should bring home how such groups have damaged their populations and located them at the bullseye of conflict.^{xxi}

Narrative competition can also reach across national and cultural boundaries to emphasize common interests. As an example, in 2017, the UK Ministry of Defence promoted on Twitter veterinary outreach programs it conducted “to help farmers and livestock owners in remote parts of Afghanistan” under the banner “We are UK / We are There”.^{xxii} As long as such a narrative is a relatively faithful reflection of actions on the ground, telling it remains a viable way to participate in narrative warfare. The example of “We are UK /We are There” also shows how when commanders consciously consult strategic narratives as templates for decisions, small investments of resources can create large relational and reputational effects, given the ability of narratives to spread and compound effects across space and time.

STRATCOM

The advent of Strategic Communications [StratCom] represents the growing recognition that Western militaries need to start taking up more space and generating more effects in the information environment, to counter exploitative narratives that can threaten operations and to broadly influence audiences in Allies’ favor.^{xxiii} In military contexts, StratCom is defined—roughly—as:

“the alignment of actions, images and words; synchronized with the use of military power and national power; to influence the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of audiences in order to achieve strategic objectives and advance national interests”.^{xxiv}

The idea of StratCom thus captures a process in which the military messages coherently, strategically, and influentially about what it is doing and the objectives it is thereby seeking. Although information about military activity is in itself influential—even apart from that activity in itself—this communication process is regarded as essential for shaping battlefields, supporting military operations, and ultimately defending national interests. As Maan describes, the most important feature of military StratCom is to “lead with a comprehensive strategic narrative that speaks to the identity of its audience”—an approach that adversaries already understand and have implemented by effectively “disseminat[ing] their brand and reinforc[ing] their ideologies through broad information operations to control the strategic narrative”.^{xxv}

Conceived as such, StratCom need not conceal or deceive audiences about the ‘real’ agenda and activity of an institution, and is as such distinct from practices such as military deception. It is thus distinctive from the disinformation, propaganda, and unattributed messaging that are stock and trade of adversarial regimes’ information operations.^{xxvi} Instead, the best StratCom closes the gap between what militaries say and what they do, elevating the institution at same time as it elevates audiences’ perceptions of it.^{xxvii} As Emily Goldman writes, effective strategic communication mobilizes “clear, consistent core messages that flow from policy goals”.^{xxviii} In turn, thoroughly socializing StratCom narratives about the positive principles to which a military is dedicated among its staff can potentially avert oppositional narrative opportunities—for example, preventing the incident of U.S. troops defecating on public property in Norway during the NATO Exercise Trident Juncture, which became fodder for RT [aka Russia Today].^{xxix} Ultimately StratCom aims to become a “mindset” or “philosophy,” where an institution’s entire staff becomes conscious of all narratives their actions could possibly serve—intentional or unintentional, own or adversarial—and act accordingly.^{xxx}

As a process, StratCom is developed through a series of thoughtful planning stages. In the first stage, the military must clearly articulate the links between the governmental policy aspirations underlying its activities and its own operational strategies, “linking where [they] are today with where [they] want to be tomorrow in a substantive, concrete manner”.^{xxxi} In subsequent steps, analysts must identify key audiences for its messages—who might care about what they are doing, abroad and at home? Whose behaviors and whose attitudes might need to be influenced to allow the operation to unfold, and to prevail? The analysts must study those audiences carefully, to determine how to make their narratives relevant to these groups’ cultural standpoints, needs, dreams, and fears.^{xxxii} Finally, operators must develop an understanding of useful platforms for reaching those targeted and of appropriate styles for presenting those to audiences, including impactful words, stories, and images for framing those them.^{xxxiii} These efforts help ensure narratives that circulate about a military action are the ones the military seeks to propagate, versus ones created by the media—or worse, ones that have been weaponized by adversaries.

Well beyond facilitating communications, clarifying strategic narratives can improve outcome, since effective strategic narrative is “a single big idea, or a coherent collection of smaller ideas, with a clear underpinning rationale and unifying purpose” that can help orient and focus operations themselves.^{xxxiv} An illustration of the premium StratCom could offer in terms of impact has been made of the raid on Bin Laden.^{xxxv} It has been pointed out that for two days after this raid, U.S. State officials were regrettably unable to provide coherent, accurate public communication about what had happened, much less to use global communication channels to shape international

sentiment towards the raid.^{xxxvi} Whereas, a dramatic release on the event in the words of a soldier involved might have sparked international engagement in the narrative of US military and intelligence supremacy.^{xxxvii} Such a StratCoup coup would have required no distortion of truth, only an appreciation of the how people narratively respond to high drama in pursuit of values such as justice. In a similar vein, it has been argued that recent United States military policy in Iran would be better received in that country if it were communicated about in ways that seem less impulsive, and more strategically aligned with the Iranian public's "engagement with ideas," such as freedom of speech and liberalized economies.^{xxxviii}

The upshot is that, to the extent that Western militaries act in ways that are principles-driven and value-driven, they could excel at narrative competition simply by telling more real stories about what they are doing, and why. As an Allied Command Rapid Reaction Corps Officer in Afghanistan stated, "if you can do what you say, and say what you do, effectively at the right time and place—with the correct audience and stakeholder—you will be able to exert influence".^{xxxix} Further, if principles-driven military policies were more proactively communicated, they could affect the behaviours that followed. As an example, if military coalitions were to more clearly and believably outline the steps they were prepared to take for violations of norms, it is possible actors could be influenced to correct nefarious behaviours earlier, and costs in blood and treasure could be kept to the bare minimum.

