

AU/ACSC/35-3023/AY06

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

CULTURAL COMMUNICATION:
CHALLENGES TO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

by

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A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

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May 2006

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Introduction

“Victory in the long war ultimately depends on strategic communication by the United States and its international partners. Effective communication must build and maintain credibility with friends and foes alike, through an emphasis on consistency, veracity and transparency in both words and deeds. Such credibility is essential to building trusted networks that counter ideological support for terrorism.”

2006 Quadrennial Defense Review
U.S. Department of Defense, pg 92

When major combat operations ended in Iraq in March 2003, victory was declared but a bigger and much harder ‘war’ ensued – an ideology war. In the West, the tenuous support for the war, built upon a now perceived nebulous threat of weapons of mass destruction, had begun to wane. With this as momentum, an insurgency rose up against the forces ‘occupying’ Iraq and the ‘stabilization operations’ quickly dissolved in irregular warfare. A ‘jihad’ of convenience evolved, and Iraq became the major front in the Global War on Terrorism.

Recognizing this shift, the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review – the first released in five years and the first completed since the United States embarked on the Global War on Terror – identifies strategic communication as a key component of Unity of Effort in the ongoing war on terror. Although it is the shortest section in the QDR and arguably, the vaguest, it is long-awaited recognition of the significance communication should play in the Department of Defense mission. That is the good news. The bad news is that the first-time mention for public affairs is less than flattering, noting “credibility gaps in each of the primary supporting capabilities of Public Affairs, Defense Support to Public Diplomacy, Military Diplomacy and Information Operations, including Psychological Operations.”¹

The QDR states the effort to “close” these gaps “will include developing new tools and

processes for assessing, analyzing and delivering information to key audiences as well as improving linguistic skills and cultural competence.”² This paper examines the training aspect of that vector in context of the recent Department of Defense cultural awareness training push. It explains the sender-receiver-message-channel model of communication and analyzes the implication of cultural on each element of the communication model as a paradigm for understanding cultural communication challenges. Through a literary review and mini-case study examining application of one of the elements of the communication model, this paper analyzes the role cultural communication training can expect of have on the Department of Defense’s ability to communicate strategically. It suggests that cultural context for communications is lacking at the strategic level and provides recommendations for implementation as well recommendations for future study.

¹ Department of Defense, *2006 Quadrennial Defense Review*, Office of the Secretary of Defense (Washington, D.C., January 2006), 92.

Background

The Push for Language and Cultural Training

Language and cultural training is a consistent theme within the QDR, mentioned throughout the 97-page document and even addressed in a special subsection as well.³ The QDR formalizes the Department of Defense emphasis in the past two years to better prepare troops supporting the nation building expected to continue in Iraq and in the Global War on Terror by educating them about the areas they are likely to serve. The recommendation for such training came early in the stability operations phase, during a U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee hearing on lessons learned from Operation Iraqi Freedom. Retired Army Major General Bob Scales, former Commandant of the Army War College and author of *The Iraq War*, testified before the committee that better cultural awareness would benefit military and civilian personnel working policy formulation, warfighting, and stability operations.⁴

This initiated a chain reaction of activity throughout DOD over past two years. Now the military has begun incorporating cultural awareness into almost all levels of training, from a general concept approach in accession training, to more specific and even formal pre-deployment training for troops.⁵ Some military training courses even include a practical exercise to help students apply training in a simulated environment.⁶

Shortages of Middle Eastern translators quickly led to a similar expansion of language

² Department of Defense, *2006 Quadrennial Defense Review*, 92.

³ Department of Defense, *2006 Quadrennial Defense Review*, 23, 31, 89, 92, 78-79.

⁴ U.S. Representative Ike Skelton, *Press Release: Skelton Urges Rumsfeld to Improve Cultural Awareness Training*, 23 October 2003.

⁵ SFC Haynes, 2nd Infantry Division, EOA Lesson Plan, *Arab Culture—Diversity Awareness for Pre-Deployment and Area of Operation Readiness*, June 2004.

