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What if the Pen is a Sword? Communicating in a Chaotic, Sensational, and Weaponized Information Environment

by Jay Janzen

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Introduction

Fake news, disinformation, post-truth, and weaponized narratives are new descriptors that have unexpectedly permeated today's chaotic information environment. Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) commanders attempting to manoeuvre in this politicized and contested battle-space face considerable risks, and strategic paralysis is often the result. According to scholars from the RAND 'think-tank,' the deciding factor in future warfare will be narrative, or more specifically, "whose

story wins."¹ Inaction therefore, is not an option — the CAF must adapt to change and complexity in order to remain both credible and potent in this burgeoning domain. Efforts are well underway at the operational and tactical levels, including several interrelated efforts to modernize and harmonize military public affairs, information operations, non-kinetic targeting, and other enablers. This article argues, however, that decisive narrative battles will take place primarily at the strategic level, and that serious points of potential failure exist along the fault-lines of the political-military dynamic. A scan of the complex information environment will be conducted from a strategic perspective, highlighting domestic and adversarial quandaries. The article will next consider implications for Canada's civil-military relationship, including the need to add *ethical influence* to the CAF public affairs toolbox. It will then advocate for a refined strategic communications approach: *Altruistic Adaptive Communications Engagement* (AACE). Then, it will conclude by recommending corresponding institutional adaptation at the strategic level to ensure the CAF remains ethical, flexible, connected, and formidable in the information domain.²

Media Sensation and Politics: A Virtual Minefield for Military Commanders

The information marketplace in which Canadians live is both crowded and contested. Gone are the days of tightly controlled messages and brands. Today, ideas spread and mutate in a chaotic fashion similar to contagion.³ The ‘many-to-many’ communications revolution ushered in by the advent of social media has both bolstered and eroded ideals, such as democratic debate, transparency, and information credibility. Regrettably, critical thinking has given way to ‘surfing’ for the typical information consumer, and this flickering of attention from topic to topic creates a “vulnerability to falsehood.”⁴ Today, truth appears customizable, perception is everything, and “facts matter not at all.”⁵

The pace of today’s media cycle is unrelenting, unceasing, and virtually unconstrained by physical or virtual borders. Broadcasting technology now resides within mobile phones, and spaces once controlled by media and governments are now teeming with new players with myriad motivations. Business models for media have been disrupted, resulting in upheaval, staff reductions, and far fewer expert journalists in the domain of defence. The rise of superficial ‘infotainment’ is undermining serious journalism and critical thought.⁶ A 2018 industry study revealed that only 49% of Canadians trust the credibility of media reporting. Globally, 66% of individuals surveyed believe media are more concerned with attracting viewers than accuracy, and 59% suspect journalists are more driven by ideology than public interest.⁷ This leads some scholars to postulate that media agencies employ a ‘problem frame’ that highlights a discourse of *fear* and *crisis* because these boost audiences and benefit the bottom line.⁸ The only media watchdogs in Canada are self-regulating, journalists are seldom investigated, and penalties amount to corrections penned and positioned as offending outlets see fit.⁹

When political dynamics are intermingled with a sensationalized media landscape, the results are a veritable minefield for military commanders. Donald Savoie, an academic expert in the field of public administration, says government operates in a “fishbowl,” and issues that would scarcely be noticed in the private sector become months-long, full-blown political crises when the public sector is involved.¹⁰ While access to information requests are an important mechanism of government transparency, Savoie highlights their extensive use by media,

legislators, and interest groups seeking to embarrass the government.¹¹ Similarly, he notes how internal government audits aimed at improving performance are regularly exploited by journalists and opposition parties for professional and partisan purposes.¹² Public figures are regularly targeted by ‘gotcha questions’ from media, which the Open School of Journalism says “poisons the news.”¹³ Other political science experts, such as Peter Aucoin and Mark Jarvis, agree that media has become increasingly aggressive and hostile, leaving many “doubting the value of enhanced transparency.”¹⁴ They add that, rather than raising accountability of elected officials, new mechanisms of transparency have primarily served to increase the exposure of public servants.¹⁵ According to Savoie, all these factors have led to a countervailing pressure by ruling governments to “manage the news, to cover up errors, and to put a ‘spin’ on damaging information.”¹⁶ Journalists rightfully complain of excessive delays in accessing government documents and the frustration of receiving meaningless talking points in response to detailed queries. Clearly, alarming trends are emerging on both sides, but

for now, these remain the exception to solid journalistic standards and ethical communications staff in Canada. That said, their growing predominance threatens to erode the fabric of democracy and government accountability.

