JSOU Quick Look
Strategic Communication

Strategic communication is a process that deliberately aligns communication strategies across one or more institutions for a known, synergistic effect.[1] While target audiences and/or communication methods may differ as part of a strategic communication endeavor, they are however, always aligned with each other. Related, it is probable that within a strategic communication campaign, a member institution's "primary audience" (this term defined below) may be another's secondary, and vice-versa.

Within military circles, strategic communication is more narrowly defined, and only "includes efforts to communicate with domestic audiences within statutory restrictions, through public affairs channels."[2] Steps on formulating a strategic communication initiative are provided toward the end of this document.

Influence is a strategic communication tactic—a process of reinforcing or adjusting attitudes and opinions of a primary audience.[3] By "primary audience," this assumes individuals are deliberately separated by demographic (who they are), geographic (where they reside), and psychographics (how they think), prior to messaging. Secondary audiences potentially impacted are not by name targeted by influence tactics, nor should they be measured against.

Introduction

In late 2019, a seemingly innocuous and family friendly movie about a teenage girl's relationship with a mythical yeti recently made headlines for an unusual reason. Many are questioning whether a scene from Dreamworks' animated film *Abominable* is part of greater strategic communication effort by China to stake its latest claim over the South China Sea.[4] Specifically, the scene features a map depicting a nine-dash Chinese territorial line surrounding the area—one containing Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei within. *Abominable* was co-created by a Chinese production team. See image here: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50093028.

During the same week as the Abominable theatrical release, U.S. broadcaster ESPN was criticized for its coverage of the National Basketball Association's (NBA) exhibition games in China, notably the use of a bigger ten-dash line graphic of the country during said coverage.[5] See image here: https://freebeacon.com/politics/espn-uses-chinese-propaganda-in-tv-graphic/. All the while, the NBA faced Chinese backlash over a tweet by a participating team's executive (Daryl Morey of the Houston Rockets) endorsing anti-government protests against China in Hong Kong. Following Morey's tweet, further discussion of politics by NBA personnel were subsequently forbidden by the Chinese government, media coverage of the exhibition games ceased, and NBA community events across China were all cancelled. Presently, Chinese manufacturers are noncommittal to future financial support of the NBA—a decision with potentially serious fiscal ramifications.[6] None of this was coincidental.

A map of the South China Sea is shown with the 9-dotted line highlighted in green. PHOTO BY U.S. CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY/PUBLIC DOMAIN

What is Strategic Communication?

Definitions for strategic communication and influence, as well as how the military defines strategic communication, are located in the blue sidebar. While peer competitors

like China remain extraordinarily skilled at devising and executing strategic communication, the U.S. is only beginning to recognize its potency. Perhaps the greatest culprit for this dichotomy is the absence of a singular definition for "strategic communication" within the United States Department of Defense (DOD).[7] It resides somewhere on a continuum between "a continuous function that occurs across the full range of military operations,"[8] and a term formerly banished from DOD lexicon due to concerns over the construct's impact on organizational configuration and staffing.[9]

Adding concepts like "influence," "information operations" and "cyber" to the mix only further confounds. All these terms reside under different authorities and policies, making it daunting to pin down how they work through and in relation to strategic communication. This *Quick Look* seeks to remedy this problem, by instructing on how to adopt, plan, and conduct strategic communication.

First things first: some definitions and distinctions to clarify.

In U.S. defense circles, "information operations" is the systematic attempt to influence primary audiences in support of a military operation. It is "the integrated employment, during military operations, of information-related capabilities in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision-making of adversaries and potential adversaries."[10]

Finally, **cyber** is either offensive (cyberattack) or defensive (cyber defense).[11] Cyber is the tactical use of computing technology to prevent or cause infrastructure damage through which information is transmitted. Cyber tactics can be employed alongside a strategic communication effort, notably to impact access to and dissemination of, information. It does not, however, directly involve message content or its use.

Why Use Strategic Communication?

