

Effective Communications Like Politics is Local

Devolving the IO Mission

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ABSTRACT

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All Communications like All Politics is Local

Background

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen

With a room full of esteemed IO professionals it is hardly surprising that our discussions so far have focused on your own IO experiences, challenges and opportunities. However, I would like to take a different tack and offer you the perspectives of some the consumers of your campaigns; and the perspectives of a reasonably well informed observer of your operations; and specifically for our Government colleagues the observations of an IO contractor. My aim, beyond simply offering you these perspectives is to illustrate why I feel that the IO mission needs to be devolved to the lowest possible levels if we are to achieve the strategic results we desire. I will therefore end my presentation by outlining an approach that we at Glevum call micro-communications. Multiple, synchronized localized campaigns that achieve the desired strategic effects.

I offer these perspectives based on the insights and experience Glevum has derived from the hundreds of thousands of face-to-face interviews we have conducted in Afghanistan since 2007, in Iraq since 2008 and more recently in Yemen and Libya. These interviews have been collected using a multidisciplinary research approach

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that combines polls, focus groups, and depth interviews, with local media monitoring, extensive indigenous subject matter expert networks, deployable behavioral observations teams and local archival research underpinned by the Intelligence Communities proven all-source research collection management approach. This extensive research effort is know as Social Science Research and Analysis (SSRA) by the DoD.

I will begin by offering my thoughts on Influence Operations. Several speakers have rightly asked the question what is influence Operations and frankly there is no common agreement and as far as I know no doctrine or definition. Since 2005, I have struggled to answer this question for deploying commanders and their staffs. After a rather futile first year, I found one quote from President Eisenhower, which I think provides the perfect definition for Influence Operations. That quote is as follows:

“ Everything we say and everything we do; and everything we fail to say or fail to do will have its impact in foreign lands”.

In my view therefore Influence Operations is simply understanding that everything we say and everything we do; and everything we fail to say or fail to do in a place like Afghanistan will increase or decrease the level of influence we achieve and that level of influence will determine the level of success we achieve. It is therefore vital that we effectively coordinate and synchronized all activities to achieve the level of

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influence we desire. This is vital because our enemies in places like Afghanistan fully understand that they are in a psychological struggle for influence and they have some significant advantages, which I still think we all too often ignore in our planning process, even while stating that we understand them. I can tell you from talking to ordinary Afghans and members of the Taliban, that as inconvenient as the enemy can be in the planning process, we ignore their strengths at our peril. Conversely, our enemies are also well aware of our weaknesses, which they seek to exploit at every opportunity.

We also forget at our peril that our enemies typically share a similar ideological, cultural and/or ethnic background with the population in which they hide and operate. This does not guarantee that they will not fall foul of religious, cultural and social norms, as Al Qaeda eventually did in Iraq. However cultural, religious and ethnic similarities are still a significant advantage for the Afghan Taliban for example, as they are for most other insurgents. At a minimum, these similarities provide the Taliban with message authority for some audiences. They can also, instinctively and by design, tap into shared narratives and a common faith, albeit one that they have significantly distorted. They understand, often share and can easily manipulate preexisting grievances, enmities and hatreds and use these issues and emotions to maintain a sizable community support base. They can also exploit ethnic and clan loyalties, traditional and religious leadership, and formal and informal legal systems to exert and maintain their control of a population who fear and often resent outside intrusions and the impact of modernity.

The Taliban can also deploy a compelling argument that appeals to key segments of the Afghan population. For example, they argue that support for them will lead to the redress of individual and community grievances; restoration of honor and respect; protection of traditions, community and faith; revenge for real and perceived injustices and casualties; purification of Islam: and/or the return of Muslim and/or ethnic power and prosperity, compelling arguments to disenfranchised and angry Afghans.

The Taliban also expertly uses both traditional communications means and modern media, combined with deadly attacks; Johanas Most called these attacks “terrorism of the deed”; in order to extend their influence, export their ideology, publicize their actions, undermine the morale of opponents and reduce confidence in the Afghan Government and the Coalition, thereby enhancing their own image, reputation and credibility.

All of these advantages are deployed most effectively at the local level, where the Taliban knows that it can have the greatest impact. While it may conduct operations and deploy propaganda for strategic effect, its main effort is focused at the local level in multiple districts using predominately local fighters with local connections and understanding and addressing local issues and intimidating local communities.