Weaponization of Information

As the information environment grows increasingly fractured, sensational, and polarized, it becomes vulnerable to other alarming trends. Over the past decade, potentially maligning state and non-state actors have begun to place increasing emphasis on the development and deployment of ‘weaponized’ information capabilities. Such ‘weaponized’ tactics generally consist of efforts to leverage overt and covert information sources,



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The Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia/First Deputy Defence Minister Valery Gerasimov (L), and the Mayor of Moscow, Sergei Sobyanin, at a meeting of the Security Council of Russia in the Kremlin, 6 April 2018.

platforms, and technology in an attempt to disrupt democratic systems, alliances, and societal cohesion. Kremlin attempts to sow discord and confusion during several recent electoral campaigns in Europe and America provide an illustrative example of the potential dangers behind such activities. Experts fear that such measures have the distinct potential to create deep threats to national security.¹⁷ In 2013, Russia's Chief of the General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, stated that, "the rules of war have cardinally changed," and the effectiveness of "non-military tools" in achieving strategic or political goals in a conflict has exceeded that of weapons.¹⁸ NATO's Assistant Secretary General for Intelligence and Security recently indicated that Russia was stepping up its use of propaganda and disinformation to offset its relative military weakness.¹⁹ During operations in Georgia and Ukraine, the Kremlin was suspected of refining capabilities including maskirovka (deception) and reflexive control (covert efforts to make an opponent voluntarily select a preferred, pre-determined course of action). Russian officials have also spent considerable resources developing global information platforms, including overt media, such as RT and Sputnik. They have unleashed covert proxies including mock 'think-tanks,' planted 'experts,' and co-opted bloggers and activists sometimes pejoratively called 'useful idiots.'²⁰ Some of these, exemplified by fake Twitter personality Jenna Abrams, are quoted by top media, and they attract tens-of-thousands of followers before they are exposed.²¹ Artificial intelligence is increasing the sophistication of automated 'bot' accounts, enhancing their ability to evade detection and raise the profile of disinformation. Leveraging these tools, the Kremlin seeks to divide alliances, disrupt national cohesion, interfere in elections, and create turmoil in western societies. China's doctrine of "Three Warfares" (psychological operations, media manipulation, and legal warfare) previously

directed principally at Taiwan, is now increasing in Central and Eastern Europe.²²

Non-state actors, such as Daesh, have also proven effective in this domain, spreading extremism and attracting international recruits via video, social media, and the on-line magazine *Dabiq*.²³ The terror group has even employed drones to record aerial propaganda footage of attacks upon Iraqi government forces. Both state and non-state actors are rapidly weaponizing the information domain, and scholars fear the victims will be truth, reason, and reflection.²⁴ Strategists postulate that future conflict will hinge upon competitions between strategic narratives, meaning that the implications for CAF commanders are great.²⁵ But given that adversarial information campaigns will extend into the politicized domestic media environment, how will senior officers counter disinformation attacks while dodging policy pitfalls? Will military generals be capable of distinguishing covert attacks by adversarial proxies from the legitimate probing of Canadian media and opposition members? The following section deals with the serious quandaries arrayed along the fault lines of the civil-military relationship.

The Information Environment and Civil Control of the Military

In a Western civil-military context, a key element of political control over a nation's armed forces is an active free press that functions as a watchdog.²⁶ Accountability is a basic and essential attribute of open, democratic societies. Journalists help ensure military leaders remain responsive to politicians, and that elected officials remain accountable to citizens. The current degradation of the information environment has led to widespread criticism of the press, eroding their veracity and



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Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (a.k.a. Daesh) propaganda photo showing masked militia holding the ISIS black banner of Muhammad.



