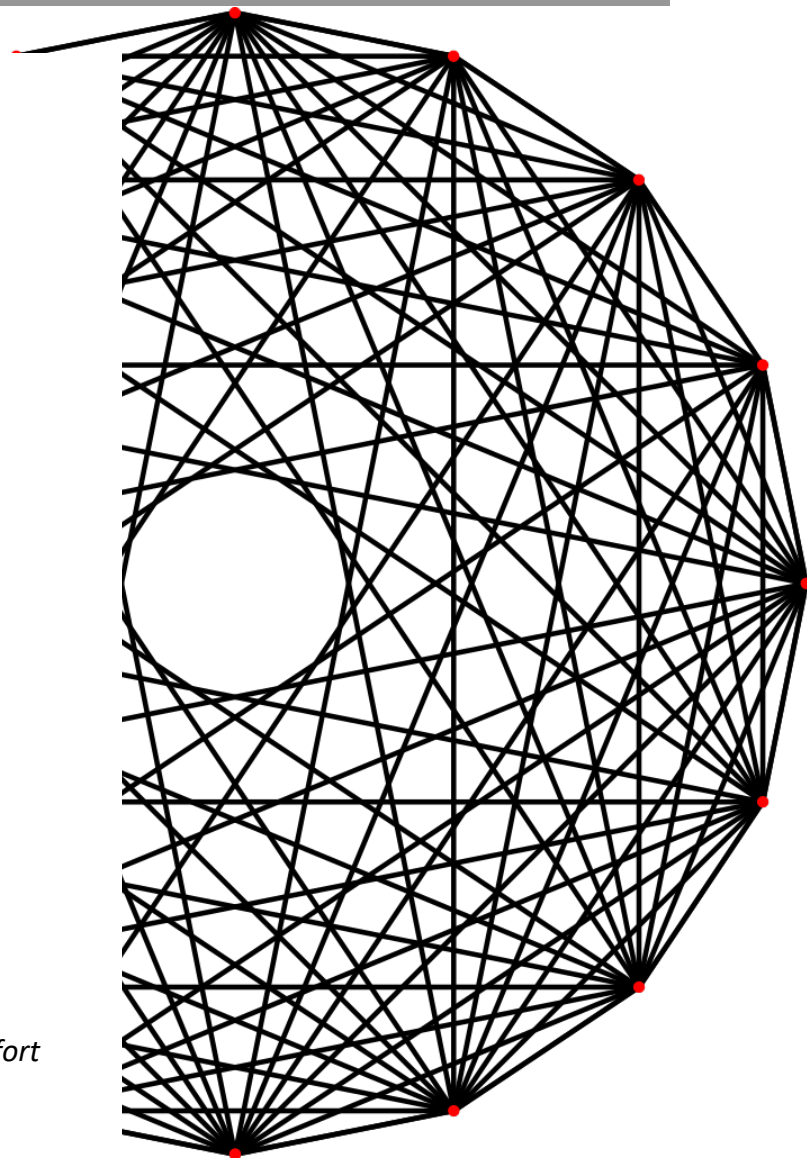# Rethinking Communication Influence from a Strategic Communication Approach

Invited Perspective Series

Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA)
Future of Great Power Competition & Conflict Effort

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Rethinking Communication Influence from a Strategic Communication Approach

Paul S. Lieber, PhD.

For over a decade, many within US defense and interagency circles maintain a belief they are 'losing' the communication influence battle, one its adversaries are excelling at due to seemingly better strategy and reach. Peer competitor infiltration into American elections, radical groups facilitating foreign fighter flow over chat applications, and/or failed attempts to counter narratives should reason for a glaring need for the US to change strategy. But surprisingly little or none of this strategic shift is occurring. While it acknowledges the importance of peer competitors, there is literally no direct reference to 'strategic communication' or equivalent process shortcomings anywhere in the 2018 US National Defense Strategy.

Instead—and by political design—US institutions with strategic communication and/or influence authorities remain separated in legislated powers and activities. The result? Disconnected, disjointed and even conflicting approaches to the same problem. In contrast, peer competitors almost brazenly implement a communication influence strategy sabotaging internal and external US interests.