The Good News is that Afghans Are Just Like Us

Afghans, like people the world over, make their decisions about whom they will vote for, obey, follow, fight for, or even die for, based on personal beliefs, motivations and fears, desires and ambitions. Most people may be angered by the failings of their Government, either in Washington or Kabul, but are rarely motivated to resort to passive, let alone violent resistance, unless their own lives and those of their families and community are negatively impacted by for example a lack of security, corruption, or a declining quality of life. While still seeking to gain influence at the strategic level, the main focus of our actions, including our information activities, must therefore be focused at the district and village levels, where we can most directly influence these audiences. Generic arguments and communications that do not relate directly to their own lives and any actions we take, which do not improve their security and quality of life, will have little or no impact.

Afghans are like us in another way. They are largely powerless to address national and provincial issues. We would like to think that we can influence on our national political life but in reality most of us only have the power to change government policy and behavior at national elections and only then if millions of our fellow citizens agree with our point of view. Most Afghans have even less power, not least because their national electoral process is deeply flawed and they have no electoral system below the national level. The only thing they can really influence are their

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own lives, those of their families and perhaps their local community, and even doing this can be extremely dangerous. Any operation we undertake, and specifically our information activities, should not therefore expect them to do anything more than change their own lives or local communities. It sometimes seems to me that our campaigns expect far more from Afghans than we could achieve in our own society and we sometimes fail to appreciate the incredible risk they need to take to resist the Taliban. That said the sum total of the positive actions of millions of individuals could eventually help us to achieve our strategic objectives. For the most part, this can only be achieved by localized influence campaigns that the audience can relate to on a personal level. Remember that supporting our objectives can place them in great danger. They will only do so when they can see that such risks will personally improve their lives. In order to develop localized actions and messaging we must have a far better understanding of all target audiences down to the lowest levels.

Better Target Audience Understanding

It is vital therefore that all operations including information activities are underpinned by an ongoing and extensive effort to establish and maintain a very detailed understanding of each local community/interest group and the multiple identities of that person and community. This understanding must then be significantly enhanced once specific audience segments have been identified and before they are targeted. Such an effort will enable us to identify how best to engage and communicate with each segment of the population; determine who they are;

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who their key influencers are; how they view their Government, the enemy, each other and us; and what they need and want. Armed with this level of deep socio-cultural understanding, our messaging and other actions can address each community's perceptions, concerns, issues, grievances, fears, needs and wants, while respecting their culture, traditions and beliefs. Without this knowledge we are doomed to failure.

Unfortunately I remain greatly concerned that all too often our operations and information campaigns are still based on a simplistic and generalized understanding of the audience being selected and targeted. Alexander Dumas said, "All generalizations are dangerous not least this one". Yet all too often it seems that our target audience understanding is superficial and generalized at best. When one looks at the relative division of effort and funding between target audience analysis, product development, production and dissemination it is hardly surprising. Such research and analysis is dull and boring but it is the bedrock on which successful COIN and information campaigns are built. This effort must therefore be significantly enhanced and accorded a much high priority, if we are truly serious about reaching and influencing key audiences. We must also look hard at who does this analysis. More collection will help but not if the questions deployed and analysis undertaken is executed by personnel who have insufficient understanding of the audience being studied. I think three of the primary reasons why Brigadier Iain Harrison lamented the quality of assessments in his presentation is that the wrong tools are being used, the right tools are being use in the wrong ways and the

analysis undertaken is simplistic or ill informed. For example, there is an overreliance on polling as a primary tool for target audience understanding. It is often the wrong tool or an excessively costly tool and even when needed is often flawed because those developing the instruments do not understand the community they are questioning and develop instruments that are culturally flawed. Worse they only want answers to the questions that support their worldview or validate the operations they want to undertake.

Baseline, Baseline, Baseline

Exploiting expert and comprehensive research and analysis the first thing we must do every time we plan any operation and especially one that will directly or indirectly impact the local population is to establish a baseline. This is the foundation on which all operations must be based. Unless one fully understands the behaviors, attitudes, fears, desires, needs and wants of communities ahead of taking action we will not only fail to develop a successful plan we will be unable to measure its impact, determine its effectiveness and modify our actions as change occurs. To reduce the negative consequences of our actions and to enhance the positives as they occur. In reality, we almost never establish a baseline before any action is taken. So even if we try to measure the effectiveness of our actions, it is almost impossible to scientifically demonstrate success or failure and just as importantly the direct and indirect causes of either/both.