⁶ Deborah Block, "U.S. Army Utilizes Training in Cultural and Communication Skills," VOA News, 10 August 2005. Available at <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2005-08/2005-08-10-voal7.cfm>. Accessed February 2006.

training. The Department of Defense released a Defense Language Transformation Roadmap,⁷ which, among other things, renewed vigor in the International Affairs Specialist Programs, encouraged units to seek partnership opportunities for language studies, and created the English for Heritage Language Speakers program partner native speakers of key languages with the government. The services are also updating their professional military education courses; the Chief of Staff of the Air Force has directed the Air University to incorporate language training into its Air Command and Staff College and Air War College into its in-residence curriculum for the 2007 academic year.⁸

Integrating these two concepts, the Marine Corps recently stood up a center for Advanced Operational Cultural Learning in Quantico, Va., in May 2005, and is looking to initiate a program which assigns Marines a regional area for them specialize in, with education and assignments focused there.⁹ According to Gen. Michael Hagee, Commandant of the Marine Corps, the initial focus will be “on the Arab culture, Arab language and on Islam.”¹⁰ The eventual goal is for every Marine to have a language specialty and a regional area of expertise.

The training effort across the Department of Defense is expansive, with \$181M identified in the 2007 budget proposal.¹¹ This money increases recruitment of personnel with language skills and increases funding for language training and special pay benefits. The budget proposal also calls for the expansion of language training for special operations and intelligence units.

⁷ Department of Defense, *Defense Language Transformation Roadmap*, Office of the Secretary of Defense (Washington, D.C., January 2005), 3 – 10.

⁸ Gen Michael T. Mosely, chief of staff, U.S. Air Force (address, Air Force Association Symposium, Orlando, Fla., 2 February 2006). Available at <http://www.af.mil/library/speeches/speech.asp?id=216>. Accessed March 2006.

⁹ Geoff Fein, “Marine Corps Expanding Role for GWOT,” *Defense Daily International* (5 August 2005): 2.

¹⁰ quoted in Fein, “Expanding Role for GWOT,” 2.

¹¹ FY 2007 DOD Budget, Available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Feb2006/d20060206slides.pdf>, accessed February 2006.

Career Field Specific Training

Special Operations

Special operations personnel, with their expansive role in civil affairs and foreign internal defense, recognized the value of cultural knowledge decades ago and their training agenda has reflected this. For 50 years, the U.S. Army Special Warfare Center and School has been creating culturally savvy “warrior-diplomats” with its specialized curriculum.¹² The United States Air Force Special Operations University has a department committed to Regional Affairs, which offers regional studies in six geographical areas.¹³ The Joint Special Operations University collaborated with AFSOU to take the academic prowess of that 40-year institute on-line and create a virtual educational hub.¹⁴

In summary, from that quick survey of training, it is easy to see there is a wide range in the type and depth of training conducted. As Randy Gangle, executive director of the Marine Corps’ Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities, has noted, learning cultural sensitivities does not translate to “cultural intelligence, understanding and awareness.”¹⁵ Retired Army Colonel Maxie McFarland, a Defense Intelligence Senior Executive and Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, says picking the right level of training is crucial since “tactile understanding necessary for today’s complex settings.”¹⁶

Status of PA Training

Language skills are not traditionally a required skill set for public affairs specialists.

¹² Janice L. Burton, Language Transformation Plan to Build Culturally Savvy Soldiers, *Special Warfare* 18, no. 2 (September 2005): 14.

¹³ Air Force Special Operations University, course catalog, FY 2006, available at <http://www.hurlburt.af.mil/jsou/af>. Accessed February 2006.

¹⁴ Joint Special Operations University, Hurlburt AFB, Fla., available at <http://www.hurlburt.af.mil/jsou>. Accessed February 2006.

¹⁵ Richard Mullen, “Marine Expert: Pentagon Still Unready for ‘Small Wars,’” *Defense Today*, Vol. 25, Number 139 (31 August 2004): 2.

