AIR FORCE FELLOWS

AIR UNIVERSITY

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

IN A WORLD WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

By

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Disclaimer

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Abstract

In the past decade, social media has changed communication as it has broadened dissemination of information and expanded "participation" in the reporting of news. During the same period, practitioners of strategic communication have sought to participate in or influence public discussions online to better explain official policies and attempt to improve the perception of the United States globally. Research shows communication effectiveness is no longer based on the frequently recommended synchronization of plans, but more often on credibility and trustworthiness of the messages and the messengers.

As sources of information have multiplied through the expansion of media outlets and social media platforms, citizens have gained the ability to choose more segmented sources of information that are closely aligned with their beliefs or information desires. This has led to individuals using narrowly-focused sources considered more credible to the recipient, often ignoring government communication activity outside these credible networks. A review of the impact of social media on communication and recent governmental activity suggests social-media strategies could be improved by attaching greater importance in planning to encouraging dialogue with the public after dissemination of information, and by leaders providing more insight on issues directly to the members of their organizations while explicitly encouraging use of social media.

Introduction

In the past decade, U.S. communication activities have markedly changed as a result of increased attention, resources and efforts paid to strategic communication. Strategic communication, as defined by a recent White House report, involves synchronizing words, deeds and deliberate efforts in order to communicate and engage with intended audiences.[1] In practice however, strategic communication has often become a structure separate from other communication and operational activities rather than a process or a way of thinking about how to improve communication.[2]

The rise of the Internet and social media during the same period has changed how people communicate. As social media has broadened traditional media's ability to disseminate information and expanded "participation" in the reporting of news, governments have also sought to participate in or influence public online discussions. While the transformation brought by social media is evident, it has not been readily apparent that U.S. government communication activities have kept pace with the media changes. The U.S. departments of State and Defense, the nation's primary organizations conducting public diplomacy and strategic communication activities, have moved extensively into the social media realm to contribute to discussion about their missions, explain official policies and campaigns, and attempt to improve the perception of the United States globally. The effectiveness of these communication efforts, however, is no longer based on the long-assumed synchronization of plans, but more often on the credibility and trustworthiness of the messages and the messengers. As sources of information have multiplied through the expansion of media outlets and social media platforms, citizens now have the luxury of choosing segmented sources of information that are more closely aligned with their beliefs or provide information tailored to their tastes[3]. This ability to selectively determine sources of news and information has led to individuals using narrower groupings of sources considered more credible to the recipient. Government news releases and official social-media posts are often outside these self-selected parameters and therefore considered less credible, especially when policy announcements do not match actions, as in the cases of wartime mistakes on the battlefield or support for authoritarian leaders in other countries.

The increasing use of social media by government communicators raises two questions: How can communication professionals and senior leaders better plan communication in a world influenced by social media, and can social media be used more effectively within current

organizational constructs? A review of the impact of social media on communication and recent governmental activity suggests social-media strategies could be improved by attaching greater importance in planning to encouraging dialogue with the public after dissemination of information, and by leaders providing more insight on issues directly to members of their organization while explicitly encouraging use of social media.

Communication in the post-9/11 era – Just do more, and do it quicker

Strategic communication is an ill-defined and often-debated term. It is useful to view it as a coordinating function rather than a separate planning staff. Policymakers, pundits and even practitioners who joined the debate about how to improve the U.S. image following the al Qaeda attacks of 2011 quickly concluded U.S. diplomats and communicators were losing the strategic communication battles. When asked in 2005 what surprised him about America's conflict with Osama bin Laden, Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani replied, "How has one man in a cave managed to out-communicate the world's greatest communication society?"[4]