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Although you might say this is a statement of the obvious, in the COIN and CT fight actions really do speak louder than words. Having read literally thousands of transcripts of interviews with Iraqis and Afghans, I can assure you again that they are just like us. They judge their Government and us by what we do and only rarely by what we say. They care most about the issues that impact them most, and they have little no knowledge of, or interest in, the various information campaigns we have launched. I seriously doubt that the average Iraqi or Afghan has made a single important decision based solely or even in part measure on what we have said to them. But they have been heavily influenced by what we have done or what our enemies have claimed we have done and on occasions by what we have not done. It is therefore vital that that all actions, and not just information activities, are designed not simply for their physical effect but also to maximize the positive psychological impact that such actions will have on the attitudes and opinions of the population. At a minimum we need to take account of and ideally mitigate the negative psychological impact of our activities.

A vital role for the information professional therefore, is to help advise the commander on the psychological impact of all of the actions he plans to take. This is perhaps a far more important role than the messaging that might be developed and deployed in support of those actions. Having been involved in the pre-deployment

training of most brigades and divisions, I think that most commanders do now understand how important the psychological impact of their actions is and I am equally certain that most IO officers play a much more important role in most formations. However, this progress is inconsistent and as we know, progress does not automatically mean success. So I would strongly recommend that the role of the IO officer as a key advisor to the commander must be strengthened and codified. No self-respecting commander would ever consider planning and executing an operation without input and advice from his Intel Staff. The same should be true of the advice of the information and influence professionals in his HQ.

Face-to-Face Trumps In Your Face

Most of our communications, to date, are what I would call “in your face”. Blanket broadcast, print and new media messaging that cannot be avoided. However all too often such messaging is tuned out – physically or psychologically. Conversely face-to-face engagements and conversations are both preferred by most people and more difficult to avoid or ignore. Every division has literally thousands of communicators whose deeds, demeanor and conversations can have a profound impact on ordinary and influential locals alike. Another vital role of the information professional should therefore be the adequate preparation of at least key personnel, ideally all personnel, so that their words and actions resonate positively with whomever they engage or are observed by. Again, we would argue that such a role could be far more valuable than developing and executing discrete information

campaigns. We have to calibrate the solider sensor and we have to modulate the solider communicator.

Strat Comm and IO can have limited impact.

From our research, I would assert that most Iraqis and a majority of Afghans have indeed seen or heard our messages and have understood them on occasions.

However, only rarely have our efforts archived a demonstrable impact, most usually when our messaging has connected with issues that matter most to the audience at the local level. National and provincial level information campaigns, by their very nature must be relatively generic in order to appeal to a mass and diverse audience.

As a result, the narratives employed, even when understood by Afghans for example, rarely resonate sufficiently to encourage them to question and ultimately change their attitudes and behaviors. And generic messaging stands little chance of persuading them to stand up to the brutal intimidation of the Taliban. Such campaigns can also fly in the face of reality for many audiences. For example campaigns intended to promote the Afghan Government or Police are unlikely to be well received in communities where the local police are corrupt, ineffective and/or openly hostile and where perceptions of the integrity and effectiveness of the Afghan Government are largely negative. Our generic messaging can also confuse or alienate. For example, while messaging about Taliban reconciliation can appeal to one audience, the Pashtun, it can confuse and alienate another, the Tajiks.

Alternative strategic messaging is therefore needed that shift the focus to other

issues or accepts these shortcomings and focuses on the efforts being made to change and improve service delivery.

Coalition not Afghan Focused – While things have improved significantly over the last four years since I was directly involved in IO efforts in Iraq, we observe that there is still a tendency to develop and execute communications and information campaigns, based on lines of persuasion that mean much to us but which matter far less to most members of the target audience. Our research in Afghanistan for example, suggests that all too often our lines of persuasion, while matching Coalition or the Afghan Governments objectives, do not match the understanding, desires and fears of the audience they are supposed to influence. We should therefore do far more to understand what Afghans think, want and expect, and then do more to relate and align our objectives with theirs.

