

ON THE NATURE OF

Strategic

COMMUNICATIONS

By CARNES LORD

Strategic communications, as now generally understood within the Department of Defense (DOD), encompass (to use the bureaucratic terms of art) public affairs, “defense support for public diplomacy,” and military psychological operations (PSYOP). That there has been something less than smooth cooperation among these various components is hardly a secret.

In the fall of 2001, for instance, the Pentagon established an Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) with significant funding of its own to plan and coordinate a joint and coalition campaign to shape the communications battlefield in the war on terror. This promising initiative promptly blew up. In early 2002, Secretary Donald Rumsfeld felt compelled to disestablish OSI when press accounts alleged that the office was placing so-called disinformation in the American media (later investigation showed the charges to be false or grossly misleading). Evidently, these attacks were inspired from within the Pentagon itself by elements of the DOD public affairs community. Continuing tension between the PSYOP and public affairs communities over the fundamental nature of strategic communications remains perhaps the most serious impediment to more effective action by the Defense Department in this critical arena.¹

Truth Versus Journalism

The OSI incident highlights the powerful constraints imposed on the U.S. Government in the strategic communications arena by American political culture—more specifically, the culture of the so-called mainstream media. These constraints operate in several ways. Most obviously, the media directly shape the strategic communications agenda by defining what is newsworthy, setting the standards by which news is reported, and framing news items in what might be called a narrative of their own. Anyone familiar with the operating environment of the

Afghan National Police officer reads free newspaper



55th Combat Camera Company (Bertha Flores)

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media understands the power of such narratives and how difficult it is to correct the impression they initially make on an audience. Second, and not so obviously, the media form the strategic communications agenda by shaping the outlook of those laboring in the strategic communications vineyards. In fact, many of these people were trained as journalists, worked in commercial journalism before joining the government, and are deeply invested in the fundamental assumptions of the media world.

Among these fundamental assumptions is a set of beliefs about what I shall simply call “truth”—about what constitutes truth in the context of journalism as well as the value of truth so understood. A careful analysis of these beliefs can help us understand the

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limitations of contemporary journalism and thereby provide some necessary perspective on the proper tasks and challenges facing strategic communications by governments.

Perhaps the overriding characteristic of journalistic truth is empiricism. By this I mean that journalists anchor their stories by reference to observed facts or to facts or opinions derived from contact with living individuals. The problem, of course, is that facts do not simply speak for themselves and also that recitals of facts by themselves are unappealing as a practical matter to the mass audiences for whom journalists write. So these facts are embedded in a story that links them and tries to make sense of them (the “narratives” I mentioned earlier). Good journalism is defined by skill in melding facts with narratives. Bad journalism has two extremes; the more dangerous is the extreme that purveys narratives

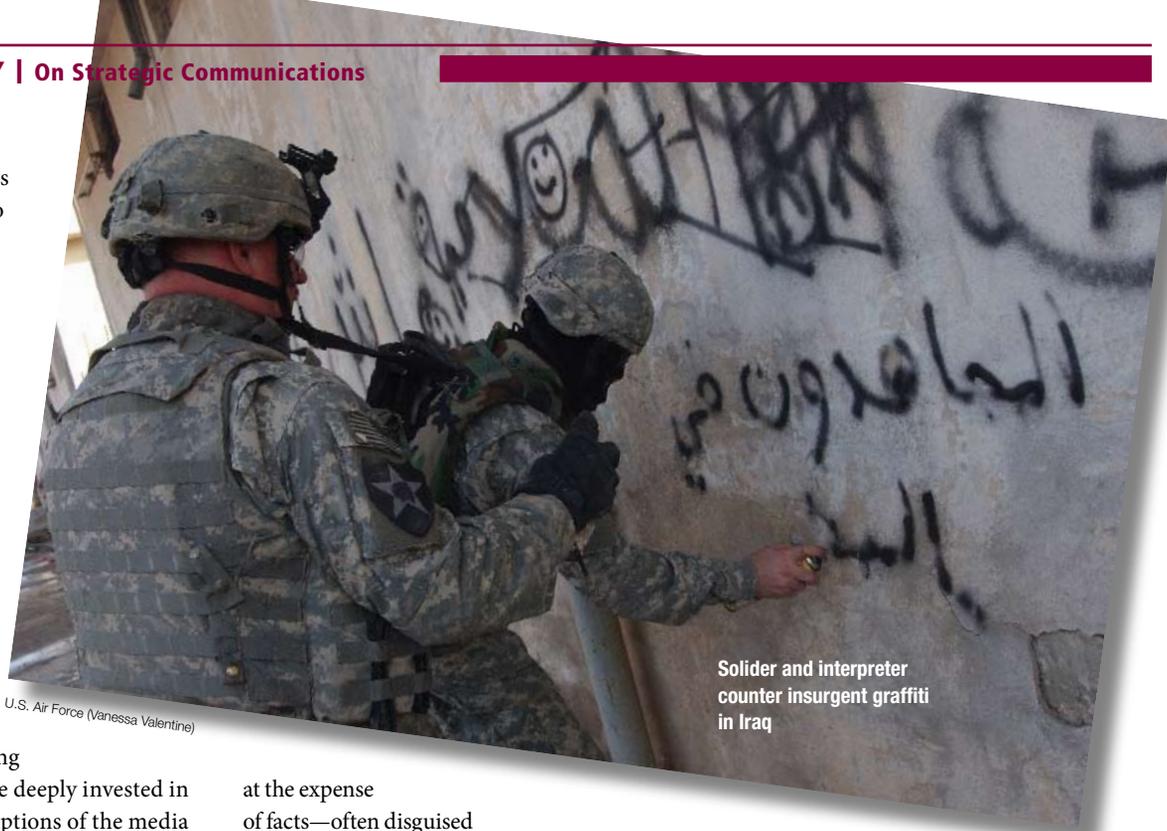
at the expense of facts—often disguised through a selective use of facts or indeed of invented facts or pseudo-facts. Spectacular cases of bad journalism of this sort are not especially rare these days even in American media of the highest prestige (*The New York Times* being a recent case in point). It is also worth noting that such journalism is more the norm than the exception in many other parts of the world, and particularly in the Middle East. Indeed, in many regions of the globe, truth in any sense has at best a tenuous relationship to the profession of journalism.