Numerous commissions and studies called for revamping the way the United States communicates with domestic and international publics despite the inherent limitations on communication effectiveness caused by inconsistencies between U.S. messages and actions. As a staff officer in the Office of the Secretary of Defense's public affairs division for four years, I observed on several occasions the White House, Office of the Secretary of Defense and Multinational Force-Iraq senior communication advisors attempt to garner media interest and reporting on infrastructure development, security improvements or Iraqi military growing capabilities, only to have the efforts quickly overcome by civilian casualties, corruption in the Iraqi government or a report critical of the U.S. efforts. A leaked memo from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to President George Bush in November 2006, in which Rumsfeld called for adjustments to the strategy in Iraq, was portrayed by most media and bloggers as recognition of a failed strategy. While critics may point to this scenario as a flawed communication plan, I doubt any preparation or messaging could have turned the coverage of the memo into a theme that called this a course correction, especially given the rising violence and U.S. casualties in Iraq and criticism of Rumsfeld.

Media coverage of the Iraq military strategy is just one example of the mixed results of the United States' increased efforts in the past decade that emphasized promoting U.S. values

and marginalizing terrorists' messages. This two-pronged approach has been considered largely ineffective because it relied primarily "on arm's length mass media tools, and self promotional strategies."[5] The objective of improving the U.S. image and support for our policies by delivering messages swiftly and accurately was worthy, but observers noted it appeared officials assumed that America's image problem was based on a lack of information, and the U.S. image would improve if the audience received more accurate information.[6] For the most part, however, the intended audiences in the Middle East described the U.S. efforts as patronizing and condescending. Worse yet, the communication approach was hampered by a gap between stated policies and actions; many people viewed the U.S. policy of promoting freedom, democracy and human rights counter to combat operations in Iraq.

Social Media – From Monologue to Dialogue

While international opinion and support for U.S. policies may not have improved despite an increase in communication and public diplomacy activities, the rise of social media during the past decade has changed the communication environment and related governmental activities. As "new media" became popular, it was increasingly apparent to observers and practitioners alike that this media is more about how people connect than the technology that enables these connections. Blogs, which emerged in the 1990s and grew in popularity in the last decade, allow visitors to post comments and communicate with the author and even each other. More-recent entrants in the online community, such as the Arabic-English forum Meedan and Global Voices, enable two-way interaction among a wide group of participants. The percentage of the American public that uses social-media networks for news is still relatively small,[7] but social media has also increased the speed with which social causes or even political protests have coalesced. Just as then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates had to quickly respond to criticisms over Army housing after the father of a Ft. Bragg soldier posted a video on YouTube showing "appalling" living conditions,[8] Netflix's reversal on pricing and Web page changes and the Susan G. Komen Foundation's reversal of funding for Planned Parenthood are two examples of non-military groups that changed their policies in part due to a groundswell of criticism fueled by social media activity. While observers often highlight the speed and ability to broadcast messages to a larger group of people, it's equally important to view online media as a social tool that increases interaction.

The traditional communication strategy of coordinating message consistency and developing products such as press releases and media relations often ignores the follow-on conversations. As noted social-media proponent Clay Shirky put it, practitioners should use social media maturely by creating an environment and convening a discussion rather than crafting a single message and attempting to control the environment.[9] Social media, with its real-time postings, comments, networks of social circles online and near universal reach through computers, smart phones and tablets, has opened the door for this desired dialogue between the government and various publics.

Diffusion of the gatekeeping function from traditional media, such as printed newspapers and network TV news, to all forms of online sources has resulted in an even greater number of sources that shape and influence how individuals interpret messages.[10] Strategies that facilitate exchange of messages have an edge over strategies rooted in delivering content. By encouraging and participating in conversations that result from comments on official information disseminated by government communicators, organizations may increase credibility and effectively counterbalance the effects of negative perceptions when incidents bring attention to differences between policy and actions.

The Army Headquarters' Online and Social Media staff, for example, uses a strategy that includes follow-on social media postings and monitoring to complement information posted on its official homepage. The actions designed to communicate with soldiers, their families and members of the public interested in the service also account for regional audiences and time-zones concerns by posting information throughout the day.[11] "Whereas information production and dissemination once were critical to gaining the communication advantage, today those who master a network and relational approach will command communication power."[12] But shifting focus from delivery to dialogue still requires audience analysis to focus on build and maintain effective relationships. Network analysis provides an insight into how to move to the next phase of effective communication.