Terminology

This manuscript intentionally builds on a March 2019 lecture for the Strategic Multilayer Assessment Speaker Series event: "Strategic Communication and Influence: An Unofficial Primer." [1] (Readers are encouraged to review this lecture for additional context.)

Within this manuscript, all referenced terminology is defined in accordance with the author's professional opinion only, noting there is considerable official doctrine which defines 'strategic communication,' 'influence,' and 'communication influence' terminology differently and by organization.

For the purposes of this manuscript, 'strategic communication' is defined as a deliberate alignment of communication strategies across partner institutions for a synergistic effect. Target audiences and/or mediums may differ across institutions, but will always be knowingly related.

'Influence' is seen as residing under the strategic communication umbrella, a specific method of strategic communication seeking to reinforce or adjust attitudes and opinions of a primary audience. These attitudes and opinions would be deemed favorable to the objectives of the communicator and associated with a preferred behavioral outcome. Within this manuscript, the term 'communication influence' is used to describe influence activities that encompass both defense and diplomatic influence actions unless purposely distinguished.

Similarly, 'defense' is intended as a generalized term that does not differentiate between specific services, the joint force and/or individual organizations under the US Department of Defense umbrella. 'Interagency' deliberately does not distinguish between intelligence, diplomatic, development, and other organizations unless appropriate for discussion and in the context of influence. Related, there is intentionally very limited discussion on discrepancies between Title X and 50 influence authorities, as this not the scope of this manuscript.

Peer Competitor Meddling

Where the US decries attributed moral 'alternatives' in its attributed communication influence activities, Russia favors covert disruption calling for chaos. Through social media based trolls and bots gleefully stretching limits of civility, Russia encouraged the US populous to question the legitimacy of several critical institutions. [2] Over a five year period, Russian disruption campaigns resulted in reduced confidence among Americans in: a) its leadership and election process,[3] b) the legitimacy of science,[4]

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[1] Paul Lieber. "Strategic Communication and Influence: An Unofficial Primer." Strategic Multilayer Assessment Speaker Series Event. Available at: https://nsiteam.com/strategic-communication-and-influence-an-unofficial-primer/
[2] John Marks. "The Weekly: Russia's Playbook for Disrupting Democracy," Sep 6 2019. New York Times Online: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/06/the-weekly/russia-estonia-election-cyber-attack.html
[3] United State Senate. "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election,"
[4] Caitlin O'Kane. "Russian trolls fueled anti-vaccination debate in U.S. by spreading misinformation on Twitter, study finds," May 31 2019. CBS News. Accessed on Sep 17 2019 at: https://www.cbsnews.com/news/anti-vax-movement-russian-trolls-fueled-anti-vaccination-debate-in-us-by-spreading-misinformation-twitter-study/

and c) the utility of diversity in a first world country.[5] These were tangibly executed via presidential election manipulation, the anti-vaccination movement, and promoting racially based discord and violence throughout major U.S. cities.

Almost surgical in execution, all three Russian efforts were purposefully framed as identity driven issues and on very sensitive topics. This approach quickly gained credibility among a populace that predominantly consumed information and formed opinions from and within social media.[6] Moreover, and as a platform, social media served as a virtual podium and seemingly level communication playing field espousing both: a) individualism and b) little discrepancy between emotion and fact based argumentation.[7]

This platform became the perfect venue for Russian communication influence campaigns to take root. Trolls and bots framed issues as personal ones, where attacking a perspective meant attacking the individual who espoused them.[8] Soon, all persons—actual or created—involved in this manipulated discussion adopted defensive postures, pouring fuel onto an already contentious issue fire. In such an unstable, contentious state, it was easy for Russian trolls and bots to make their mark, while hiding identity and intent.

With the cat out of the bag and these unmasked as peer competitor communication influence efforts, two important questions come to mind:

1. *Why was it so easy for a peer competitor to influence the US population?*

2. *Why was the US communication influence strategy wholly unprepared for such an event?*

Potential answers? Current US communication influence paradigms are woefully outdated.