Information Agility

Afghans have heard the news, listened to the gossip, heard enemy propaganda and drawn their own conclusions based on their own motivations, fears and knowledge often before we even know something has happened and certainly before we have reacted. This is compounded by a typically cautious and limited response delayed by waiting for all the facts to be collected. By then a combination of rumor, conspiracy theories and enemy propaganda has already shaped the information environment often irreversibly. We must therefore become much more proactive

and responsive, which requires proactive planning and the delegation of IO authorities down to the lowest levels of a command. Very little happens that cannot be predicted and preapproved responses can be developed that can be quickly adapted and deployed.

Demarcation Disputes, Terminology and Doctrine are Irrelevant

Guys, big news. The audience does not care one iota about your “lane disputes”, changing definitions, evolving doctrine and confused terminology. They assume that all messaging obviously emanating from their Government or Coalition is propaganda. It does not mean that they reject it but it certainly means that they will question it. Ironically, this may impact Public Affairs the most because they are most obviously connected to our mission. It is therefore vital that current efforts to develop a single, coherent and coordinated approach that utilizes all of our capabilities for common effect is implemented quickly and accepted throughout NATO. I have been in IO since it was called C2W. It is time we got over this naval gazing and focused our efforts entirely on successfully influencing the audience.

Advertising is not Communicating - We must move away from an undue focus on advertising and public information announcements as a primary means of communication with the target audience. Big strides have been made in the quality of our advertising and public information efforts and much better use is being made of entertainment and engagement as key communications medium but the shift

needs to be even more significant. Excessively costly advertising campaigns have far too little impact, especially at the local level, to justify the significant expense. With budgets ever more constrained this money can be spent far more effectively especially at the local level where the greatest impact can be achieved.

Coalition Controlled - We must minimize our desire to control all facets of an information campaign and reduce the requirement to secure formal approval for almost every message. By its very nature, an approval authority that involves U.S. and NATO officers and officials, who do not speak fluent Pashtu or Dari and share no socio-cultural similarities with the target audience, is deeply flawed. It also immediately and often significantly reduces the impact of messages, which have to be understandable by both the approving authority and the Afghan audience. The reality is that approved messages are far more likely to be understood by the approver than the receiver. Even when Afghan advisors are used to develop a campaign or products, typically, and instinctively, they will adjust their advice to secure the approval of their commander/customer. The protracted Coalition approval process also seriously delays our ability to react quickly to developing events and the fleeting opportunities that can emerge. Perhaps most importantly of all, our largely centralized approval process, severely limits our ability to develop highly nuanced and timely campaigns in each key district, that will appeal to the Afghans living in these unique and distinct communities.

Afghan Produced Is Not a Silver Bullet - We must avoid the assumption that just because we increasingly use local production companies and cultural advisors to develop our communications products that this will mitigate other shortcomings. Simply being Iraqi or Afghan does not instantly convey a highly nuanced understanding of each audience and not all locals are creative. Indeed, unrestricted use of local advisors and companies can actually inject bias and misinformation into our campaigns if not thoroughly and independently vetted and tested. Policies such as the Afghan First initiative can actually undermine the effectiveness of our activities. As someone who has to recruit, vet and manage hundreds and sometimes thousands of local staff and vendors, I can assure you that the unrestricted use of locals can be a highly detrimental practice. Vetting, testing, monitoring and evaluation must be an ongoing part of the IO process to ensure that the right products are produced and deployed.

Timid in the Face of a Ruthless Enemy – Unlike our conventional response to the Taliban threat, which is decisive and deadly, some may argue too much so, our information response to Taliban lies, deceptions and atrocities has all too often been timid and pedestrian. The Taliban is quick to exploit our missteps including the deaths of innocent Afghans but we have been lamentably ineffective at contesting their lies; exposing their deceptions and distortions, including of their faith; publicizing their atrocities; and highlighting their failures. We could, with commitment and investment, track all of their activities, and at both the local and national level, exposing the Taliban to the harsh spotlight of Afghan and international public

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scrutiny. We must overcome our own reticence to contest this space and aggressively engage our enemy right across the information domain. This is best done at the local level where local stories about local people will have the greatest impact. It is also best done by Afghans and the Afghan media, suitably, ethically and legally informed, resourced and empowered by their allies in the Coalition.