Where to focus -- Network Importance

Networks are interconnected nodes of individuals, groups, organizations or states. These nodes influence the behavior of their members and are usually organized intentionally.[13] A widely cited definition of a network form of organization is "any collection of actors…that

pursue repeated, enduring exchange relations with one another…."[14] Understanding networks is relevant to government communicators because the enduring relationships and exchanges of networks allow messages and information to propagate, and dialogue to continue.

Network-approached communication ends with the message instead of starting with a pre-determined message and attempting to find a platform to disseminate the message. When planners include the goal of increasing dialogue with people in a network, the initial receiver of the information is more likely to pass on that information in a format and forum that is considered credible by the new receiver. An example would be reviewing social media discussion threads about an organization before determining which of several competing priorities should be highlighted in social media and on an organization's Web site.

But how can government communicators improve their ability to monitor, understand and contribute to a variety of networks? Studying the blogosphere to understand where discussions originate, how participants are connected relevant themes, and which networks are worth engaging is a starting point. In a 2009 study, Berkman Center researchers analyzed the Arab blogosphere and determined most discussions were localized, but many "bridge bloggers" served as virtual connectors between discrete discussion groups.[15] Continued participation and use of cluster or link analysis possible through social-media analytics may help digital media teams such as those in the State and Defense departments develop dialogue with useful networks and better understand issues in online communities.

Traditionally only senior leaders or their designated spokespersons for government or military organizations provide approved information to media and the public. This practice encourages consistent messages and helps senior leaders ensure information released supports their objectives. The approval process for messages is usually lengthy, which is particularly troublesome in the context of fast-paced events in the field and equally fast-paced social-media conversations. Although consistency is important, access and being relevant to an increasingly varied set of social networks is also important to maintain the ability to communicate with people outside military circles. If senior military leaders encourage members of their staffs to use social media and provide increased access to these sites while on the job, the indirect access to varied social networks may provide greater situational awareness if users provide informal feedback about online discussions affecting the organization.

Examples of Government Social Media Activity

The Department of Defense has been engaging in the social media environment for several years. The department's headquarters uses various forms of social media to provide official information, answer questions submitted online and engage directly with bloggers. Additionally, the service departments (Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines) conduct similar activities from their headquarters, commands and field units throughout the world. DoD and service policies and guides encourage their members to use social media within the confines of security requirements and military justice rules. The Uniform Code of Military Justice forbids service members from making, in any public forum, statements contemptuous or disloyal to the president and other high-ranking officials, and talking disrespectfully of supervisors.

Regional combatant commands that coordinate with the Department of State and U.S. embassies actively use the Internet to disseminate messages to the public in their area of operations. Web sites in regional languages and English, such as *Central Asia Online* or *Magharebia*, provide news stories, commentary and analysis by staff and contractors who are paid correspondents. The news stories include topics such as operations in Afghanistan, regional trade issues, sports and entertainment. News articles typically include facts of events or incidents and U.S. government messages when relevant, but a focus on intentional dialogue, such as that found on the news aggregator/blogging site Global Voices, is not evident.

U.S. Central Command, responsible for military operations in the Middle East and Central Asia, has operated a digital engagement team since 2008 that goes "where the conversations are" in their areas of operations to correct misinformation or misperceptions, counter terrorist ideology and promote U.S. interests. The team maintains YouTube, Flickr, Facebook and Twitter sites, and also regularly engages in discussions on popular blogs and discussion groups in Arabic, Dari, Persian, Pashto, Urdu and Russian. The 20-member team of native-language speakers follows discussion threads, provides comments and responds to comments and questions.[16] The team engaged in recent online discussions about Iranian naval exercises and the U.S. Navy's rescue of an Iranian fishing vessel from pirates in the North Arabian Sea, explaining U.S. operations assist with freedom of navigation and safety of all mariners transiting the area. All postings on Central Command's social media pages and in open forums are openly acknowledged as coming from the command.[17] Team members focus their

activities in areas that include a military link, and build relationships by discussing issues in a "thoughtful, respectful manner" based on facts.