More than anything, strategic communication is a mindset. As China recently highlighted, the first step in being strategic is to recognize that individuals are constantly communicating … and are being communicated to. Thus, any and every strategic communication effort is never done in a vacuum, nor should be considered in isolation.

If properly planned and executed, strategic communication can achieve a powerful effect. When individuals receive compatible information from multiple reliable voices, it speaks literal volumes. This resonance not only implies legitimacy, but also conveys communicator acumen in both a problem set and audience needs. This is also why timing can be equally as valuable as words within a strategic communication message.

To explain, the *Abominable* scene intentionally coincided with the very protests Morey called attention to via his tweets, one decrying a lesser Chinese role in Southeast Asia. In contrast, the nine-dash line in *Abominable* subtly but brazenly reinforced an ongoing (years long) Chinese strategic communication effort to justify Chinese supremacy in the region. Using a mainstream children's movie as its medium portrayed this notion as a matter of course.

A third truism of successful strategic communication is to utilize the ideal communicator for each message type. Marrying a message to an individual best suited to communicate will achieve maximum results. Marshall McLuhan famously coined the term "the medium is the message" to describe this facet of strategic communication. [12]This means carefully choosing the right medium (i.e., in person, online, broadcast, etc.) for that individual, message, and target audience.

China's strategic communication campaign was one of continuous reinforcement through select media channels. Its *Abonimable* image placement was one of several initiatives calling for increased South China Sea ownership, and—being a movie—offered no direct opportunity for a counter perspective. China's endgame may be years away: the same young adults watching the film are apt to grow up thinking China is and always was a nine-dash line territory. The only recourse, as Vietnam executed, was to pull *Abominable* from its theatres due to the image undermining its sovereignty claim. This only served to further justify the Chinese perspective by highlighting this image as a problem worthy of such drastic action.

Can Strategic Communication Change Behaviors?

Every strategic communication initiative should be correlated with a desired behavior of a particular audience.[13] Specifically, any well thought out and executed strategic communication campaign can and should focus on [an] action[s]

it is trying to cause and/or prevent. Still, measuring strategic communication success by primary audience behavior is a mistake that will lead to incorrect assessment of effort. Simply put: no message can *cause* anyone to do anything, in isolation. It most certainly, however, can make it seem like the way to go.

All of this occurs in known stages. A primary audience must first receive a message to ultimately act on it. But in between lies processing said message, contrasting it to existing attitudes/opinions, and ultimately fomenting behavioral intent after these prior three stages completed.[14] Perhaps not surprisingly, research finds diminishing returns as a message moves from receipt to behavior.[15] The road from message receipt to behavioral intent can be a long one.

Assessment underscores this finding. Message saturation may help with receipt and potentially processing (due to semi constant reminders to a primary audience). Within these two stages lie *measures* of *performance*. In contrast, measures of effectiveness reside at stage three, where attitude and opinion change is factored in. *Measures of effectiveness* can be gauged by quantitative and/or qualitative mechanisms.

To be successful, strategic communication planners must always determine measures of performance and effectiveness before a campaign starts … and as separate entities (see below). Meaning, how often and where they will communicate, and desired attitude and opinion emphases and/or changes.

How Can Existing Communication Become *Strategic* Communication?

While there is no universal formula for reorienting existing communication and influence activities into a bonafide strategic communication effort, eight steps should ideally occur whether one or multiple organizations are involved.[16]

1. Overlay all existing communication and influence efforts against each other to create a strategic communication big picture.

2. Segment each communication and/or influence effort by the following categories: a) primary audience, b) communication conduit, c) attitude and opinion focus, and d) engagement timelines. It is expected that some or all of these categories were not pre-determined prior to this step.

3. Reorganize engagement timelines to more naturally complement and amplify each other.

4. Specify measures of performance and effectiveness for each effort, one at a time.

5. Select appropriate assessment timelines for measures of performance and effectiveness (i.e., every two months).

6. Establish (i.e., 1-2) points of contact for each effort to then serve on a strategic communication team.

7. Schedule regular meetings (i.e., every two weeks) featuring points of contact (step 6) to realign engagements (point 3) as needed. Identify challenges and/or hurdles encountered during communication execution.

