# Strategic Communication
## in the New Media Sphere

*By* TIMOTHY CUNNINGHAM



Sailor updates official U.S. 7th Fleet Facebook site to promote interaction with parties interested in U.S. Navy

U.S. Navy (Gregory Mitchell)

The U.S. Government continues to seek a comprehensive, effective communication strategy through which it may project and promote American interests, policies, and objectives abroad. Many believe that the government and military have been outcommunicated since 9/11. A primary cause of this alleged deficiency is failure to recognize that strategic communication through traditional media and through the new media are not the same thing. There are fundamental differences between traditional and new media spheres. Hence, using conventional methods for new media strategic communication is decidedly less productive than developing a communication strategy appropriate for the new media universe.

Successful strategic communication in the new media sphere cannot remain the exclusive domain of professional strategic communicators insulated from most aspects of mission execution. To compete for attention with the proliferation of messages exchanged



Pentagon press secretary briefs media on Secretary of Defense's schedule

DOD (R.D. Ward)

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in today's "attention economy," military and civilian agencies must co-opt the skills of nearly all personnel charged with carrying out disparate aspects of a mission or specific policy, critically those in theater such as Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), District Support Teams (DSTs), and others.

## What's Different?

Models representing how messages are communicated through traditional media are not appropriate for depicting how they are communicated (or exchanged) through the new media. Communication through traditional media is based on monologic (think *monologue*) communication and a one-to-many message flow, whereby *one* individual or group sends a discrete message to an audience consisting of *many* different people. Communication through the new media is based on dialogic (think *dialogue*) communication and a many-to-many message flow, whereby *many* different media consumers are simultaneously exchanging (sending and receiving) messages with *many* other people through new media outlets such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

In the traditional media sphere, audiences are mere consumers of messages. Reading a newspaper or watching a television news program is an act of passive message consumption. Audiences in the new media sphere actively engage with the new media; they both consume and produce messages via the new media outlets mentioned above. Rather than message *consumers*, audiences exchanging messages in the new media sphere are called *prosumers* because they both produce and consume messages.

Monologic and dialogic communications are fundamentally different, and the audiences associated with each activity (message consumers versus prosumers) are also distinct in nature. This argues for the design of new media strategic communication efforts separate and distinct from those conducted through traditional media. This in no way implies that strategic communication in the traditional media sphere is diminished, only that it must be conceptually recognized as entirely separate from new media strategic communication efforts.

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Many see new media as compromising the efficacy of the message they intend to convey. However, strategic communicators, in reality, never controlled the messages they sent into the media universe. Print and broadcast media outlets and other "mediators" have always interpreted and reframed messages for media consumers. Communication models that identify message senders and message receivers as the sole agents involved in communication were as invalid in the traditional media universe of 1950 as they are in the contemporary new media universe.

Through new media, communicators now have a direct line of sight with their audience, namely media prosumers. Ironically, the removal of the message gatekeeper has only made strategic communication more complex, as there is now an even greater number of credible interlocutors within a prosumer's social network who shape and influence how and within what context an individual decodes and interprets a message.

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*strategic communicators never controlled the messages they sent into the media universe*

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To reiterate, the paradigm of the U.S. Government as message sender and the *New York Times* or CNN as mediator or gatekeeper applies only to the traditional media sphere. In the new media universe, communicators engage directly with message receivers who are in their own right message senders. These prosumers reuse, repackage, and repurpose the information that a communicator has conveyed to them for their own message-sending activities. The message originator cannot control which modified message is exchanged, or how, among prosumers at an organic level. The originator may only purposefully attempt to control initial message input(s), and thereby influence thematically a conversation taking place in the new media sphere.

A discrete media conversation taking place within a complex communication environment will continually evolve, be subsumed by, or converge with other discrete media conversations, and overall will take on a life of its own—a life that the message originator cannot predict. That is, questions, conclusions, actions, behaviors, and other activities by and among participants in the new media universe will emerge during the flow of the

conversation that extend well beyond the intent of the originator's initial message input.

And herein lies perhaps the biggest problem with military and government leaders who still view press conferences and press releases as the primary means with which to convey a message to either a general or target audience. The act of conveying a message through a press conference or press release is an incomplete action. If an initial message-sending activity altogether neglects the follow-on conversation that takes place in the new media sphere once the press conference has concluded or the press release has been widely disseminated, the activity has failed from a new media standpoint.

To say it another way, press conferences, press releases, blog entries, and Facebook posts as discrete acts that do not account for the message as it moves and evolves in the new media universe are of limited value. A press conference, press release, blog entry, or Facebook post represents a single message input. If further inputs or contributions are not made as the message evolves within a larger media conversation, then the effectiveness of the communication activity has been compromised, and there is little chance that the objectives associated with a strategic communication effort will be realized.