Certainly, a PA who happens to speak German stationed in Germany brings additional capability to that mission, but U.S. government host-nation advisors have largely handled communication activities in overseas communities. Specific culture training has mostly been absent from public affairs training. Public affairs activities focus on domestic media¹⁷ and so formal cultural communication training is not a major part of the main body of military public affairs training. The Department of Defense Joint Course in Communication has a short block on interpersonal cultural communication, but this training program is optional and selective; only about two dozen personnel are selected to attend this limited training at the University of Oklahoma each year out of the thousands of public affairs specialty personnel in DOD.

PA Training Outlook

What is the right level of training for public affairs? The QDR specifically defines the necessary capability as linguistic skills and cultural competency.¹⁸

Interestingly, the special operations career field has identified cultural communication training as a distinct facet in their training. The Air Force Special Operations University curriculum offers a course on Cross-Cultural Communication¹⁹ and the Army commissioned a study by the North Carolina Center for World Language and Cultures to examine “Methods to Improve Cultural Communication Skills in Special Operations Forces” in 1998.²⁰ It is unclear whether the study led to implementation of a cultural communication program for the Army, but the Air Force school has open enrollment for its course the PA career field could take advantage

¹⁶ Col Maxie McFarland, “Military cultural education: necessary part of soldier-development program,” *Special Warfare*, (July 2005), 62-63.

¹⁷ Defense Science Board, *Report on Strategic Communication* (Washington, D.C., September 2004), 12.

¹⁸ Department of Defense, *2006 Quadrennial Defense Review*, 92.

¹⁹ JSOU Catalog

²⁰ see ARI contractor report of the same name, United States Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Studies, July 1998)

of. Non-special operations personnel can attend the AFSOU regional classes on a space-available basis.

These two courses would build a foundation of ‘cultural competence.’ McFarland uses this phrase when distinguishing between levels of cultural knowledge, outlining distinctions between cultural literacy and cultural competency. He defines cultural literacy as understanding your own “beliefs, behaviors, values and norms”²¹ and enough about others’ cultural patterns to recognize these perspectives might conflict. Cultural competency is more complex and “demands a more in-depth and application-oriented understanding.”²²

²¹ McFarland, “Military cultural education,” 63.

²² McFarland, “Military cultural education,” 63.

Analysis

Communication Model

Public affairs personnel are communication specialists. Cultural competence for public affairs specialists therefore centers on cross-cultural communication efforts – planning and executing culturally sound communication plans, advising commanders on the communication environment, etc. In its most simple form, communication is “the exchange of thoughts, messages, or information, as by speech, signals, writing, or behavior.”²³

There have been no shortage of communication models (see Lasswell, Metzke, Osgood and Schram, Riley, Gerbner, Shannon-Weaver, among others) created to depict that exchange: a sender sends a message to a receiver through a medium. While any of these models help examine the communication process, one of the earliest communication models, Berlo’s Source-Message-Channel-Receiver (S-M-C-R) Model²⁴ is a logical choice because it succinctly addresses influential factors affecting communication for each element. This design provides a framework for examining the unpredictability of communication and some of the elements responsible for those irregularities.²⁵

The following updated figure from the Communication, Cultural and Media Studies database²⁶ graphically captures the Berlo communication components and subsequent factors:

²³ American Heritage Dictionary, available on-line at <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/communication>. Accessed January 2006.

²⁴ David K. Berlo, *The Process of Communication: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1960), 72.

²⁵ Mick Underwood, “Berlo’s S-M-C-R Model,” *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies*, (Cornwall, UK: 2003). Available at <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshhtml/index.html>. Accessed February 2005.

²⁶ Underwood, “Berlo’s S-M-C-R Model.”

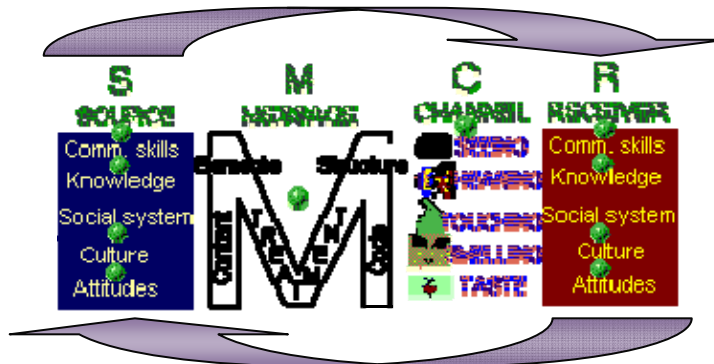


Figure 1 BERLO's SOURCE-MESSAGE-CHANNEL-RECEIVER MODEL

Although each of the components will be described separately, it is important to note that there is a potential for overlap between the elements. Cedric Clark's recognition of this dynamic almost 40 years ago still resonates:

“Communication cannot be described in a linear fashion; it is a complex system of elements. This point cannot be over-emphasized in view of popular tendencies to think of communication as well as other social processes in terms of cause and effect.”²⁷

The communication elements are interdependent variables in the system and the system is reflective. This is better represented graphically, then, as an exchange or cycle:



Source-Receiver

The source is the sender of the message, or the ‘who.’ Communication skills, knowledge, social system, culture and attitudes are important considerations for the source (sender) as well as the receiver. These factors all intertwine and influence the communication process.

Communication Skills include the verbal skills of writing and speaking (encoding skills), reading and listening (decoding skills), and thought/reasoning which is both an encoding and decoding skill. These communication skills drive our ability for “communication fidelity” in that they first “affect our ability to analyze our own purposes and intentions, our ability to say something when we communicate” and then “affect our ability to encode messages which express what we intend.”²⁸

Attitudes are a state of mind or a feeling or disposition. The attitudinal elements making up this factor include attitude toward self, attitude toward subject matter, and, for the source, attitude toward receiver. These variables shape the communication process from both sides, and so for the receiver the variables include attitude toward self, attitude toward subject matter, and attitude toward source. The receiver’s assessment of source credibility is introduced here.

Knowledge refers to expertise. This includes knowledge of oneself, knowledge of the subject being communicated about, knowledge of the channel, and knowledge of the receiver—all elements of the communication process. Even awareness that communication is taking place is an influence: “knowledge of the communication process itself affects communication behavior.”²⁹

The social and culture factors together create the socio-culture system of the source and receiver. An individual is influenced by the perceptions, values, beliefs and standards embedded in them by groups they belong to, their religion, their social class, etc. These factors influence attitude as well as behaviors.

Communication is a reciprocal process and so it is easy to see why these factors are the

²⁷ Cedric C. Clark, “Problems of Communication in Rural Africa,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 3, Number 1, Special Issue: Rural Africa (Winter, 1969), 225.

²⁸ Berlo, *Process of Communication*, 42.

²⁹ Berlo, *Process of Communication*, 49.

same for the same for the sender and the receiver. This is an important realization for communicators crossing cultural boundaries because it is necessary to understand how the sender's perspectives affect the communication process. McFarland calls this "self-awareness of our own cultural assumptions."³⁰

Failing to understand this exchange can affect communication fidelity at the lowest level. These paradigms are hard to break, because we have to resist the urge to 'mirror image' our own communication requirements and expectations on the receiver. Crucial to the communication process then, is remembering "the receiver is the most important link in the communication process."³¹

Message

The message is 'the what' in the transmission model. It is not just the "product," but is comprised of message code, message content and message treatment. Each of these are comprised of elements (substance) and structure (form).³²

Code refers to a set of symbols. Codes contain group of elements (vocabulary) and structure (syntax). Examples of codes include language, music, etc. To learn the code, patterns and consistency among the ways the elements appear are studied.

Message content is the material chosen to express the source's purpose. The content is ordered in a manner to effectively convey the elements of the message, including our assertions about the information. The order is chosen (chronological, order of importance, etc...) to present assertions about the content.³³

Message treatment includes the presentation of the message. It can include, among other

³⁰ McFarland, "Military cultural education," 63.

³¹ Berlo, *Process of Communication*, 52.

³² Berlo, *Process of Communication*, 54-55.

things, emphasizing certain elements of the message or leaving out portions of information all together. Each decision is part of the treatment: “selecting and arranging codes and content.”³⁴

Although the sender has a purpose for communicating, the chance for effective communication increases when the message holds meaning for the receiver. “Wise communicators,” says Cutlip, Center and Broom’s “Effective Public Relations,” the most widely recognized public relations handbook, “see receivers not as passive subjects but as selective users of information for their own purposes.”³⁵ This supports Berlo’s insistence on keeping the receiver central in the process.