While effectiveness of remaining credible and changing outlooks can be difficult to determine, the engagement team has seen examples of the tone of dialogue changing following their postings in Farsi forums. After an airstrike along the Afghan/Pakistan border in November 2011, criticism of the American-led mission subsided and comments became less toxic after the team provided factual information on Farsi and Urdu sites. Additionally, it has been apparent to team members that individuals who appear to be Iranian representatives have countered official Central Command postings on the team's Farsi Facebook site. Moderators of Farsi sites have also said that Iranian representatives have asked them to alter responses already posted or even close their sites following anti-regime comments. Iranian press articles have also recently discussed the engagement team's activities and included threats made to the team members. Understanding the value of incrementally building online relationships and learning what people are discussing, communication planners discuss the most-prevalent issues in the various forums during weekly meetings with representatives from public affairs, information operations, intelligence, operations and field commands, and forward their information to the State Department.[18]

Similar to the Defense efforts, the State Department is very active on the Internet and in social media. Main State and embassies alike maintain Internet sites and forums with official documents, articles and speeches explaining policy to the public. The staff of the Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs operates social media activities in its educational and cultural affairs, international information programs, and public affairs bureaus. Policy bureaus within the department also have public diplomacy specialists that maintain social media activity in the local language of their regions. State's Digital Communications Center is responsible for leading the department's official flagship social-media presence and uses briefing guidance to post information on specific online platforms and also provides multimedia products to embassy public affairs officers for their social-media sites. Field staffs are encouraged to develop their own social media plans that support their embassy's strategic engagement plan, which is where the majority of dialogue and online engagement occurs with local populaces.[19]

The State Department also created a Digital Outreach Team in 2006 which employs 10 analysts that post dozens of comments on 25-30 Internet sites per week. The team is active on

many popular sites that cater to Arabic, Persian and Urdu language readers. Similar to the Central Command digital team, members post information, respond to questions and participate in online discussions with full attribution and counter errors in fact posted online. One discussion started by a State representative asking why many in the Arab world condemn Palestinian deaths but not the killing of civilians by suicide bombers in Iraq continued online for four days.[20] According to a State Department fact sheet, the team has posted more than 2,000 messages and received hundreds of thousands of views of its online postings in the first four years of its existence.[21]

While DoD and State social-media activities have increased greatly in the past several years, governmental and private business leaders alike are inquiring more about the effectiveness of online efforts. Measuring results of communication or public relations activities is notoriously difficult. Private-sector marketing practitioners initially measured social-media effects by adapting the traditional return on investment method of determining value. Terms such as "return on engagement, participation, involvement, attention or trust" were introduced to show the amount of time, likelihood of referrals, or attention paid to social media sites. The number of page views, click-throughs, page comments, Social media mentions, YouTube views, positive and negative media reports, and number of social media followers can be measured and correlated with an organization's communication activities.[22] At the State Department's digital center, the number of people submitting questions, number of questions answered or Twitter impressions, provide the core data for measuring a specific engagement's effectiveness. The next level of analysis includes looking at the number of re-tweets or sharing of the information with other users, placement in traditional media, and to what extent the online discussion moved to even more personal engagement off line.[23]