Official press conferences may last 30 minutes. The intended messages are conveyed to mediators (correspondents from, say, al Jazeera or ABC News) who will package the messages into 5- to 10-second sound bites and impart meanings ("spins") as they convey the messages to media consumers. Those 5- to 10-second segments are all that the vast majority of media consumers will know of the original messages communicated by American officials at the press conferences.

But in the new media sphere, prosumers will repackage and repurpose the original messages conveyed at the press conferences (as well as the messages as spun by disparate traditional media), and the conversations on specific topics will continue. If the message originators (say, the International Security Assistance Force, Department of Defense, or Department of State) do not participate in the conversations taking place in the new media sphere, then the message originators have surrendered the ability to influence the media conversations, let alone to attempt to control them. A press conference, press release, blog entry, or Facebook post is a first act—a necessary but insufficient undertaking

in support of strategic communication objectives.

Participating in any media conversation can be time-consuming. Participating in multiple conversations simultaneously can present a severe resource drain. In practical terms, a press conference, press release, blog entry, or Facebook post that serves as the initial and the final (that is, *only*) undertaking in a strategic communication activity is much easier than maintaining dialogue across many different new media outlets. But while traditional one-way, monologic communication methods may be easier in both conceptual and practical terms, they are also woefully less effective.

The separateness of strategic communication in the new media and traditional media spheres is nowhere more pronounced than in

points not only to the *inadequacy* of these models for contemporary strategic communication, but also, more fundamentally, to the complete *absence* of feedback mechanisms in the traditional media universe itself. It is not simply that the models are no longer universally valid; given their inability to generate feedback, the traditional media themselves are wholly deficient for the unique brand of strategic communication conducted in the new media sphere. Feedback is a form of dialogue, and dialogue is the currency of new media strategic communication. If the goal of strategic communication is to change perceptions, opinions, and ultimately behavior, then without feedback it is difficult to gauge in any meaningful way if a specific strategic communication endeavor has succeeded.

a responsibility delegated primarily to a cadre of professionals charged with communicating messages and information to the general public or to a specific audience. The pervading notion of who "does" strategic communication is responsible for the structure and composition of groups involved in strategic communication through the new media, such as the Defense Department's Digital Engagement Team and the State Department's Digital Outreach Team. While both of these undertakings serve as important first steps toward a more comprehensive approach to new media strategic communication, they are largely insulated from the formulation and/or execution of policy or plans.

An alternative framework for communicating strategically—and one more



USPACOM commander speaks to media in Vietnam about medical community service project during Pacific Partnership 2010
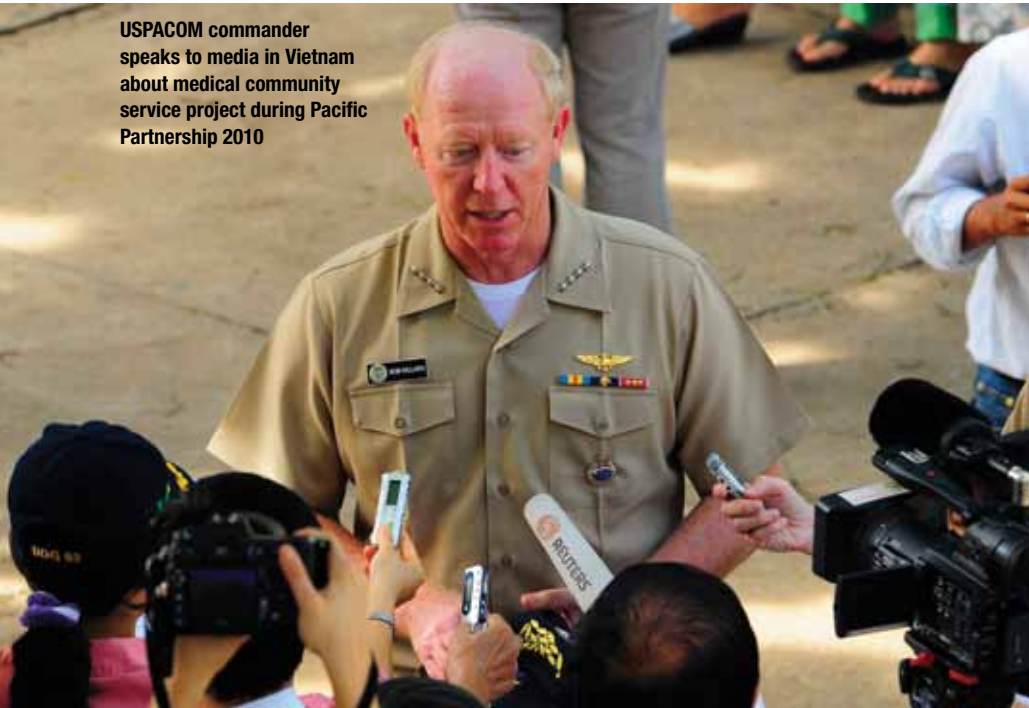
U.S. Navy (Matthew Jackson)