For better or for worse, the message is often the focal point of communication planning. The word communication derives from the Latin *communis*, meaning “common.” Communication, then, means to establish commonness.³⁶ Sometimes the communication problem can be solved by finding a common message, and culture can be a significant barrier as far as what messages will be accepted. That was the case when anthropologists convinced senior military leaders and President Franklin D. Roosevelt that the Japanese culture would not support an ‘unconditional surrender’ and so modifications to the language and the approach won out.³⁷

Channel

The channel is “the how” – the medium through which a message is delivered. Berlo listed them as sensory factors, but representative mediums can quickly be ‘built’ by combining senses. Radio broadcast centers on auditory factors; television broadcast on visual and audio

³³ Berlo, *Process of Communication*, 59.

³⁴ Berlo, *Process of Communication*, 60.

³⁵ Scott M. Cutlip, Allen H. Center, Glen M. Broom. *Effective Public Relations*, 7th Ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994), 400.

³⁶ Cutlip, Broom & Center, *Effective Public Relations*, 401.

³⁷ Montgomery McFate, J.D., Ph.D., “Anthropology and Counterinsurgency: The Strange Story of their Curious Relationship,” *Military Review* (March-April 2005): 32.

factors. These public media channels serve as the “message-vehicles.”³⁸

Choosing the “best” channel or combination of channels is a complicated but direct process requiring knowledge about the availability, cost, reach, suitability, and impact.

Choosing more than one channel increases potential for the receiver to have access to the message.

The channel portion of the model is intuitively most scientific portion of communication. Many of the consideration elements (cost, reach, format, etc.) have data associated with them to aid in decision making. In this respect market research transcends culture, though knowledge of how a society views and uses its media outlets might not be as readily available. As with all the other model components, communicators should not project their own societal experience into the decision.

Cultural influences within S-M-C-R model

In summary, the social and cultural influences that define the socio-cultural system of the source and the receiver, the emphasis on the receiver throughout the communication process means that the culture of the receiver should dominate communication planning. Berlo’s summary of the model explains the receiver-centric nature required for effective communication:

“We choose codes that our receiver can understand. We select elements from the code that will appeal to him, [and] that are easy for him to decode. We structure these elements to minimize the effort required to decode and interpret the message. We choose content that will be convincing to the receiver, [and] that will be pertinent to his interest, his needs. Finally we treat the message generally in order to achieve the maximum possible effect—to accomplish our purpose.”³⁹

For effective communication, you begin with the end – the receiver – in mind. The focus must remain on that end throughout communication planning and execution.

³⁸ Berlo, *Process of Communication*, 64.

Mass Communication Application

After examining the communication model and knowing the emphasis the research demands for the receiver, it is easy to make the connection between the communication elements. Culturally-competent communicators, then, should be cognizant of the prevalence of cultural influences throughout the process:

“In Iraq and the rest of the Middle East ... providing information alone is unlikely to produce trust. How that information is transmitted, and by whom, may be just as important as the information itself.”⁴⁰

Because the communication process is inter-related, a misstep within one of the variables impacts the others and can degrade the entire communication process.

When dealing at the mass communication level, the misstep becomes even more magnified. Because public affairs personnel are charged with planning this type of interaction, the channel portion of the SMCR model distinguishes public affairs activities other communication. It therefore serves as an appropriate area as a mini-case study to explore the cultural challenges to strategic communication from a public affairs aspect.

Channel Assessment: U.S. Approach to Arab media

Interaction with mass media is a fundamental component of a strategic communication effort attempting to reach a large audience, particularly across a large area. Some Western critics of the strategic communication efforts in Iraq have claimed there is “no open channel for communication in the Middle East.”⁴¹ This is despite the emergence of “nearly 300 newspapers,

³⁹ Berlo, *Process of Communication*, 62.

⁴⁰ Stephanie R. Kelley, “*Rumors in Iraq: A Guide to Winning Hearts and Minds*. Research Paper (Monterey, Calif.: Naval Postgraduate School, 2004), 50.

