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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

BLOGGING FROM THE BATTLEFIELD: A NEW COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Title: Blogging from the Battlefield: A New Communications Strategy

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Thesis: Blogs conducted at the tactical level is one way the US can accomplish its goal of conducting effective strategic communications in the new media environment.

Discussion: The internet and the new media it created have changed the way the world communicates. Ideas are spread faster and to more people than ever before. In addition, these ideas can come from anyone in the world: right or wrong, educated or un-educated, enemy or friend. The US must adapt to and make use of the advantages of the new media environment while denying those advantages to its enemies if it is going to conduct effective strategic communications. One of the main advantages that the new media presents is the ability for a dialogue to develop between the communicator and the audience. Using this dialogue as a measure of effectiveness, the US can adjust its actions and narrative to better achieve its desired outcome. Blogs are the best vehicle for developing a dialogue in the new media. Furthermore, the execution of these blogs should be conducted in a decentralized manner at the tactical level. Conducting blogs at the tactical level is the best way for the US to fully exploit the advantages provided by the new media. However, along with these advantages, the new media also presents a number of challenges that the US will have to manage in order to adapt to the new media.

Conclusion: While it does present some challenges, blogs conducted at the tactical level do accomplish the US's goal of conducting effective strategic communications in the new media. In addition, the challenges presented by blogging at the tactical level are far outweighed by the advantages that it provides and most of those challenges need to be solved regardless of whether blogs are adopted as a method of strategic communication or not.

Table of Contents

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Introduction

The internet and the new media it created have changed the way the world communicates. Ideas are spread faster and to more people than ever before. In addition, these ideas can come from anyone in the world: right or wrong, educated or un-educated, enemy or friend. The US must adapt to and make use of the advantages of the new media environment while denying those advantages to its enemies if it is going to conduct effective strategic communications. Blogs conducted at the tactical level is one way the US can accomplish its goal of conducting effective strategic communications in the new media environment.

Background

The US is approaching the ten-year mark in its War on Terror. In that time, the US has won major campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as stopped Al Qaeda from carrying out another terrorist attack on the scale of 9/11. Despite these successes, the perception is that terrorism is as much if not more of a threat today than it was ten years ago. Part of the reason for this perception is due to the conventional approach the US has taken in prosecuting this war, which in turn can be traced back to labeling the conflict as a war in the first place. A better way to define the fight against terrorism is to call it a global insurgency.[1]

In order to defeat a global insurgency, the US must first identify its center of gravity and critical vulnerability. If the US treats the insurgency like guerilla warfare, then it can figure out the center of gravity and critical vulnerability by looking to Mao Tse-tung, an expert at executing guerilla warfare. According to Mao, guerrilla warfare "derives from the masses and is supported by them, it can neither exist nor flourish if it separates itself from their sympathies and cooperation."[2] In this statement, Mao identifies the people as not only the center of gravity for any insurgency, but the critical vulnerability as well. This should not come as a surprise since according to Clausewitz the people, the army, and the government are the three constituencies that drive war.[3] Therefore, in order to defeat this global insurgency the US must separate it from the people.

A mistake the US has been making is that the majority of its focus has been on separating the support of the people in the locality in which combat operations are taking place from the terrorists. The people, in a global insurgency, are not just the local populace of Afghanistan or Iraq. Due to globalization, these insurgencies draw support from a worldwide audience. While the US is making efforts at addressing this worldwide audience, it needs to increase those efforts because Islamist extremism is an ideology that pays no attention to ethnic, regional, or national boundaries as evidenced by its ability to infiltrate societies with little or no Islamic tradition.[4] Another mistake the US has to be wary of is concentrating its activities solely on those extremists and their sympathizers. The US cannot beat this global insurgency alone. It needs partners. Therefore, it needs to continue its efforts to gain and maintain the support and cooperation of countries that have traditionally been its allies. Finally, the US must gain the support of those people still trying to decide which side is more "credible and worthy of their trust."[5] Since this is the largest group, it is the key group for the US to concentrate on because, as the US gains the support of this undecided group, the support for the global insurgency will slowly erode. Therefore, the people can be divided into three broad categories: "the terrorists and their supporters and sympathizers; the United States, its traditional friends and allies, including in traditionally Muslim societies, and the friendlies in contested areas; and the rest of the world."[6]