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suited to new media strategic communication—involves distributing the workflow among all individuals charged with executing policy or plans. That is, the practice of strategic communication would be performed in a distributed work environment; it would be the responsibility not of professional strategic communicators insulated from the policy execution process, but of those individuals directly charged with executing policy or carrying out a plan. The delegation of control in this context is conceived more properly as *delegation through distribution*.

The case for delegation through distribution is twofold. First, strategic communication performed by disparate small groups or individuals responsible for carrying out different aspects of policy or planning injects humanness and transparency into the work being performed by, for instance, a PRT. No longer is a faceless, distant institution—the Defense Department or U.S. Government generically—seen as coordinating the construction of a new school in a specific province. Instead, prosumers see and engage with a small team of in-country human beings sharing information and insight with a self-identified community of interest through the new media. In some contexts, this

the examination of the role of feedback. New York University communication professor Douglas Rushkoff writes that effective communicators today utilize the new media to generate feedback, arguing that "from phones to blogs to podcasts—we have gained the capacity to generate feedback, and as a result our ideas are exchanged more organically, rapidly, unpredictably, and—most important—uncontrollably than ever before."[1]

Feedback mechanisms in most traditional communication models are wholly absent. Therefore, strategic communication efforts tethered to these models do not allow feedback from message prosumers. This

Granted, many traditional media outlets have begun integrating some feedback and other content from new media outlets into their reporting streams, but traditional media outlets will continue to be primarily focused on conveying messages to message consumers, not engaging in dialogue with message prosumers. Adopting many-to-many communication practices would go against the nature of their role as "authoritative" mediators in the contemporary media universe.

## How Must We Adapt?

Strategic communication as envisioned by most military and civilian agency leaders is

community of interest will be global in nature (a Facebook group formed around the issue of Afghan reconstruction, for example), while in other contexts this community of interest will be more localized (a mobile messaging group—which is essentially the Short Message Service version of an email distribution list—that allows interested locals to receive or send group messages about the progress of local school construction or reconstruction more generally in the province, district, or village).

Second, as already discussed, one of the chief advantages of leveraging the new media for strategic communication is the ability to solicit feedback. From the prosumer's perspective, the whole point of providing feedback is to tangibly influence or directly affect how policy or plans are executed. The work of the professional strategic communicator is typically wholly separate from the functions performed by individuals charged with implementing various facets of policy. Therefore, the feedback provided through new media is not readily sent from prosumer to policy executor, but to a mediator or middleman who will often not be able to relay the feedback to the appropriate individual or group laterally (in an organization such as the Defense Department, the individual charged with a specific function or responsible for plan execution may not be identifiable or reachable) or vertically (it may not be appropriate to send feedback to higher level officers in many situations).

Some effort has been made by those integrally involved in formulating (as opposed to simply executing) policy to employ new media for strategic communication purposes. Admiral Michael Mullen's Twitter feed is but one example. While laudable for the example it has set, individual policymakers cannot reasonably seek feedback for the purpose of informing policy given the limited time they have to engage through a given new media outlet. Thousands of prosumers are following Admiral Mullen's feed, but are not able to provide feedback to his posts because the Chairman is not following their feeds. (How could he follow them all?) Thus, Admiral Mullen's feed is still operating under the auspices of the traditional influence model of communication, whereby one-to-many message projection is the predominant form of communication. Utilizing the new media in this manner is certainly acceptable, but leaders should not delude themselves into believing that the replication of one-to-many communication practices in the new media

sphere is evidence that they or their respective organizations are adequately harnessing the power of the communication revolution.

A dialogic new media communication strategy must be persistent and adaptive over time. It represents at a conceptual level a war without end, although it is a war waged in the information sphere. In the globalized new media universe, there are no termination criteria for strategic communication campaigns. In fact, there is no such thing as a "campaign" because the conversation taking place among members of the "Always On" generation is persistent and without end. The narrative will

communicators "spend a lot of time, energy, and money trying to reach their audience. Three months pass by and then they're off to a new campaign." The persistence of the media conversation taking place is such that we are asking participants to "listen to your message or engage in conversation. You can't just disappear after three months."[2]

While government strategic communication efforts typically last longer than 3 months, the point is clear enough: the intent of new media strategic communication should be the design of messages meant to engage users in dialogue over time. Antiquated

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DOD (Chad J. McNeeley)

**Host Jon Stewart interviews Chairman during appearance on *The Daily Show***

evolve—even significantly—but the media conversation does not end. Nine years after al Qaeda succeeded in projecting its message loud and clear to a global prime-time audience, the organization's media operatives are still very much engaged in a never-ending strategic communication effort with a worldwide network of sympathetic amateur prosumers who interpret, repurpose, and in some form or fashion proliferate the organization's messages.