⁴¹ Defense Science Board, *Report on Strategic Communication*, 41.

over 90 radio stations and more than 40 television stations”⁴² in Iraq. Additionally there are the major channels of the Arab population are the mosque, print media, school, and broadcast media.⁴³

Of these outlets, satellite broadcast media dominates U.S. attention because of its reach. The increasing availability of satellite dishes means breadth in reach across the Middle East – a region with the highest and lowest literacy rates in the world.⁴⁴ Television, then, becomes one of the great equalizers in terms of being able to reach both those categories of communication skill levels.

Satellite dishes mean the availability of Western newscasts has also increased, but most are not presented or even translated into Arabic.⁴⁵ The major U.S. news web sites are not available in Arabic, with the exception of CNN.⁴⁶ CNN does have CNN International, with five regional channels, including CNN International Europe/Middle East/Africa, but with such a broad region and English-only programming, it is not likely to gain a solid foothold anytime soon.

There are main four influential Arabic channels: Al-Jazeera, Al-Manar, Abu Dhabi and LBC Al Hayat.⁴⁷ As should be expected, most Arabs prefer viewing media sources in their own language and which center around the Arab viewpoint.⁴⁸ One Iraqi critique of CNN during major combat operations in Iraq was that it was “very boring” and that “[t]hey never seem to talk

⁴² Donald H. Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense, (address, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, NY, 17 February 2006). Available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/2006/sp20060217-12574.html>. Accessed March 2006.

⁴³ James Poniewozik, “The Battle for Hearts and Minds,” *Time*, 22 October 2001, 69.

⁴⁴ World Affairs Council, *Arab and Muslim Countries Profiles in Contrast* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), v.

⁴⁵ Shane Harris, “Federal radio, TV networks aim to change Arab hearts and minds,” *Government Executive*, 31 July 2003. Available online at <http://www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0703/073103h1.htm>. Accessed 23 November 2005.

⁴⁶ see <http://arabic.cnn.com/>

⁴⁷ Hisham Sharabi, “The Arab Satellite Channels and Their Political Impact After the Iraq War,” Al-Hayat (London: England), 18 July 2003. Available on-line at <http://www.worldpress.org/Mideast/1369.cfm>. Accessed 23 November 2005.

to real people, only experts.” Instead, he was interested in seeing real people and the affect the war was having on them.⁴⁹

The United States has struggled with this ‘Arab view,’ especially with regard to editorial decisions and in particular graphic imagery. This too is part of the cultural understanding. According to Issan Mousa, professor of media studies at Yarmouk University in Jordan, “Arab channels know [graphic] images address the core consciousness of their viewers. For the Arab audience, these are the defining image of the war.”⁵⁰ Media reflect societal norms, such that coverage “seems to reflect notions, values and ideas that resonate within particular societies.”⁵¹ This is particularly true in times of conflict: “national sentiment and patriotism do come into play during a war and influence coverage.”⁵² While this seems intuitive, it is an important point of order because critics may label these manifestations as bias.

‘Handling’ of Al Jazeera has varied over the network’s 10-year existence. Their Kabul office was bombed during Operation Enduring Freedom⁵³, an instance later dubbed unintentional. High-level U.S. officials have appealed to the Qatri emir to ‘reign in’ the troubled network.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, in the initial days of Operation Iraqi Freedom a parade of Washington officials lined up to make appearances.⁵⁵ The Arab network was even offered embed positions during combat operations as part of the U.S. military embed program.⁵⁶ But this emphasis on

⁴⁸ Daoud Kuttab, “The Arab TV Wars,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 6 April 2003, 45; and Sharabi, “Arab Satellite Channels.”

⁴⁹ James Poniewozik, “What You See Vs. What They See: The Arab Networks Are Not Without Bias, But They Often Fill in Missing Pictures from the War,” *Time*, 7 April 2003, 69.

⁵⁰ Poniewozik, “What You See Vs. What They See,” 68.

⁵¹ Narashimhan Ravi, “Different Stories: How the newspapers in the United States, Britain and South Asia covered the Iraq War.” *The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA: 2004), 55.