This is a concept already understood by the enemy. Since they do not have to be accurate in their claims, they are able to gain and maintain the support of their allies.[7] With their actions and exaggerated accomplishments, they also target the resolve of the smaller nations in the US led coalition.[8] Finally, they understand that their key objective is the audience that has not yet decided which side to support. This is why the majority of their propaganda is aimed at that populace in an effort to gain their support as well as new recruits.[9]

The US can separate the insurgents from the people by either destroying the enemy, which has been the focus of the US to this point, or by making the enemy and its message unacceptable to the people.[10] The US can do this by focusing on the people's decision making process. The decision making process can be affected through the information environment "through psychological, electronic, or physical means."[11] Through these means, the US can affect "the intellectual and emotional arenas in which individuals, families, tribes and governing bodies reason and make decisions based on their respective historical, cultural, social, religious and educational backgrounds."[12] However, "An approach to separate extremists from their popular support bases is unlikely to work if the terrorist fringe has greater credibility in the public eye than either the United States or 'moderate' indigenous authorities."[13]

The US must prove to the people that it is both "more trustworthy and more credible than its enemies."[14] The first way to go about doing this is by reducing the "say-do" gap. Communication is primarily a matter of what is done.[15] If what the US says does not support what it does, then its credibility is reduced. The second way is by ensuring that everything the US proclaims is not only truthful, but realistic as well. When the US sets out unrealistic goals and inevitably falls short of them, good intentions do not matter. To the public, it appears that the US lied to them. This simple act will help to reduce the "say-do" gap as well as ensure that the messages the US is putting out remain consistent with each other, not contradictory.[16] The final way is by getting the message out first because, "perception is often reality in that the side that communicates first wins the perception battle."[17] By combining the concepts of increasing the creditability and trustworthiness of the US and separating the global insurgency from the global audience, the "long-term strategic goal of U.S. message-making must be to help restore the international prestige of the United States of America around the world, and win the 'war of ideas' worldwide: not only among Arabs and Muslims, but among countries that traditionally have been close friends and allies."[18]

Strategic Communications

In an effort to close the "say-do" gap, the Department of Defense (DOD) has defined a concept called Strategic Communications (SC). According to Joint Publication 3-13 on Information Operations, the DOD defines SC as

> "focused USG efforts to understand and engage key audiences in order to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of USG interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all elements of national power."[19]

In layman's terms SC is ensuring that the US Government's (USGs) actions and words align with its policy and take into account the culture that it is trying to address. The key contributors to SC are Information Operations (IO), Defense Support to Public Diplomacy (DSPD), and Public Affairs (PA).[20]

Information Operations is primarily used at the tactical and operational level to affect the decisions and decision-making processes of a target audience (TA), while defending friendly decision-making processes.[21] Its core capabilities are electronic warfare (EW), computer network operations (CNO), psychological operations (PSYOP), military deception (MILDEC), and operations security (OPSEC). In addition, it integrates these core capabilities with information assurance (IA), physical security, physical attack, counterintelligence, combat camera, PA, civil-military operations (CMO), and DSPD.[22]

Defense support to public diplomacy are actions taken by the DOD to "understand, inform, and influence foreign audiences and opinion makers and by broadening the dialogue between American citizens and institutions and their counterparts abroad"[23] in order to promote US foreign policy objectives. Examples of DSPD include CMO and Medical Readiness Training Exercises.

Public Affairs' mission is "to conduct activities to inform, educate and communicate to the American and international public its goals, objectives or whatever information the U.S. deems necessary to further or protect its national interests."[24] It accomplishes this mission by expediting the flow of "accurate and timely information"[25] through the media. A key aspect in this mission is ensuring that the information about the DOD is accurate by countering "adversary misinformation and disinformation through the publication of accurate information."[26] Doing this "allows for truthful, honest opposition to the enemy's media borne propaganda"[27] and, by pointing out the falsehoods in the enemy's propaganda, aids the SC campaign by enhancing the USG's credibility while degrading the enemy's credibility. An example of a PA activity that did an excellent job at accomplishing its mission is the Embedding Program employed in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

The Embedding Program

During the invasion portion of OIF, the DOD sought to influence the media, and through them public opinion, with strategic level presentations given by senior personnel in Washington and Qatar as well as by instituting a program of embedding reporters with military units.[28] In the embedding program, vetted reporters would live, eat, sleep, and travel with designated military units and stay with that designated unit for the duration of the invasion. The purpose of this program was to provide "robust media access to counter likely Iraqi lies and disinformation"[29] while highlighting "the professionalism of the United States Armed Forces."[30] When the invasion started, there were more than 600 US and foreign journalists embedded with military units. These units ranged from aircraft carriers, to Special Forces, to Army and Marine infantry units.[31]