Communicators "can't take a stop-start approach," as one social networking executive has put it. They must shift away from the campaign mindset. With campaigns,

methods based on successive "campaigns" with defined beginnings and ends are not applicable to strategic communication conducted in the new media sphere and may, in fact, even betray the fundamental nature of strategic communication as conceived by luminaries such as Edward Bernays, who in 1928 described the virtues of effective discourse as a "consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea, or group."[3] One obvious difficulty for military and civilian leaders is to develop persistent and congruent strategic communication

efforts given the limited length of soldiers' tours and the impermanent nature of functional assignments.

## What's Next?

If there is one word to encapsulate today's media environment, it is *engagement*. Engagement through dialogic communication is now at least as important as information-sending activities in the traditional media sphere utilizing monologic communication practices.

But as military and civilian leaders adapt strategic communication efforts to the contemporary media universe, they should also be looking ahead to how the media universe will continue to evolve. The traditional media universe is about information. Today's new media universe is about engagement. Tomorrow's media universe will be about immersion and experience. Put another way, leaders should recognize that in designing strategic communication efforts, they must now account for yesterday's informational media and today's engagist media, and will soon need to address tomorrow's immersive or experiential media.

Immersive media is a fascinating and complex topic beyond the scope of this article, but suffice it to say that the development of ubiquitous computing technologies—from semacodes and Near Field Communication to mirror worlds and advanced haptic devices—

will have a profound effect on what we today call strategic communication. The advent of newer and different communication technologies has the potential not only to disrupt our business-as-usual approach to strategic communication, but also to overwhelm it. We have *adopted* new media tools for strategic communication purposes but have not yet *adapted* to the new media universe itself. We are using new media tools to replicate the same monologic communication practices of yesterday. With few exceptions, there is no dialogue, there is no feedback, and there is no authentic engagement taking place.

Adoption without adaptation will not be possible as tomorrow's immersive media universe unfolds. Ubiquitous computing and the immersive media universe that it will help create will mean that strategic communicators will need to be *in* the Internet rather than *on* the Internet. Either we are in—or we are out. There will be no communicating from the sidelines, much as we are doing today.

To meet the exigencies of tomorrow's highly complex communication environment, there can be no distinction between actor and communicator and no separation between functions. In other words, those doing the communicating must be the same persons acting in a given operational environment. In a real contemporary context, the process of changing how strategic communication is done can be catalyzed by encouraging, even

requiring, individual members of PRTs and DSTs in theater to engage and converse with other prosumers through an array of new media outlets, particularly those popular with specific prosumer segments (for instance, young Iraqi males and Afghan mobile users). Obviously, not all members of a PRT or DST will be capable of engagement in a foreign language, but even engagement through English-language new media on a much wider scale by military and civilian personnel will inject transparency into American reconstruction efforts and go a long way in fostering support in allied countries and raising morale at home.

None of this is to suggest that military and civilian leaders and communication professionals have no role to play in the contemporary or future strategic communication environment. Strategic communication through traditional media will remain important well into the future and is most appropriately conducted by a cadre of communication professionals. However, we must reconceptualize the breadth and scope of how we conceive of and define strategic communication by understanding the new media and how it is evolving. The imperative that we face is to adapt to the changing media universe by pursuing a course of action that utilizes the skills and abilities of nearly all military and civilian personnel in order to compete and succeed in the communication environment of today and prepare for the environment of tomorrow.

Indeed, broad guidelines to ensure operational security must be established—and continually refined and updated—before any step to delegate strategic communication responsibilities more broadly is taken, but operational security does not justify inaction. Either America's strategic communication efforts adapt and advance, or our participation in the media conversation will dissipate until we face total obsolescence in the immersive media environment of tomorrow and beyond. **JFQ**



**U.S. Forces–Iraq commander GEN Odierno updates press on state of affairs in Iraq**

DOD (Cherie Cullen)

### NOTES

[1] Douglas Rushkoff, "Fighting the Terrorist Virus," *Discover Magazine*, December 4, 2006, available at <http://discovermagazine.com/2006/dec/peer-review-terrorism-virus>.

[2] "Audience Engagement: Long Engagement," *New Media Age*, October 11, 2007, 23.

[3] Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Horace Liveright Publishing, 1928), 25.