Also and even with a strategic adjustment, the United States is simply too far behind the Russians in the influence game to catch up.

Philosophical Challenges to Effective Communication Influence

The most glaring culprit is the unwillingness of the United States to break the rules. Extending discussion from peer competition to violent extremist groups, policy makers and practitioners will reason these groups successful because they are not restricted by moral, ethical, and/or organizational principles. Deceit, misdirection, and disregard for consequence permit terrorists to excel in spaces that

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[5] Nicholas Thompson and Issie Lapowsky. "How Russian Trolls Used Meme Warfare to Divide America," Dec 17 2018. *Wired*. Accessed on Sep 17 2019 at: https://www.wired.com/story/russia-ira-propaganda-senate-report/
[6] Derrik Asher, Justine Caylor and Alexis Neigel. "Effects of Social Media Involvement, Context, and Data-Type on Opinion Formation," IEEE 2018 International Workshop on Social Sensing.
[7] ByungSoo Ko, Chanyong Park, Dongkeon Lee, Jaewon Kim, Ho-Jin Choi, and Dongsoo Han. "Finding a News Article Related to Posts in Social Media: The Need to Consider Emotion as a Feature," 2018 IEEE International Conference on Big Data and Smart Computing.
[8] Dave Lee. "The tactics of a Russian troll farm," Feb 16 2018. BBC News. Accessed on Sep 17 2019 at: https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-43093390

US entities seemingly cannot.[9] Then there is the conundrum of rigid geographic combatant command lines, ones meant to delineate operational and tactical command for kinetic activity[10] but make little to no sense for a global Internet and non-kinetic informational battlespace.

While reach and boundaries are certainly a hindrance, more important are philosophical roadblocks. Specifically, there remains an unwillingness by US DoD and interagency entities to accept communication influence outcomes short of behavioral change, tethering measures of effectiveness for influence and strategic communication efforts to behaviors.[11] The United States is not alone in this shortcoming, with the United Kingdom's 2019 strategic communication defense strategy positing "success is influencing target audiences sufficiently to cause them to change or maintain their behavior."[12]

This criticism should not be construed as dismissing behavioral change completely when devising communication influence objectives. In fact, behavioral goals should be deliberately thought of when segmenting audiences and formulating overall communication influence campaign design.[13] Still, determining success by target audience behaviors will always result in failure and—even worse—–poor subsequent planning.

To explain, even the most carefully crafted communication influence campaign can never *cause* someone to adopt or change a specific behavior. What these campaigns can do, however, is magnify specified attitudes and opinions statistically and significantly related to desired behaviors among a primary audience. The Russian communication influence campaigns took this even a step further, by attacking core constructs that transcended beyond the topic at hand.

Theoretical Roadmaps to Predicting Behavior

How individuals reason about a problem can forecast connected behaviors. This is an important caveat, as research finds that mass media can both determine what someone should think about, also how

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[9] Christopher Paul, Colin Clarke, Michael Schwille, Jakub Hlavka, Michael Brown, Steven Davenport, Isaac Porche and Joel Harding. "Lessons from Others for Future U.S. Army Operations in and Through the Information Environment," 2018. RAND.

[10] Andrew Feickert. "The Unified Command Plan and Combatant Commands: Background and Issues for Congress," Jan 3 2013. Congressional Research Service.

[11] Paul Lieber and Peter Reiley, "Countering ISIS's Social Media Influence," Special Operations Journal 2, no. 1 (1 June 2016): 47–57.

[12] "Joint Doctrine Note 2/19: Defence Strategic Communication: an Approach to Formulating and Executing Strategy," United Kingdom Ministry of Defence.

[13] Rodney G. Duffett and Myles Wakeham, "Social Media Marketing Communications Effect on Attitudes among Millennials in South Africa," The African Journal of Information Systems 8, no. 3 (June 2016): 20–44, http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/ajis/vol8/iss3/2/

they should think about it. This is what mass communication scholars refer to as second level agenda setting theory,[14] a concept that applies to social media platforms.