8. Schedule (i.e., monthly) meetings with leadership to educate on current strategic communication strategy (point 3) also adjustments made mid-execution (point 7). Request guidance on identified challenges and/or hurdles (also point 7).

Conclusion

For the U.S. DOD to keep pace with peer competitors in the strategic communication arena, it must accept philosophical and assessment criteria compatible with them. The *Abominable* nine-dash line example serves as a front and center example on the power of Chinese strategic communication to shape primary audience attitudes and opinions around a key geopolitical issue. It also highlights challenges inherent with the current U.S. DOD approach to strategic communication—one still searching for established doctrinal and definitional terminology associated with this process.∎

Where Can I Learn More About Strategic Communication?

The most applicable and current readings on strategic communication arguably reside in scholarly journals in the mass communication, social psychology, and political science disciplines, respectively. Access to these journals can be found at the USSOCOM Research Library: http://jsou.libguides.com. Please consult with a research librarian for needed guidance.

These select books present an array of strategies and tactics for how to utilize mass communication toward strategic communication effect:

- Singer, Peter, and Emerson Brooking. *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 2018.
- Craig Carroll (Eds.). *The Handbook of Communication and Corporate Reputation,* 2013.
- Caywood, Clarke. *The Handbook of Strategic Public Relations and Integrated Marketing Communication,* 2012.
- Farwell, James. *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication*, 2012.

Endnotes

1. Paul Lieber, "Strategic Communication and Influence: An Unofficial Prime," Strategic Multilayer Assessment Lecture, 19 March 2019, https://nsiteam.com/strategic-communication-and-influence-an-unofficial-primer/
2. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Department of Defense, *Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept*, 2009.
3. Lieber, "Strategic Communication and Influence."
4. Ben Westcott and Dan Tham, "Dreamworks 'Abominable' Pulled from Movie Theaters in Vietnam over South China Sea Map" *CNN Online*, 18 October 2019.
5. Gabriel Crossley, "ESPN Criticized over China-NBA Coverage for Using 'nine-dash line' Map," *REUTERS*, 10 October 2019.
6. Lauren Thomas, "China's Battle with the NBA Could Hurt Nike," *CNBC Online*, 8 October 2019.
7. Michael Creswell, "Wasted Words? The Limitations of U.S. Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2019, 42:5, 464-492.
8. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept*.
9. "Pentagon Drops 'strategic communication,'" *USA Today*, 3 December 2012.
10. *Information Operations*, Joint Publication 3-13 (Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014).
11. Committee on Armed Services House of Representatives, *Military Cyber Operations* (hearing), 22 June 2016.
12. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).
13. Paul Lieber and Peter Reiley, "Psychological Operations to Counter Online Radicalization," in Chris Marsh, James D. Kiras, Patricia J. Blocksome, Eds. *Special Operations: Out of the Shadows* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2019), 125-136.
14. Paul Lieber and Peter Reiley, "Countering ISIS Social Media Influence," *Special Operations Journal*, 2016, 1 and 2: 47-57.
15. Paul Lieber and Yael Lieber, "Countering Violent Extremism in Europe: A Social and Group Network Approach," in D. Caleta and C. Robinson Eds. *Violent Extremism and Radicalization Processes as Driving Factors to Terrorism Threats* (Slovenia: Ministry of Defense Republic of Slovenia, Joint Special Operations University and Institute for Corporative Security Studies, 2018), 19-30.
16. "Rethinking Communication Influence from a Strategic Communication Approach," Strategic Multilayer Assessment Invited Perspective Series, 4 February 2020, https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Lieber-IP-Final-14Jan20-v3R.pdf.

AUTHOR: DR. PAUL LIEBER, JSOU RESIDENT SENIOR FELLOW. Contact information: jsou_research@socom.mil.

JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY
Department of Strategic Studies
7701 Tampa Point Blvd., Bldg. 5200, MacDill AFB, FL 33621
socom.mil/jsou