Overall, the embedding program was a success. It leveraged the media into "accurately depicting coalition military and the compassionate actions of liberation."[32] It also helped improve the public's perception of the military and gave credibility to the media coverage.[33] In terms of counter-propaganda, the "media embeds were also able to report on and in fact, counter misinformation from the Iraqi regime."[34] The program also allowed the journalists to better exercise their self appointed role of watchdog by putting them with tactical units so they could challenge or confirm military briefings.[35] Also, when embedded and nonembedded reports are compared, the embedded news stories were more positive and conveyed greater trust towards military personnel.[36] Finally, due to the advances in technology that allowed the embedded reports to get their reports out almost instantaneously, "people all over the world got more information, faster, than they had ever gotten from a battlefield before."[37] This is especially important since in a survey conducted by Gallup in 2005, "Only 39 percent of Americans say they get enough information about military matters to make informed decisions; 60 percent say they do not."[38]

The embedding program also had some failings. First, since the journalists were kept with a specific unit, the stories coming out of the program tended to focus on the small scale drama of the war and were not able to provide a broader operational or strategic picture.[39] Another problem is that maintaining an embedded reporter is expensive and time-consuming for a news agency.[40] This resulted in the number of embedded reporters dropping from 700 to 23 after the fall of Baghdad.[41] Also, once these reporters left the country, many did not report on Iraqi issues again, let alone return to Iraq.[42] When the situation in Iraq became worse due to the increase of violence, the perception of OIF became overwhelmingly negative for two reasons. First, by raising the expectations of the public to believe that OIF would be quick and that the people of Iraq would welcome the Allied forces, the US created a "say-do" gap. Secondly, when violence increased, the lack of embedded reporters resulted in the news outlets concentrating, and continually playing, the worst of the violence since that was all they had. The poor expectation management and lack of reporters on the ground compounded the increased violence in Iraq and led to an overwhelmingly negative perception of the war in Iraq, which the enemy then took advantage of.[43]

There are a few key points that should be taken away from the embed program. It worked well in accomplishing the DOD's media strategies of presenting the troops as liberators while countering the misinformation put forth by the Iraqi government.[44] However, it is not a fiscally sustainable way of reporting on the war for the news agencies. As a result of this, the DOD ended up doing "more of its own video releases and other information directly to local TV and radio stations."[45] While effective, this is a time consuming task for a small cadre of Public Affairs members to conduct. Finally, the US cannot "rest entirely on the success of the embed program and must continue to engage media."[46] This continued engagement will require the DOD's adaption to the "new media."

Traditional vs. New Media

Traditional media is what most people typically think of when they hear the term "media:" newspapers, magazines, and TV news channels. It is characterized as having a monologic or one-way flow. In monologic communication, one person sends a discreet message to a broad, passive audience. This audience simply absorbs the message and does not go about repackaging and resending it. In the traditional media model, the only people who repackage and resend information are the journalists who act as a gatekeeper or filter between the communicator and the consumer, to the extent that they resize the amount of information and put some type of "spin" on it.[47]

The emergence of the internet and global communications has brought about a new type of media. This new media consists of social networking, blogs, sites for sharing information such as You Tube, as well as online editions of what is considered traditional media: newspapers, magazines and TV. New media is changing the ways "information moves around the world."[48] Unlike traditional media, new media is characterized by a "dialogic" flow of communication. In the new media realm, consumers are no longer passive. They absorb, repackage, and resend information becoming communicators in their own right.[49] This audience can be "called prosumers because they both produce and consume messages."[50] Since each recipient of a prosumer's message is a prosumer in their own right in the new media sphere, the constant repackaging of the message to suit each prosumer's opinion on the subject causes an evolution of the original message which, if left to its own devices, may not resemble the original message at all.[51]

Another characteristic of the new media environment is that the communicator now has a direct line to the prosumer. Rapid technological change has made it so that the information environment is accessible to almost anyone.[52] The communicator no longer has to go through the gatekeepers of the traditional media to reach its target audience but can go directly to them through the internet without a filter. Since the communicator now has a direct line to the prosumer and the prosumer can repackage and resend its viewpoint on the message back to the communicator, a dialogue can develop between the two. From this dialogue, the communicator is able to obtain feedback on the impact of the message it sent out. This feedback becomes a measure of effectiveness for that message.[53]