Performance Does Not Equal Effectiveness – Glevum has lobbied extensively with both DoD and State to secure business monitoring and assessing the impact and effectiveness of Coalition and local Government operations and information campaigns. We have also strongly advocated for the independent testing of all information assumptions, plans and products. All too often our efforts fall on deaf ears and these vital activities, if executed at all, are an afterthought that makes the Measurement of Effectiveness' (MoE) extremely difficult and of limited utility. While I would love to get all the work for Glevum, the important thing is that this work awarded to someone, frankly anyone, who is competent in this field. Often measurement is limited to Performance (MoP) but all that proves is that our messages were produced and delivered. It is our impression that MoE is simply is not being done in a systematic and independent manner. This may offend some, but in our view MoE should not be undertaken by the same entity developing and disseminating messaging.

Technically Acceptable Lowest Price

Many of our military clients are rightly skeptical of the contractors they employ because so many fail to perform as promised and some fail. While some blame does fall on the contractors, the blame has to be shared by the Government and never more so than in our profession. When awarding technically acceptable lowest bid contracts, why is it that the Government never asks itself how has the winning company able to underbid all others? Rarely is it because of our brilliance. Good companies win such competitions by slashing costs and cutting corners and usually quality suffers as a result. But all too often these awards are made to start ups and low cost low quality operators who know far more about how to game the competitive process than they do about executing the contract. If the Government is serious about our business, it must have the guts to make subjective awards based on value for money and be willing to resist the inevitable appeals from the lowest bidders.

I would like to make one other important point on the communications bidding process. Why does the Government still insist on issuing RFPs that explain in detail exactly what they want a contractor to do, down to the last nut and bolt. We are supposed to be in the creative business. Make us tell you how we would meet your needs, don't give us the answers. All anyone needs to do right now is employ a good contractor writer who can spin an RFP 180 degrees, with almost no knowledge of how to execute an IO contract. Jim Treadwell when he was head of the JPSE had

contractors submit a proposal at their own expense that explained how they would execute a Tsunami related communications campaign. That is the way to identify and select creative and expert contractors who actually know what they are doing rather than companies who learn on the job with taxpayers money, and who have to scramble to put an ad hoc team together after they have the assurance of a government contract.

Micro Communications

You might gather by now that we believe that communications like politics is local. That is why we advocate devolving the IO or MISO mission to the local level and executing what we call micro communications campaigns. This approach is based on a fundamental rethinking of how communications and information campaigns are planned and executed to ensure two things; that our campaign fully addresses broader national and Coalition aims, while at the same time, reaching and resonating with ordinary and influential locals from all levels of society. The new **micro communications** campaign we advocate is aimed primarily at multiple audiences at the district and local level. Our approach is intended to address those issues that matter most in each district. Rather than focus on national and typically generic issues, our campaign would explain national issues in ways that each Afghan can understand and relate to, thereby leading them to question perceived wisdom and ultimately changing their attitudes and behavior. It is intended to focus specifically on their lives and the challenges they face. It is also designed to track

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events and emerging trends that occur in their communities and ensure that we can respond rapidly to both. This will ensure that we remain relevant, that we can exploit opportunities as they arise, and it will limit damage when things go wrong. It will directly support commanders at the brigade and battalion level, while meeting in Afghanistan ISAF and IJC strategic objectives.

Local Success = Strategic Impact – In addition to multiple coordinated local campaigns aimed at local audiences intended to achieve strategic effects, another key focus of this campaign will be to raise to national prominence, successes that occur at the local level. Such a campaign would seek to publicize local successes and positive developments at the regional and national level in order to develop a desire and ultimately a demand from other communities for similar change and success. And this campaign will elevate to the national level, the atrocities committed by the Taliban and publicize the suffering that ordinary Afghans endure at the hands of AGE. The Taliban has successfully manipulated local occurrences such as the reputed desecration of a Koran to provoke national outrage. We have to be able to respond rapidly and decisively to counter such misinformation and we must similarly publicize Taliban violence against ordinary Afghans to all Afghans.

Conclusions

In the end actions will always speak louder than words and the actions and behavior of a Coalition forces and a supported Government like that of President Karzai will have the greatest positive or negative on the local population. That the said, the

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MISO or IO professional can still have a profound impact on the battlespace. First and foremost, they can help commanders to better understand the local population and the psychological effect of all operations. Second they can undertake information campaigns that directly connect with the individual at the local level achieving strategic effect one heart and mind at a time. But to do so, we believe that the changes and improvements mentioned above and all MISO and IO professionals need to remember that effective communications like politics is local. And that means devolving the MISO or IO mission.