Marketers have also begun using sentiment analysis (tone of conversations) as a way to measure the effectiveness of social-media activities, but attribution and useful analysis remains difficult. In one example of sentiment analysis, researchers studied the tone of comments in response to the State Department Digital Outreach Team's efforts following President Obama's Cairo speech in June 2009. Researchers reviewed postings on social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, popular Arabic Internet discussion forums and commercial news sites and concluded that the measured sentiment toward the United States became more negative following the team's postings -- 42.3% prior to the outreach team's posts compared to 73.4%

after a team member's posting. The researchers acknowledged the negativity could be attributed to the team's decision to primarily engage in discussions that are already negative, a sign that people are interested enough in the issue to continue posting responses rather than ignoring States' posts. And in line with Noelle-Neumann's "spiral of silence" theory, viewers of the site who supported the United States may have felt they were not in the majority and did not post comments. Given the usual one- to two-day lifespan of online conversations, and the even shorter shelf life of 15 minutes for a tweet, another limiting factor of the team's performance was the lengthy time (2.77 days on average) for the team to respond to other users' posts.[24] To the team's credit, their strategy, which calls for targeting negative discussions, and the likelihood they are balancing the discussion for the shadow audience that reads but doesn't post online, should be taken into account when determining effectiveness of the operation. Given the high level of negativity measured after engagement, policymakers should review the effectiveness of digital engagement after addressing the factors that can be controlled. If the teams were enabled to respond quicker, would they be able to reduce negative sentiments? Can the same explanation of government policy be made by directing people to an official Web site instead of producing new posts that require additional approval? Additional research may help policymakers determine if the increased negativity found as a result of the digital engagement is caused by the engagement and if increased efforts are warranted given constant budget challenges.

Examining U.S. efforts in the context of other nations' efforts can also be useful. Examples of effective and ineffective inclusion of social media in communication efforts by other states and non-state actors may be seen in recent conflicts. In 2006, Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers, and Israel responded by launching a massive air campaign in Lebanon following a failed rescue attempt in which eight Israeli Defense Force soldiers were killed. During the ensuing ground operation in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah used social media to create the perception that Israel was attacking civilians in the Gaza Strip. Hezbollah also used its satellite television station, Al Manar, to show near-simultaneous coverage of strikes against Israeli targets while Israeli officials often provided their version of events much later. Israel relied on traditional media to counter enemy claims, while international public opinion criticized Israeli use of cluster munitions and both sides for causing civilian casualties. More than a month after the beginning of hostilities a UN-brokered cease-fire ended the fighting without a clear military winner. After analyzing the Hezbollah success, it appeared their effective actions were

not part of a hierarchically directed strategy, but instead were embedded in planning at lower levels. Two years later, Israeli forces again launched an air attack on the Gaza Strip and a 24-day offensive against Hamas. Having studied the previous conflict, Israeli leaders established a National Information Directorate to explain its military actions, post videos on YouTube and liaise with friendly diasporas. The Israelis used social media extensively, including YouTube, Facebook and blogs, to set the online agenda and preserve Israeli strategic and tactical options. [25] In contrast to the UN-brokered agreement in 2006, the Israelis declared a unilateral cease-fire after determining it had achieved a tactical military victory and reduced Hamas' ability to fire rockets from Gaza.

In a non-military context, governments such as Israel, France, China and Russia reportedly operate covertly in the social media realm by using teams that pretend to be ordinary citizens who engage in blogs and Web discussions to disseminate government views and discredit the opposition.[26] Even without research regarding the credibility of these types of postings it is likely the United States' practice of using full attribution when engaging in online forums should help improve acceptance of U.S. communication when compared to other governments.

Implications and Recommendations

The current communication environment is characterized by increasingly varied online dialogue between people posting information and those reading it. To improve dialogue following posting by governmental organizations, leaders and communications practitioners should consider the audience first, encourage members of the organizations to engage in online conversations, and mitigate risks of less message control by rapidly disseminating information and guidance to members.

The military considers strategic communication a process, and staffs usually develop messages and activities with the intent of supporting policy and coordinating message delivery. Network analysis, such as studying who is communicating online, identifying who is bridging various discrete groups, and determining which sites and forms of communication are considered most credible to the intended recipient of information, should be included early in planning. When developing the communication plans, for example, to explain the U.S. training mission in Afghanistan post 2014, planners could determine which social media sites discuss related issues

such as difficulties of cross-cultural training, stress of deployments and Muslim presence in communities near U.S. bases where additional training may occur, to improve the ability to communicate with and explain policies to more members of the public.