Another development of the new media environment is that everyone is a communicator, whether they know it or not.[54] Communicators are no longer limited to a professional cadre of PA officers. Instead, "all personnel will communicate to some degree with members of the public, including friends and family, in ways that are not constrained by time, distance or medium."[55] Due to each of these characteristics, the best communications strategy in the new media is a strategy of engagement to gain feedback on the message as well as maintain an ability to shape the message as it evolves.[56]

Applying traditional media strategies to the new media "is decidedly less productive than developing a communication strategy appropriate for the new media universe."[57] If the USG produces a message and there is no engagement afterwards, then the USG has surrendered the ability to have any influence on how the message evolves.[58] By not taking part in the evolution of the message, the US cedes that ability completely to prosumers who may be biased against US interests. In addition, by not engaging the new media, the US loses out on the feedback and, hence, the measure of effectiveness it could have had on that message. A measure of effectiveness based on feedback from the target audience is essential since messages, to include actions, "will be perceived differently by viewers who may likely be biased."[59] A final reason why it is dangerous not to engage the new media is because as the message is repackaged time and again the quality of the information in it will go down. As the originator of the message, the poor quality of the information will have a direct effect on the credibility of the US regardless of the quality of the original message. Where before the US could rely on the major media outlets to act as gatekeepers and maintain the quality of information, though often with their own interpretation, the new media has bypassed these gatekeepers and "information is passed to audiences often times without any context or filter."[60] How the US can engage the new media and who in the military can do it is addressed later in this paper.

The US needs to not only adopt a communication strategy appropriate for the new media, it also needs to adapt to the new media. The information environment allows the enemy to conduct an asymmetric form of war and the US must counter it in that environment.[61] In addition, with the emergence of the new media, "the significance of information as an element of national power is highlighted, particularly in times of crisis and war."[62] By adapting to the new media, the US will be able to obtain the key element of feedback, which will help gauge in a "meaningful way if a specific strategic communication endeavor has succeeded."[63] Also, since there are no longer any barriers or filters during interaction in the new media, the dialogue that develops between the originator and prosumer will provide transparency to the military and help build the trust and credibility of the US.[64] In fact, in order to preserve the credibility and influence of the US, the speed of the new media requires "responsive, agile processes and capabilities,"[65] which the US currently does not have. In addition, certain aspects, such as social networking, have the potential to touch every aspect of national security, including: gathering and vetting open source information, gauging and influencing public opinion, conducting research and analysis, conducting IO, and distributing crisis response communications.[66] Finally, adopting the new media without adapting to it is not sufficient. The small number of PA professionals currently charged with communicating the messages to the prosumer is not enough to monitor and take part in the sheer number of dialogues that each message produces. Without being able to do conduct a dialogue, the US has not truly adopted the new media.[67]

Adapting to the New Media

One of the fundamental considerations for adapting strategic communications to the new media is the delivery vehicle.[68] The delivery vehicle has the potential to "significantly distort, impede, or facilitate reception by the audience."[69] Blogs are an appropriate delivery vehicle for adapting strategic communications to the new media. A blog is, in its most basic form, a "journal available on the Web that comes in many forms of potential influence."[70]

Blogs are appropriate vehicles for the new media for a number of reasons. First, in strategic communications, actions will always speak more loudly than words.[71] However, the entire world is not able to be present to witness the actions of the US and there is not enough time in a press conference to cover everything that has been done. Blogs can help to bridge that gap by conveying to the world what the US has done by the people who actually did it. By their nature, the use of blogs recognizes the fact that strategic communication campaigns cannot have termination criteria.[72] Blogs begin and continue a dialogue with other prosumers on the web. The end of the dialogue will not necessarily coincide with the end of a military mission.

Blogs also have the potential to be extremely influential in the new media. W.L. Bennett divided what he called the Infosphere of the new media into three layers. The top layer consists of the traditional, mass media. The middle layer is made up of prominent blogs, webzines, and advocacy groups. The bottom layer is made up of e-mail, mailing lists, and personal blogs. A successful communication strategy must be able to access all three of these layers.[73] Blogs are a vehicle that can accomplish this. An example of this took place in 2004 when CBS's 60 Minutes aired a story accusing President Bush of using his family connections to get out of military service. The memo this accusation was based on was eventually proved to be a forgery. However, the story that the memo was a forgery was broken by a blog, not CBS. This story quickly spread across the new media from one blog to another until the mainstream media picked it up.[74] In this example, a conversation started on a blog first spread across the middle layer of the infosphere and eventually spread across and influenced all three layers of the infosphere.