⁵² Narashimhan Ravi, “How newspapers covered the Iraq War,” 55 and 57.

⁵³ Rick Zednik, “Perspectives on War: Inside Al-Jazeera,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, Vol. 40, Number 6 (March/April 2002): 45.

⁵⁴ Zednik, “Inside Al Jazeera,” 45.

⁵⁵ Kuttab, “The Arab TV Wars,” 47; and Defense Science Board, *Report on Strategic Communication*, 21.

⁵⁶ Johnathan Alter and Martha Brant, “The Other Air Battle,” *Newsweek*, 7 April 2003, 38.

strategic communication did not evolve into an enduring campaign⁵⁷ and, overall, engagement with the network has considerably waned.

Instead, the post-war Western approach was to create its own outlets: two news networks and a radio program. While there has been some success with the creation of Radio Sawa,⁵⁸ a Middle East Voice of America radio program which plays a mix of Western and regional music and occasional news programs, in terms of attracting a listening audience, it has received some criticism, including the charge of “propaganda” from one Jordanian paper.⁵⁹

The United States pursued the establishment of two government-funded network stations, initially with Iraqi Media Network and then the Middle East Television Network instead of utilizing the established regional networks. The Iraqi Media Network, which was created out of the former Iraqi Information Ministry in March 2003, produces broadcasts and publishes two papers. The Middle East Television Network, which broadcasts Al Hurra, has been operating since January 2004.

Because of their U.S. funding, these outlets have a hard time shaking perception as the propaganda organs.⁶⁰ Additionally, U.S. intent is always in question. The U.S. project manager for Middle East Television Network described the necessity of the METN project as “[w]e need to bring enlightenment to the Arab World.”⁶¹ The project has stalled over disagreements over the airing of Islamic religious material as part of the programming.⁶² These conflicting perspectives diminish the appeal of the channel, and the legitimacy of the message.

On a broader scale, the U.S. efforts to establish media outlets in the region show a lack of

⁵⁷ Defense Science Board, *Report on Strategic Communication*, 21.

⁵⁸ Kuttab, “The Arab TV Wars,” 46.

⁵⁹ cited in Harris, “Change Arab hearts and minds.”

⁶⁰ Center for Media and Democracy, “Source Watch – Iraqi Media Network History” (Madison, WI: 2006). Available at http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Iraqi_Media_Network. Accessed May 2006.

⁶¹ Harris, “Change Arab hearts and minds.”

⁶² Harris, “Change Arab hearts and minds.”

support for what is widely-viewed as the Arab free press – a move widely criticized as inconsistent with democracy. Some may argue that building these networks is bringing the capability for a free press since Iraqi civilians are helping build the station content, but the U.S. hand has proven heavy in the process and intent.

Understanding the cultural environment and particularly the suspicion of government information sources (a hallmark of the totalitarian regimes in the region, especially in Iraq) might have led to a different strategic communication approach. Understanding that Al Jazeera was born from an anti-establishment movement in response to the information environment of state-run media⁶³ explains, in part, its appeal. It has been criticized not only by the United States, but also by other governments as well,⁶⁴ and this only emblazons its popularity and credibility.⁶⁵

For whatever the reason, or maybe all of these reasons, the Iraqis continue to watch their own stations. As a result, the Iraqi people still aren't getting the coalition message:

“While there is some recognition the satellite news channels do not say anything positive about the Coalition, because Iraqis do not see the Coalition side of the story they assume what the Arab media report is true. These rumors indicate that the United States should not expect Iraqis to search out the Coalition message on new radio or TV channels, but should take the Coalition message to the sources Iraqis already watch and listen to.”⁶⁶

Perhaps most devastating is the potential impact on the source-receiver relationship. That same study on Iraq rumors summarized: “Overall, the perceived unwillingness of the United States to share information with the Iraqis is attributed to the United States not valuing or respecting them.”⁶⁷ These feelings increase tension and add to the suspicion about the U.S. intent in the

⁶³ Gregg Reynolds, “Alternative TV: The War Through Arab Eyes,” *Christian Century*, 19 April 2003, 8.