A rarely questioned belief of contemporary journalism is that truth in the sense just discussed is valuable to its audiences. A bedrock conviction as to the utility of truth is at the heart of American journalism’s self-understanding, linked to its conviction of the absolute sanctity of the free speech provision of the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It does not take a great deal of philosophical analysis to see that this belief is totally untenable. There is little visible utility, for example, in extended media coverage of mining disasters, triple murders, or interstate pile-ups; at the end of the day, this is journalism as entertainment, not public service. The widely noted tendency of the American media today to cover war in the spirit of a spectator sport is equally problematic from this perspective. The point of all this is not to trash the media but simply to question the

pretenses of the media to the moral high ground in their ongoing if undeclared war against the strategic communications programs of the U.S. Government.

Let me return to the issue of truth. To see clearly the limitations of journalistic truth, we might distinguish two other sorts of truth. One kind I will call “granular truth,” the other “higher truth.” By granular truth, I mean a level of truth that reflects a greater degree of analysis than is generally performed by journalists. Such analysis provides essential context for understanding the meaning of the empirical facts that journalists present; it can be historical, comparative, or quantitative in character. Generally, this sort of analysis is what historians or social scientists do. There is nothing preventing journalists from doing it themselves, and the best sometimes do, but generally they lack the time and the appropriate skills. One might think that academic analysis can be directly appropriated by journalists to shape their narratives. The reality is that such studies are cited by journalists more than they are actually read, and often serve decorative as much as substantive purposes. In bad journalism, the use of such material often borders on the fraudulent or serves a barely disguised ideological agenda.

By higher truth, I have in mind something such as the Platonic notion of a level of reality that is in a sense more real than the merely empirical. This is the realm of



U.S. Air Force (Vanessa Valentine)

Soldier and interpreter counter insurgent graffiti in Iraq

grand ideas, of fundamental truths about man, nature, the right form of government, the best life, and, not least, war. At the end of the day, the empirical facts of journalistic truth are meaningless unless they can be located in relation to truth in this sense. Journalists are particularly ill equipped to perform such a function, though again, there are exceptions (for example, consider someone such as Timothy Garten Ash, or from an older era, the great Walter Lippmann). Examples of higher truths in this sense are Clausewitz's "fog of war," or his thought that intelligence in war is unreliable.

Implications for Strategic Communications

Let us return to the OSI incident. Much confusion has arisen over the question of whether OSI activities involved "lying" to the media. While there was apparently a small covert component to the OSI kitbag involving press placements with foreign—not domestic—media, there is no evidence that these placements were anything other than truthful in the ordinary journalistic sense. Military psychological operators in fact regularly claim that American PSYOP deals only in truth. If or to the extent that this is correct, however, it becomes difficult to distinguish PSYOP from public diplomacy—or, for that matter, from public affairs, the strategic communications interface with the domestic media. But the psychological operators seem unable to convince others that this is really the case.

A major study published recently by the National Defense University of lessons learned from our recent operational experience reveals considerable unhappiness on the part of field commanders with the performance of PSYOP forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and argues that there is a pressing need to reconceptualize the PSYOP discipline.² In particular, it holds that the notion that psychological operations only deal in truth is self-defeating and unsustainable and that much more attention needs to be given to increasing the persuasiveness of PSYOP messages through appealing to human emotions. It suggests that psychological operations need to be reoriented to support combat commanders at the tactical and operational level, rather

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than producing public diplomacy, such as materials for theater-wide consumption. Such a reorientation could go a long way to clarify the respective missions of PSYOP and public affairs and reduce the tensions between them.