The ability to reach all three layers of the infosphere is important. However, internet penetration is not even worldwide. Some countries, like the US, have a good deal of internet penetration, while others have very little. However, regardless of the amount of internet penetration in a particular country, "even if members of a population do not have access to the Internet or read a particular blog, they may be influenced by it if local elites, including mainstream media elites, do."[75]

Blogs are also a good vehicle for the US to use in the new media because their influence can be gauged. This is because all blogs are not created equal. The most influential blogs are the ones that are linked to most often by other websites.[76] In addition, it was found that the sphere of influence for a blog was limited to about two links away. This means "bloggers who are read by journalists working for broadcast media with large audiences can have a potentially much larger sphere of influence than those who are read only by other bloggers or Internet users."[77] Also, the influence of a blog is not static. A blog with important information about a subject that few other blogs are able to gain information on, such as operations in a combat zone, are likely to rise in rank fairly rapidly.[78]

Finally, blogs are a good tool for ensuring unity of effort. When conducting an operation that involves other government agencies or NGOs, a blog can be used as a forum for discussing ideas, filling Requests for Information and Requests for Action, as well as simply ensuring that everyone involved is on the same page.[79]

Creating an Influential Blog

If blogs are used as the vehicle of the US in the new media, then they must be set up correctly in order to be effective. There are four main factors that affect a prosumer's assessment of a blog. These are its design, utility, accuracy and consistency, and currency.[80] Design refers to the general appearance and functionality of the blog. The blog must look professional and be easy and intuitive to use.[81] In addition, it should be up to the standards of the target audience. This means that the blogger must be able to post videos and pictures as well as words. Also, in order to generate an effective dialogue, prosumer's should be able to post every type of media that the blogger can post. Finally, in order to aid the blog in gaining influence, it should be easy to link the blog to other websites.

Utility refers to the relevancy of the blog to the interests of the target audience.[82] This issue will work itself out as the blog evolves in the infosphere. As the blog begins to gain influence and other websites link to it, it will naturally draw to it an audience that is interested in its subject. Since the target audience is spread across the world and not necessarily subject to any ethnic or national boundaries, this natural draw of the blog as it gains influence is the best way to reach the majority of the target audience over time.

Accuracy and consistency refers to whether the "information provided by a blog is generally correct or consistent with other information accepted by the target audience."[83] There are two key things that have to happen for a military blog to maintain its accuracy and consistency. The first is maintaining a policy of telling the truth. The blogger needs be candid about what he is blogging about. The blogger cannot "sugar-coat" the truth and, if he can't talk to a topic due to OPSEC, he needs to be frank about that while not using it as an excuse. This candidness will eventually overcome the mistrust of the prosumer and make him question his other sources. The other thing that must be done is that the leadership needs to ensure that the US's actions support realistic and achievable policies and statements and that the blogger understands how these actions support the US's policies. This is important since one of the purposes of the blog is to spread the information about what the US, in the form of the blogger, has done or is doing. The blogger can agree or disagree if these actions are actually supporting US policies, but if the blogger cannot explain why the USG feels that these actions support its policies, then the "say-do" gap is highlighted rather than reduced.

Finally, currency has to do with the "frequency with which the blog is updated."[84] If the information on the blog is outdated, then its credibility is hurt. If this happens often, then prosumers will stop paying attention to the blog and it will lose its influence. Therefore, the blog needs to be updated on a regular basis since the information that it covers changes with each US action.

Adapting Blogs to the Military

The aspect of a blog that makes it key as an engagement tool in the new media is the ability for a dialogue to develop on it. However, in order to be effective, this dialogue must be agile in two ways. First, the blogger must be able to respond in a timely manner. Restrictive and cumbersome approval chains to determine how to respond on a blog will inhibit the ability of the blogger to achieve results. Also, one person trying to run multiple blogs will be inhibited in their ability to respond to any of the blogs in a timely manner due to the volume of traffic going over each blog. The solution to this is to execute blogging in a decentralized manner at the lowest level.[85] This can be accomplished in two ways. The first is by allowing personnel to blog on personal sites about their military operations. The second is by creating a framework of blogs that personnel could use to blog about their military operations. Each of these methods has advantages and disadvantages, which will be covered later in this paper.