⁶⁴ Zednik, “Inside Al-Jazeera,” 46; and Reynolds, “The War Through Arab Eyes,” 8;

⁶⁵ Kuttab, “*The Arab TV Wars*,” 45.

⁶⁶ Kelley, “*Rumors in Iraq*,” 37.

⁶⁷ Kelley, “*Rumors in Iraq*,” 37.

area,⁶⁸ affecting our overall ability to maintain our credibility and execute an effective communication strategy in the region.

⁶⁸ Poniewozik, “Battle for Hearts and Minds,” 69; and Reynolds, “Alternative TV,” 8.

Conclusion

Examining the U.S. approach to mass communication efforts in the Middle East highlighted the prevalence of cultural influences affecting not just the source and receiver involvement in the communication process, but their impact on effective message delivery and channel selection as well. The language and cultural training efforts in motion will be an important first step in creating a core of culturally competent military members able to execute their mission in support of our global national interests.

The case study also underscored the interdependence of the elements of the communication model. This meant that the communication policy driving the channel selection in the Middle East influenced the entire strategic communication effort. A disconnect between policy and result also translates to an inability to link tactical results to operational objectives supporting the overall strategic objectives. Linkage needs to occur between the elements of national strategy, including policies, diplomacy, and military operations, as well as strategic communication.⁶⁹

The fact that “[n]one of the elements of U.S. national power – diplomatic, military, intelligence [information], or economic explicitly take adversary culture into account in the formation or execution of policy”⁷⁰ is a gap in capability. These disconnects can be costly as we attempt to formulate sound strategies to maintain support for the Global War on Terror over the long term. Just as the rest of the military force has adapted its operations to more effectively apply their skills in asymmetric war, public affairs practitioners – and policy makers – must too. Only in developing a cadre of culturally-savvy communicators at all levels – tactical, operational and strategic – can we prove our readiness and relevance in the Global War on Terror.

⁶⁹ Defense Science Board, *Report on Strategic Communication*, 11.

Recommendations

In order to overcome the cultural challenges to strategic communication, the following recommendations are offered:

First, the cultural training identified for service members needs to be pushed upward as well, so that this skill set can be incorporated with consistency and at the macro level. The Department of Defense needs to redefine cultural competence in terms of the organization. DOD should adapt the educational and healthcare organizational approach to cultural competence: “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.”⁷¹

The Department of Defense is on track with its efforts to institutionalize cultural training, but this has occurred mostly at the tactical level. Rumsfeld recently announced that regional operational planning efforts would also incorporate cultural inputs,⁷² but it needs to permeate the institution to the strategic level as well. Cultural elements should be “reflected in attitudes, structures, policies, and services.”⁷³

Second, receiver-focused communication needs to become the norm. A critique of the U.S. handling of communication efforts is that it “concentrates on delivering ‘the message’ and omits the essential first step of listening to our targeted audiences.”⁷⁴ As asserted by the Defense Science Board in their 2005 report on Strategic Communication: “Good strategic

⁷⁰ McFate, “Anthropology and Counterinsurgency,” 24.

⁷¹ Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Issacs

⁷² Rumsfeld

⁷³ Mark King, Anthony Sims & David Osher, “Cultural Competence.”

⁷⁴ Defense Science Board, *Strategic Communication*, 38.

communication cannot build support for policies viewed unfavorably by large populations.”⁷⁵

Knowing and listening to the receiver and responding to feedback in the communication process is what indicates that communication is successful. Repeating the message, even in the receivers’ language, and even in a culturally acceptable manner, might not be the solution:

Finally, research and analysis needs to continue, particularly in media consumption factors. The information environment is dynamic and anticipating change as the Iraqi society develops will be crucial in staying ahead of and improving communication techniques, tactics and procedures. Policy and strategic direction need to lead those changes. Media uses and gratification surveys may become necessary to pinpoint target audience behaviors.

The U.S. record on strategic communication in the Middle East has been poor and it cannot turn around with tactical-level changes. Only by linking cultural knowledge to strategic direction so that sound guidance leads change can we chart a path to understanding and effective communication.

⁷⁵ Defense Science Board, *Strategic Communication*, 11.

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