STRATCOM AND FUTURE WAR

Many Allied militaries have a good underlying foundation of principles and values. Nonetheless, the business of articulating, socializing, and communicating these values explicitly in all actions presents a challenge. As has been observed of NATO, "challenges of formulating narratives and organizing efforts, the constraints of money and resources, time pressure, personalities, policy dysfunction, legitimate differences of opinion over approaches [and] the variable skills of practitioners and capabilities of nations...are unlikely to disappear".^{xl} Canada and other militaries are nonetheless attempting to address these challenges, with Chief of the Defence Staff, General Jonathan Vance having recently directed the institutionalization of StratCom across the DND/CAF enterprise.^{xli} This is an auspicious beginning, as for militaries to develop a StratCom consciousness enveloping its distributed commands, along with adequate processes to project that consciousness outward into the work, will take substantial focus, time and effort.

Apart from the mental, moral, and social work of articulating strong guiding principles and reflecting them in military actions, StratCom also requires investment in technical capabilities falling within the ambit of information operations, which are now "core military capabilities" that present "the most important of our many capability challenges in this new era of hybrid warfare".^{xlii} CDS Vance has predicted that conventional weaponry will indeed soon primarily be "leveraged" and "postur[ed]" to support engagements in the cognitive (i.e. informational) and cyberspace domain, where much current military competition is already occurring.^{xliii}

In the first place, successful competition in the informational domain depends on militaries investing in the development functions, processes, skills, and tools to monitor the informational

battleground, so they can fully understand audiences and also detect adversarial narratives before they take root. StratCom practitioners need to be supported by analysts tracking the information environment 24/7 with the kinds of AI-boosted innovations for “Making Sense of the Chatter,” and “Detecting and Responding to hostile information activities” being funded by Defence Research and Development Canada’s Innovation for Defence Excellence and Security [IDEaS] program.^{xliv} Using such tools, military analysts will be able to quickly pull out and triage narratives on relevant themes circulating in the information environment. Guided by these analyses, practitioners stand a better chance of developing truthful, aspirational, win-win narratives more compelling than the misleading, divisive, exploitative ones gripping key audiences.^{xlv}

Successful engagement in StratCom also requires the improvement of communications capabilities in militaries, which need to learn to tell their stories in more appropriate and appealing ways. Challenges loom in this regard, as militaries, with their distinctive cultures and jargons, sometimes go far wrong in communication—a notorious example being the US DoD’s dissemination of leaflets and videos with images of the 9/11 attack to Afghans who had never seen a skyscraper or a jet plane.^{xlvi} Helpfully, a growing sense of the stakes of narrative competition is leading militaries to invest in capabilities beyond superficial marketing approaches, such as military-grade Actor and Audience Analysis (AAA).^{xlvii} These analytical techniques begin by developing anthropological and psychosocial understandings of groups—essentially reverse-engineering the underpinnings of attitudes and behaviour.^{xlviii} In turn, they identify the most reliable interventions for changing these group attitudes and behaviours in ways that support our political objectives. To return to the Afghan example, AAA would likely have revealed that obtaining support for Allied troops would have been better achieved not through slick videos, but through sensitivity to local material conditions and social incentives (e.g. poverty, fear, tribal loyalty) that really matter to Afghans, such as “access to a wider variety of food, or...[to] the bridge that will let [them] walk to a market”.^{xlix}

Another huge challenge is setting parameters for StratCom practitioners to engage in rapid-fire dynamics in the information environment, while supporting a coherent StratCom narrative and principles. At this point, obtaining approvals for an official Government of Canada departmental social media post—including one by Department of National Defence—requires approvals to be obtained from multiple levels and branches of government. But participating in narrative-driven exchanges requires understanding and responding to memes, trolling behaviours and other trends that can evolve by the hour. Keeping up with the informational battle rhythm requires developing similar kinds of Mission Command approaches as those used in air warfare—where decentralized action, short approval chains, and elevated risk tolerances empower rapid decision-making in response to on-the-ground cues.¹ Institutionalizing a communications approach will require a sea-change for military bureaucracies, where quite often “only those at the higher ranks [can] authorise the sharing of information and communication ...slowing down the potential speed”.^{li}

STRATCOM DURING COVID-19

While StratCom is still in formation in Canada's Department of National Defence (DND), the COVID-19 crisis has offered a small case study revealing how far it has already come in building up this capability. During the third week in March 2020, as the Government of Canada began to announce national recommendations and directives for social distancing, rumours began spreading on social media that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) were preparing to enforce these policies under martial law. In Quebec—it was reported on Twitter—the Canadian military were already using drones and even “military-biker alliance” to keep order in the streets. Conspiracy theories now tend to be transnational, recycling similar themes across state borders—and in this regard similar conspiracies as the one glimpsed in Quebec had already been circulating for several days in the United States, in the form of hoax text messages warning recipients that martial law was on the verge of being implemented.^{lii}