Blogging at the tactical level would be able to take advantage of both monologic and dialogic communication. Monologic communication would be carried out, first and foremost, in the form of the actions of the US. Monologic communication would also be used in the command structure going down to the blogger in the form of well written and thought out Commander's Intents and the blogger's leadership articulating how the US's actions support its policies and statements. Dialogic communication would then be used by the blogger as he discusses with other prosumers what actions the US carried out, his actions in particular.

Adopting a method where the execution of blogging is pushed down to the lowest level would also solve the second problem of maintaining agility. In order to be agile in responding to the prosumer, the blogger must be a subject matter expert on what he is talking about. If the blogger is insulated from what he is talking about then he runs the risk of responding too slowly and losing the interest of the audience or making a misstatement and tarnishing his credibility.

Furthermore, in order for the blogger to be a subject matter expert, the blogger would have to be down at the platoon or squad level. While this means that the bloggers will be the 19 or 20 year old Corporals and Lance Corporals, this is exactly who it needs to be. It is the "digital natives" who will be "critical to success in the social media environment."[86] These digital natives are the "young service members who are savvy in the use of new media devices, platforms, networks, and possibilities."[87] In reality, this describes most of the young service members in the military. The majority of the young service members were not even in high school when Facebook was launched. They have grown up with social media and are the best personnel for exploiting its uses. Also, with the reality of instant communications, it is the individuals at the lowest tactical level who are best positioned and "should be empowered to respond to propaganda to the best of their ability."[88] Finally, unlike a PA officer, a young Corporal or Lance Corporal will not be viewed as a mouthpiece of the US message, due to their youth and ability to be candid about what they talk about.

In order to close the "say-do" gap, the bloggers need to concentrate on talking about what the US is doing and why. "Words frequently work only if supported by deeds."[89] A caveat to that statement is that people need to know about the deeds. This goes back to the question of "if a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?" It is the purpose of the blog to articulate what the US does in an effort to work on the "do" portion of the gap. In order to do this, they need to be candid and honest about what they did. Former Director of the CIA, R. James Woolsey, felt that one of the reasons Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were so successful during the Cold War was because they would report critically and objectively, not only on the USSR but on the US as well.[90] This does not mean that the blogger has to be critical of what the US is doing in order to succeed. It does, however, mean that the blogger should be allowed to express their personal opinion on how well the US's actions are supporting their policies. The caveat to this though is that the blog is not a forum for the blogger to whine and complain about his chain of command. Being candid combined with the policy of "under-promise, and over-deliver,"[91] will bring transparency, trust, and credibility to the actions of the US. In addition, by being candid and honest the blogger can avoid the appearance of propaganda because, if the blog appears to simply be propaganda, it will not be effective.[92] The underlying assumption for blogging at the tactical level to work is that as long as the US's actions are legitimate and the blogs are honest about those actions then "an informed *non-hostile* public will agree."[93]

Finally, in order to increase the influence of the blogs, the US should build on the success of the embedding program. As stated earlier, when journalists were embedded with specific units, they built relationships with those units and generally reported favorably on the actions of their unit. However, it was too expensive for the news agencies to maintain those journalists in the field with those specific units indefinitely. Blogging pushed down to the lowest level provides a cheap way for those previously embedded journalists to maintain their relationships with the units they were with and continue reporting on them. This will increase the influence of the blogs in two ways. First, they will be directly influencing the top level of the infosphere and so also have some influence on all the prosumers from that mass media. They will also gain influence because as prosumers view the content of the journalist's message, they will have the ability to access the journalist's source, the blog. This will lead to more viewings of the blog as well as more links, thereby increasing the direct influence of the blog.

Advantages

Blogging at the tactical level helps to achieve the goal of winning the war of ideas among our friends, allies, and the undecided in a number of ways. First, it influences the people simply by informing them about the actions of the US. Though it sounds simple, this is an important first step. At home, "Only 39 percent of Americans say they get enough information about military matters to make informed decisions."[94] This lack of knowledge is not limited to the general public, but extends to the media as well with the result being that the media will fill in "blanks" in their story from sources other than the DOD.[95] This creates a situation where the "less informed people get to tell the American public what's going on,"[96] which results in the USG's policies being understood for what other people say they are instead of what they actually are.[97] Blogging at the tactical level will fill those gaps of information and inform the publics of the US and its allies.