Leaders should also consider disseminating directly to members of the organization on a more frequent basis public affairs guidance and senior-leader perspective on issues. In a hierarchical organization such as the military, members are more likely to participate in online discussions and self identify as a member of the organization if they are aware their leaders are communicating and what the leaders are saying. Members in an open system typically want to contribute and are usually accurate when they communicate even without official messages.[27] Blending hierarchical control with decentralized distribution to everyone in our network, i.e. service members, family members, reservists, retirees, community members, etc., may improve message delivery. It's also likely leaders and communicators will reach more networks than the organization can on its own through official spokespersons and receive more feedback on messaging and how the organization is perceived by outsiders.

The deadly protests in Afghanistan following the unintentional burning of the Quran at Bagram Air Base in February 2012 provides an example through which to view this proposal for disseminating messages to service members. The International Security Assistance Force-Afghanistan commander issued a video statement after hearing of the burning incident, and his statement was posted on the ISAF's Facebook page. Within hours a soldier formerly deployed to Afghanistan as a mentor to the Afghan army engaged in a Facebook discussion with Afghans and U.S. citizens that was initially critical of the ISAF response. The soldier briefly explained the counterinsurgency strategy and reasons for the commander making a quick public apology, and the follow-on conversation on the Web site included a comment from an Afghan questioning the legitimacy of the rioting. This is an example of a service member having access to the leaders' points and engaging credibly in an online discussion without public affairs assistance.

Conclusion

America has traditionally reduced its public diplomacy efforts as it transitioned from wartime to peacetime. The public and elected leaders grew tired of information campaigns and ended the Committee on Public Information after World War I, the Office of War Information following World War II, and incorporated the U.S. Information Agency into the State

Department following the end of the Cold War.[28] The recent expansion of online communication and technology that connects people globally calls for increased dialogue and greater emphasis on effective communication.

Leaders and communicators could add weight to many communication improvements underway and improve their ability to understand issues and contribute to the online discussions by using a communication strategy that includes analysis of networks and empowers service members to engage in social media with official information readily available. Additionally, official encouragement and increased access to networks will reinforce current communication initiatives and enable rank-and-file members of organizations to help with the process of understanding, engaging and contributing official messages to online discussions.

Social media requires enough resources to be effective, but relatively inexpensive analytics and assessment tools are available for use in most levels of government. Additionally, commercially-designed analytical products that improve measurements of impact and may require additional funding could be limited to national or headquarters-level communication staffs that can provide tailored products to assist field units.

Commanders and policy makers should expect communication actions based on dialogue and decentralized execution to be timelier, more relevant, and help service members and families better understand official priorities. This should also contribute to greater unity of effort for the mission without adding new communication layers or staffs.

Leaders should be prepared to accept potentially increased risk of service members making comments not fully in line with leadership messages as they encourage service members to engage on issues. This potential risk can be mitigated by providing guidance rapidly and directly to all personnel. The alternative of forcing a more centralized approach to control the message will likely exacerbate the disparity between the speed of official responses and public desire for timely, credible information.

The various social media being used today will be even more important in a future communication environment likely involving greater "audience participation." Technology will further meld existing and new applications and become more instantaneous and central to our way of life at home, work, on the battlefield and in all facets of life. As new-media activity increases, government leaders and communicators should continue to look for opportunities to encourage use of social media and foster dialogue after dissemination of official information.

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Endnotes

[1] Obama, *"National Framework for Strategic Communications,"* 2.

[2] Mullen, *From the Chairman - Strategic Communication: Getting Back to Basics,* 1.

[3] See Slater, "Reinforcing Spirals: The Mutual Influence of Media Selectivity and Media Effects and Their Impact on Individual Behavior and Social Identity" for a discussion of media-selectivity effects.

[4] Mahbubani, Kishore. "China, U.S., Europe - Whose Century?" *The Globalist*, 2 March 2005, http://www.theglobalist.com/StoryId.aspx?StoryId=4406.

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