Whether DOD has a distinct public diplomacy function apart from supporting State Department requirements in this area is a murky question, but I believe the answer has to be *yes*.³ There is a wide range of public diplomacy issues that can only be effectively handled by people with intimate and current knowledge of defense and security matters (consider the enormous role that intelligence issues have had in the public debate in this country and abroad over the war in Iraq). The core of the defense public diplomacy function is counterpropaganda, counterdisinformation, and the care and feeding of the foreign press. The core of the defense public affairs function is the care and feeding of the domestic press. As such, it is fair enough to say that both of these disciplines deal in "truth."

To differentiate them properly, however, let us return to the different senses of truth discussed earlier. A case can be made that public diplomacy needs to operate not only at the journalistic level of truth but also at the granular and the higher truth levels. Public diplomacy and public affairs alike need to keep journalism honest by countering factual lies or mistakes and—perhaps more importantly—challenging its narratives when they become overly detached from empirical

truth. At the same time, public diplomacy should operate in more sophisticated modes. It should be able to bring to bear, if only in limited ways, the granular contextual analyses of historians and social scientists, and it should be able to tap into the higher truth—if you like, "bigger picture"—interpretations of metajournalists, intellectuals, or philosophers. To state the matter in this way is to make it obvious that not only the Defense Department but also the State Department itself—the lone official guardians of public diplomacy today—are a long way from having such capabilities. **JFQ**

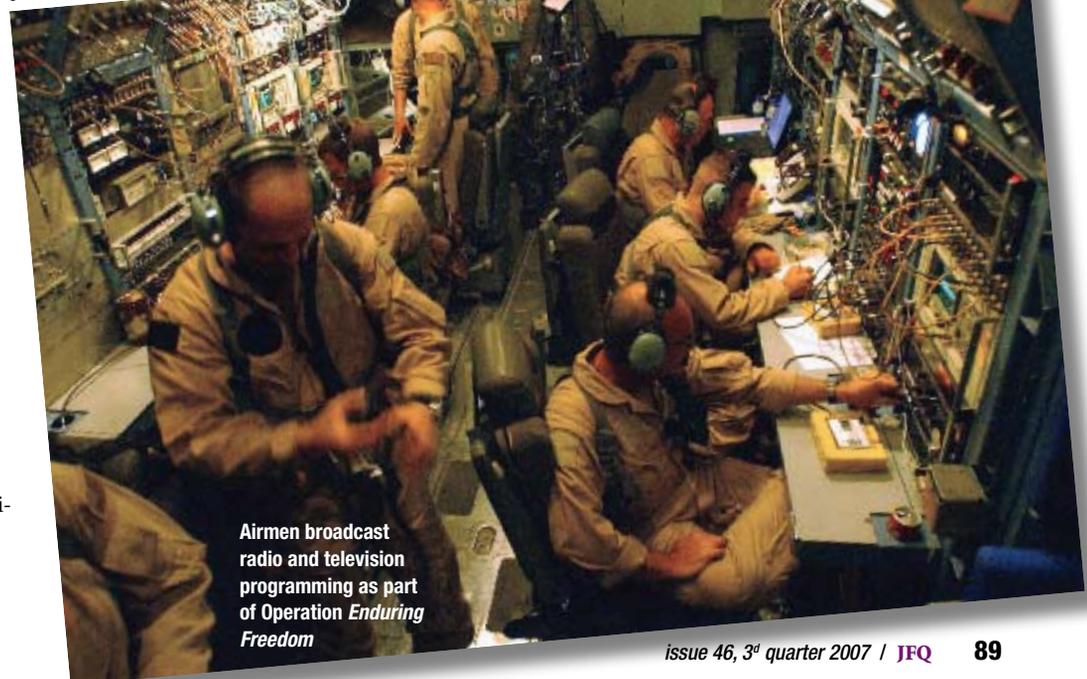
NOTES

¹ See Brigadier General Simon P. Worden, USAF, Lieutenant Colonel Martin E.B. France, USAF, and Major Randall R. Correll, USAF (Ret.), "Information War: Strategic Influence and the Global War on Terror," unpublished paper, October 2002. General Worden (since retired) was Director of the Office of Strategic Influence.

² See Christopher J. Lamb, "Review of Psychological Operations Lessons Learned from Recent Operational Experience" (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2005), available at <www.ndu.edu/inss/Occasional_Papers/Lamb_OP_092005_Psypops.pdf>.

³ See Robin A. Campbell, Lieutenant Colonel Annette N. Foster, ANG, and Lieutenant Colonel Steven J. Smith, USA, *Harnessing the Military's Voice: An Argument for a Greater Role in Public Diplomacy by the U.S. Military*, National Security Program Discussion Paper Series (Boston: John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2005).

U.S. Navy (Aaron Ansarov)



Airmen broadcast radio and television programming as part of Operation Enduring Freedom