With the majority of people getting their information from the internet today, it is unrealistic to believe that that information will be correct if the subject matter experts do not add their input. Providing the information on what the US is doing aids the US in influencing the third group of the global audience, those people who are undecided, as well. A side benefit of telling the world what the US is doing, is that the blogger will inevitably end up showing the world what the insurgents are actually doing as opposed to what they say their doing. Exposing the enemy's "say-do" gap may not result in the undecided group suddenly agreeing with everything the US wants or does, but it will result in the undecided group disagreeing with the insurgents and seeing the insurgents as a common enemy.

Blogging at the tactical level also helps the US influence the global audience by effectively countering the propaganda of the enemy. An aggressive blogger that keeps his blog current will aid his commander by being "better prepared to counter false and negative reporting as events occur."[98] This is because perception is reality and the first side to get its story out is perceived to be telling the truth.[99] Blogs that regularly update the public on the actions of the US will be able to get its side of the story out before the enemy is able to counterfeit their propaganda. This makes it so that when the enemy does eventually get its propaganda out, it is seen as the lie that it is since the US put out its version of events before anyone knew that there was a controversy involved.

Another advantage of blogging at the tactical level is its economy of force. If the US tried to control the message over the blogs by allowing only Public Affairs officials to write the blogs, then the US would have to increase the size of the Public Affairs workforce significantly and even then they would not have the subject matter expertise required to be agile in the new media.

By exploiting the social media talents already present in the servicemembers at the tactical level, the US can engage the new media effectively without the overhead of increasing the number of personnel.

Blogging at the tactical level can also aid the US when it comes to coordination. As previously discussed, a military blog provides a vehicle to help ensure unity of effort between the DOD, interagency, and NGOs.[100] A blog at the tactical level can also help ensure the coordination between a commander and his subordinates. It provides a means for a commander to passively observe how his orders and commander's intent has been interpreted.[101] If it differs from the commander's vision, the commander now has the ability to course correct earlier in an operation.

Blogging at the tactical level will also help increase the credibility of the US. Almost 77 percent of Americans think that the DOD sometimes gives false information to the media.[102] Part of the reason for this is that the "Pentagon always acknowledged its mistakes reluctantly after the fact"[103] and often responds to questions with denial or excuses such as on-going investigations and troop movements.[104] The blogger does not have to divulge everything he knows to gain credibility. By being candid and honest, the blogger can overcome this poor outlook on the military and build credibility. An example of how being candid can raise credibility while still denying information is Secretary Rumsfeld in his news briefings at the beginning of OIF. He was very candid about what he would and could talk about and say things like "I don't know" and "I'm not going to tell you."[105] Despite not telling the people everything they wanted to know, even when "reporters ran contradictory stories…the public tended to believe Rumsfeld."[106]

A final advantage of blogging at the tactical level is the feedback that it generates.

Globally, the US can use the feedback to gauge how effective its actions and policies are at influencing the opinions of the three target groups in the global audience. Locally, in areas where there is good internet penetration, the commander can use the feedback as a measure of effectiveness of his actions in his Area of Responsibility (AOR). In addition, that feedback can help the commander discover issues in his AOR that he was not aware of before. Finally, the commander can use the blogs and the social media it generates to create trust and understanding amongst the populace of his AOR.[107]

Challenges

While blogs executed at the tactical level do engage the new media in a way to influence all three groups of the global audience, they do not close the "say-do" gap on their own and they create their own challenges. The first and most obvious challenge is operations security (OPSEC). A blogger discussing recently completed or ongoing operations risks revealing the US's current Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs). To mitigate this risk, a balance must be maintained between sharing and security.[108] The responsibility for determining this balance lies with the commander. However, "operational security does not justify inaction"[109] in the new media.

Another challenge in executing blogs at the tactical level is ensuring that the blogger understands how the US's actions support its policy. If the blogger is not able to articulate how his actions support the US's policy then, at those times when it is not clear and he is questioned on this issue in the blog, it will appear that there is still a large "say-do" gap in US foreign policy. Even when there is not a "say-do" gap, perception is reality. However, this is true for strategic communication to be successful regardless of whether or not blogs are executed at the tactical level. Therefore, it is the responsibility of a servicemember's leadership, at all levels, for "seeking out, understanding and helping to communicate the full context of why their units are taking or not taking certain actions."[110]

The flip side of this challenge is that "we cannot credibly sell a bad policy, no matter how it is packaged."[111] This strategy does not, and cannot, address the problems that arise if the US's plans and policies do not seek to "understand and address the root causes of the conflict or instability."[112] This is the responsibility of the USG and when it promotes a message that differs from tactical reality, or it over-promises, a national-to-tactical "say-do" gap appears.[113]