Schema theory reinforces this connection between attitudes, opinions, and behaviors. It posits that individuals will logically organize how they reason about items into particular groupings, or schema. Schema organization is based on prior experiences and serves as a tool when facing future and/or new challenges.[15] A classic schema example is of a child touching a hot surface, which—in turn—forms schema to deter him or her from touching a stove and/or potentially scalding surfaces capable of serious harm.

As humans are constantly and subconsciously sorting information into schema, organizing message campaigns compatible with existing primary audience schema is most effective. Therefore, attempts to skip steps in jumping to alternate behaviors may end in the exact opposite effect, what social psychologists refer to as cognitive dissonance.[16] Cognitive dissonance occurs when individuals are directly encountered with alternatives to which they lack sufficient coping or reasoning strategies. Several critics of failed health campaigns employing shock strategies highlight cognitive dissonance as the culprit.

Using these theories as evidence, countering the narrative will always be a poor approach to communication influence. Message recipients never process messages in isolation, and will always—consciously or otherwise—reason how introduced concepts fit within existing frames of understanding. Second, no message exists in a vacuum. While social network analyses can explain and potentially predict the frequency and structure of a messaging system (who is talking to whom and how often), they do not account for human interactions within these spaces and/or how well online messages reflect offline beliefs.[17] These analyses are devoid of context.

Similarly, readily available machine learning and artificial intelligence tools—mechanisms favored by communication influence practitioners—can sort and predict petabytes of message data, but these do not account for contextual nuances beyond the words themselves. This is yet another reason why Russian trolls and bots were so effective; they focused not on message but instead emulated potential responses to them.

Social media data also cannot speak to group norms. Supplementing assessment with qualitative and/or quantitative inquiry is a must. There is a distinct possibility that a social media space is simply an opinion popularity contest. Spiral of silence theory explains that individuals who perceive themselves in the majority opinion are most apt to speak up, the opposite for those of perceived

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[14] Maxwell McCombs. "A Look at Agenda-Setting: Past, Present and Future," Journalism Studies 6(4):543-557 · November 2005. Agenda setting theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1968) was originally employed to explain why news media covered particular topics. McCombs (2005) extended this theory into its second level, to now explain emphasis on particular aspects of topic coverage. Most recently – and to better understand social media based patterns of linking particular topics to others – Vu, Gou and McCombs (2014) introduced third level or 'Network Agenda-Setting' theory.
[15] Robert Axelrod. "Schema Theory: An Information Processing Model of Perception and Cognition," The American Political Science Review, Vol. 67, No. 4 (Dec., 1973), pp. 1248-1266
[16] Leon Festinger. "A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance," 1957. Stanford University Press.
[17] Paul Lieber and Yael Lieber. "Reconceptualizing Radical Groups and Their Messages," 2017, JSOU Press.

minority standing.[18] The greater such perceptions, the greater the effect. Therefore, messaging trends may simply be intra-group majority versus minority perception at a given time.[19] Again, countering a narrative will produce little to no gain in such environments.

Finally, online communication is anything but text alone. Word choice, acronyms, emojis, memes, animated gifs, etc., all combine to adjust meaning of text embedded within and around them.[20]

Analyses limited to text or a single element of these supporting communication markers will miss significant portions of the overall sentiment picture.

Being Strategic in Communication

To be competitive in the modern communication influence space, the United States must accept that a number of adjustments are necessary. These are in the strategic, organization, alignment, and authorities spaces, described below.

STRATEGY

To begin, the United States must recognize that communication influence resides under the strategic communication umbrella and that it must embrace parent principles. Specifically:

1. Communication efforts must be aligned, purposeful, and feature a stated and known effect. This requires re-inserting the strategic communication function and ideology into its communication structures.

2. Success should be measured by the consistency of messaging, not frequency and/or verbiage of a message. This requires re-imagining assessment strategies to emphasize attitude/opinion change, acknowledging information beyond words.