Evidently, the upper echelons of DND were quickly apprised that the martial law narrative was emerging in Canada. A CBC interview with CDS Vance on March 20 reveals that effort had already been put into crafting a counter-narrative to the ‘martial law’ interpretation of military involvement in the COVID-19 crisis, as it clearly and deliberately portrayed the potential role to be played by CAF in a different light. Vance indicated that he wanted to “reassure people” so that “as soon as you mention military during a crisis, people [will not] think troops with guns and weapons”; Instead, he hoped the Canadian public would see any prospective CAF deployment “as more akin to a humanitarian response” where the CAF was “there in time of need”.^{liii} Vance’s framing of military support for governments could be anticipated to play well to public opinion, given that 90 per cent Canadians support CAF’s involvement in humanitarian forms of disaster response at home and abroad.^{liv} Over the coming week, CDS Vance plausibly further reassured Canadians by posting the lengthy situational reports issued to military troops on his public Twitter account so they were available to all to view. These SitReps included preliminary details of Operation Laser, a deployment through which the CAF would support domestic governments’ efforts to suppress COVID-19 outbreaks as requested and required. By leveraging an open social media channel such as Twitter to transparently post internal SitReps, CDS Vance could counter the circulating narrative that secretive deployments were occurring.

Finally, Vance emphasized in other interviews that Canadians were likely to be bombarded with disinformation about COVID-19, some of which may come from adversarial actors. He described an extraordinary increase in the deliberate use of cyberspace to spread false information about COVID-19 “to attack the response of some countries”.^{lv} He also predicted efforts on the part of state-sponsored and non-state-sponsored actors to rely on the COVID-19 crisis to undermine institutional trust.^{lvi} He thereby forthrightly exposed to the Canadian public to the logic of hybrid warfare that uses disinformation to degrade our collective wellbeing, and primed ordinary citizens to combat its effects through attitudes of credulity and habits of digital literacy.

CONCLUSION

At the point of writing this paper, CAF had not yet been deployed to assist communities in this way, and so it is likely that much of the story of DND and CAF's communication regarding COVID-19 was yet to unfold. However, early indications suggested a deliberate attempt was underway to ensure that DND/CAF is mounting an approach to StratCom around COVID-19 based on a studied awareness of the features and needs of domestic audiences in a crisis, and emphasizing values such as trustworthiness, transparency and reputational integrity.^{lviii} The case of DND/CAF's engagement in StratCom around the COVID-19 offers an auspicious glimpse of how Western militaries are seriously entering into this new domain of "spectacular" information combat, in which adversaries have already been investing for some time. Promisingly, DND/CAF has evident StratCom processes in place for monitoring the information environment, understanding adversarial tactics and audiences, and filling vacuums where nefarious narratives can take hold with trustworthy, transparent, yet carefully honed messaging to favorably affect attitudes and behaviour.

Still, StratCom in the COVID-19 case is relatively straightforward, requiring institutions such as DND/CAF to address domestic audiences reassuringly at a panicky time when these institutions are most likely to be trusted. One must hope Western militaries are also learning how to develop effective processes for creating 'offensive' StratCom—that is, for telling impactful stories that can build resilience to adversarial beliefs and schemes abroad. When Allied forces learn to combine a habit of steady, trustworthy, value-driven communication with a capability of instantaneously but intensively spanning linguistic and cultural boundaries, the true promise StratCom holds for supplementing—and even substituting—conventional warfare will begin to be realized.

NOTES

ⁱ The term is borrowed from Guy Debord's 1967 *Society of the Spectacle*, which aptly anticipated the way public and political life would increasingly be staged for media consumption.

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^{liii} Joel Rubin, "Coronavirus misinformation and hoax text messages are making the rounds. Here's how to spot them", Los Angeles Times, 18 March 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-03-18/coronavirus-martial-law-email-message-hoax>.

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^{lv} Ibid.

^{lvi} Joel Rubin, "Coronavirus misinformation and hoax text messages are making the rounds. Here's how to spot them", Los Angeles Times, 18 March 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-03-18/coronavirus-martial-law-email-message-hoax>.

^{lvii} The provisional fulfilment of this prediction can be observed in the fall-out from the CAF mission Operation Laser in Quebec and Ontario long term care facilities in May and June 2020, in response to lethal outbreaks of coronavirus at facilities poorly equipped to deal with frail and seriously ill patients. Their efforts were commended by families, staff and the provincial governments. And when the CAF issued a scathing report on the conditions observed in various long-term care facilities hard hit by COVID-19—and when that report was leaked to the press, apparently by CAF members—the report was widely praised for its candid expose of systemic problems in eldercare, even while steps were initiated to quell such leaks going forward. See: Bob Shieffer/ Andrew Schwartz, "The Truth of the Matter: The Killing of Soleimani and the US Response", Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 15 January 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/killing-soleimani-and-us-response>.

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