Another challenge that this strategy fails to overcome is building an operational or strategic picture. Just like with the embedded reporters in Iraq, blogs at the tactical level engender a "soda straw" effect that will have a great depth of information on the tactical level of that one unit but be unable to more than cursorily place it in the big picture.[114] This challenge can be partly overcome in two ways. The first is through the traditional method of PAO's and press conferences to assemble and present the big picture. However, this proved challenging in Iraq when the PAO's were trying to keep up with only a couple hundred embedded reporters.[115] Another way is by having the entire chain of command blog on its actions so that engagement can occur at each level in the new media. The problem with this, of course, is that most commanders do not have the free time to properly engage the new media.

Maintaining the credibility of each blog will also be challenging. In AORs where there is a high amount of internet penetration, a commander will be tempted to use the blogs in his unit to pass PSYOP information or misinformation. If this happens, it will destroy the credibility of that blog and injure the credibility of every other blog written at the tactical level.[116] Along this same line of maintaining credibility, the US must guard against a zero defect mentality. If a blogger is not allowed to discuss mistakes that he made, the perception will be that he is hiding the truth and the credibility of the blog goes down.

A final challenge of this strategy is that the blogger may not be culturally in tune with the prosumers he is engaging in the new media. While the US can try to educate the bloggers and make them more culturally aware, they will be communicating with people from across the globe and it will not be possible to educate them on every single culture. Miscommunications will happen. However, since a dialogue will be occurring rather than a monologue, most of the miscommunication can be worked out through the course of the conversation.

A Framework of Blogs vs. Personal Blogs

As stated previously, two ways to accomplish the idea of blogging at the tactical level is to either develop a framework of blogs that personnel could blog on or allow personnel to talk about their operations on their personal blogs. While the majority of the previously discussed advantages and challenges apply equally to both methods of blogging at the tactical level, there are some that apply more to one method than the other.

The method of allowing servicemembers to use their personal blogs is better than creating a framework of blogs set up by the USG when it comes to maintaining the credibility of the blog. Personal blogs will be able to maintain their credibility easier than a framework of blogs because servicemembers will be more likely to express their actual opinions vice what they think the command wants them to say. Personal blogs are also less susceptible to being usurped by the blogger's commander for PSYOPs because they would not be easily found in a central location like a framework of blogs. Also, bloggers would balk at putting out misinformation on their personal site while they would be less likely to balk at this on a blog that is part of a US framework because the blogger might consider it as the unit's site.

On the other hand, a framework of blogs set up by the USG is better than personal blogs when it comes to feedback, coordination, and monitoring OPSEC because it is easy to find and is in a central location. One of the primary purposes of blogging at the tactical level is to use the feedback it creates to gauge how the US's actions are influencing the public. With this feedback, the US can, if need be, change its actions so that it accomplishes its objectives. A framework of blogs is better at accomplishing this because commanders know where to look to observe that feedback on the US's actions rather than having to constantly search for any new personal blogs that might be applicable that were created only recently. Also, in the situation of ensuring unity of effort between the DOD, interagency, and NGOs, a person from another organization who had taken advantage of a servicemember's blog to ensure unity of effort before would be familiar with the framework of blogs and be able to use it to quickly find the blog of someone who belongs to the unit he is now working with as opposed to having to scour the entire internet to find that blog. Finally, while both methods are equally challenged by OPSEC, the central location of a framework of blogs makes it easier for the chain of command to monitor blogs for OPSEC violations.

Conclusion

While it does present some challenges, blogs conducted at the tactical level do accomplish the US's goal of conducting effective strategic communication in the new media. In addition, the challenges presented by blogging at the tactical level are far outweighed by the advantages that it provides and most of those challenges need to be solved regardless of whether blogs are adopted as a method of strategic communication or not. Whether the method chosen to accomplish this is by allowing servicemembers to use their personal blogs, having a framework of blogs created by the USG, or some combination of the two; the US must adapt to the new media and blogging at the tactical level is the best way to accomplish this.

Finally, the US's primary form of communication will always be its actions. The message that the US conveys with its actions will always carry more weight with the world than the message it conveys with statements. That being said, if the US's actions and statements are seen to be contradictory or fall short of one another, then the US will fail at strategic communications and no amount of adapting to the new media can change that.

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