While on the topic of assessment, communication influence campaigns must be strategically redesigned from the ground up. This involves factoring in

- message to medium match[21] (e.g., is a specific medium and individual most appropriate for conveying particular content?),

- timing of message dissemination (e.g., does the release of a particular message logically build upon prior and future ones?),

- target audiences are known and appropriate (e.g., are targeted individuals primary versus secondary audiences?), and

- desired discussion frames are pre-identified (e.g., are word choices deliberately selected to achieve specific attitude and opinions about a topic?).

ORGANIZATION

Most importantly, communication influence organizations need to be realistic in what they can and cannot do. It is to be expected that existing personnel—even ones in communication influence

functions—may lack the qualifications to accomplish these steps. This is to be expected, as their organization's paradigm, policy, and training are geared toward a completely different model. What they do possess, however, is invaluable experience to ensure a proper path ahead. Augment these individuals with pedigreed social and computer science personnel—notably in the mass communication, assessment, and data integration spaces—capable of executing needed functions and to train others to do the same.

ALIGNMENT

As institutional change will require leadership oversight and buy-in, these organizations must simultaneously designate a senior strategic communication official to oversee quality assurance for all messaging efforts also to align activities with communication influence peers. In its 2019 national strategic communication (StratCom) strategy, the United Kingdom seconded the importance of this alignment: "a StratCom approach to strategic planning envisages formulating and executing strategic military plans that are coherent with each other and which focus activities on delivering the… government's intent, rather than undertaking activities and then trying to explain them."[22] Most importantly, an aligned approach—and senior officials guiding it—will significantly reduce the likelihood of conflicting messages and activities.

AUTHORITIES

Even with these changes, communication influence authorities may get in the way if not appropriately addressed. These authorities substantially differ across defense, intelligence, and diplomatic organizations. While authorities can be restrictive, they can also be extraordinarily beneficial when strategically applied. Each authority carries with it very specific legal and practice expectations for who should be speaking to whom and via what channel. Credibility of this communication goes hand-in-hand. Therefore, and if truly aligned, a true strategic communication approach to communication influence can work magic if its members maximize respective authorities.

As authorities define conduit and audience appropriateness, each entity should only target (as primary audience) individuals appropriate under a respective communication authority and within channels and platforms these individuals typically consume such message content. Similarly, message timing should align with how these same individuals typically make decisions.

Of course, every situation will vary. Thus—and even with a well-aligned communication influence initiative—some strategic adjustments will be necessary along the way. Supplementing or adjusting message and assessment criteria can and should occur, but only if there sound reasoning behind it.

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[18] Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, "The Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion," Journal of Communication 24, no. 2 (1974): 43–51

[19] Jose Liht and Sara Savage. "Preventing Violent Extremism through Value Complexity: Being Muslim Being Britishm," Journal of Strategic Security 6, no. 4 (2013): 44-66.

[20] Isidoros Perikos and Ioannis Hatzilygeroudis. "A Framework for Analyzing Big Social Data and Modelling Emotions in Social Media," 2018 IEEE Fourth International Conference on Big Data Computing Service and Applications.

[21] Marshall McLuhan. "Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man," 1994. MIT Press.

[22] Joint Doctrine Note 2/19.

Also, and most importantly, adjustments should not conflict with a partner's communication influence authorities and/or activities.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps many or even most of the sentiments in this monograph seem common sense. Proper scientific backing, a deliberate strategy, audience segmentation, and alignment of effort should underlie any successful strategic communication initiative. Unfortunately, this is not occurring within the United States, and both peer competitors and adversaries are seizing advantage.

What this manuscript—as did the lecture which engendered it—proposes is to strategically pause. Stated obstacles to successful communication influence are anything but insurmountable. They do, however, require realistic critiques and actions by leadership and practitioners. Also for both to make and take the necessary time to create and analyze communication influence strategies before adopting them or accompanying policy.

Turning to technology solutions in lieu of these steps only increases the likelihood of staying an improper course. As purchasing then only further institutionalizes the problem: there is now significant financial investment toward putting Band-Aids on self-induced wounds.

As a first and next step, it is important for US communication influence organizations to trust more: trust their partners, their subject matter experts, and the possibility that the ideal solutions are ones not yet adopted and beyond existing expertise. This same solution does not require abandoning existing beliefs to get there.