Parliament Hill, Ottawa.

legitimacy. This assault has dangerous consequences, including weakening society's "resiliency to weaponized narrative that a respected press provides."²⁷ It also reduces civil control over the military, and diminishes government accountability. Professional media criticism is an important democratic safeguard that helps ensure military activities and expenditures remain aligned with the expectations and norms of wider society. The CAF, therefore, has a vested and long-term interest in ensuring defence journalism in Canada remains active, credible, and professional. After all, the military and the Fourth Estate share the same desired end state: a vibrant and healthy democratic society. Obviously, the ongoing relationship will remain tumultuous, but military leaders should consider the media a powerful potential ally in the fight against adversarial information efforts.

Civil-military matters become even more complex when 'weaponized' attacks are introduced into the information domain. The nexus between the military, their political masters, and journalists will create puzzling predicaments as the nation faces covert information attacks. The Kremlin and other actors are employing decentralized hybrid information tactics in order to obscure the origins, motives, and intent of such action. As more is learned about

these hostile activities, one matter is becoming increasingly clear. The broad parameters and guidance behind these hostile campaigns are generated at the *strategic* level, and the potential targets, outcomes, and effects are themselves strategic. Therefore, a uniquely military response to such developments would be inappropriate, as it is a civil responsibility to set policy, consider alternatives, define national discussions, and make strategic decisions.²⁸ That stated, civil-military relations expert Stephen Saideman argues that generally, elected officials lack "the power, the expertise, and the interest" to engage in serious accountings of complex military issues.²⁹ He argues that parliamentarians are constrained by restrictions on the accessing of military information as well as by limitations upon their time. Politicians therefore, have a strong tendency to focus upon *sensational*, yet *superficial* issues, rather than weighty matters of strategy and policy.³⁰ He feels the best Canadians can hope for is

that the Minister of National Defence (MND) and the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) perform well on their own, as oversight from Parliament will be weak and ill-informed.³¹ Another expert, Yagil Levy, builds upon this theme by observing that the media are predisposed to cover "episodes" rather than complicated processes.³² He notes that a "news-as-commodity" approach can lead to media bias, potential manipulation by the military, a

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General Sir Mike Jackson leaving Downing Street Watch with War Cabinet Meeting, April, 2003.

lack of advocacy for policy alternatives, and diminished civilian control.³³ The third and final aspect in this trinity of trouble is the fact that military strategists are unlikely to get timely and decisive political direction regarding how to respond to information attacks. As the highly-distinguished British General Sir Mike Jackson, a former Chief of the General Staff once quipped regarding deployed military operations: "...political guidance can be really helpful... if you get it."³⁴ So, if such guidance is scarce for deployed commanders, what can be expected in response to hybrid information attacks whose origins and very existence may be extremely difficult to detect? Crown ministers are consumed with the frenetic issues of the day, often fueled by media and opposition activity. This leaves military leaders with a dilemma. If political direction is not forthcoming, should generals accept the risks of active engagement in the hybrid information environment? Donald Savoie sums up the expectations of ruling political authorities this way: civil servants are to avoid public profile, and even if actions are correct 99 percent of the time, the focus will be on the one percent that goes wrong.³⁵ Senior CAF officers have faced disproportionate criticism in the past for minor public 'kerfuffles,' including calling terrorists "murderers and scumbags," citing "toxic narratives" in the media, and calling upon journalists to engage in deeper debates besides whether deployed military missions constitute "combat." These incidents were met with a barrage of outrage from select journalists, including accusations that the military is bent upon using its public relations machine to

"To successfully inform, one must earn the trust of audiences, which also requires targeted persuasion to generate specific effects such as trust and learning."

stifle political debate, and to muzzle, marginalize, and intimidate journalists.³⁶ Clearly, military leaders will not enjoy *carte blanche* when it comes to confronting sensitive, strategic-level information issues directed at the CAF or Canadians *writ large*. But, given the gravity of the potential threats, inaction is also not an option. Hybrid information attacks will not be limited to the military alone. Rather, they will be omnidirectional, synchronized, adaptive, and potentially overwhelming.³⁷ Therefore, it is time for serious engagement with respect to this matter among senior political, military, and government officials. A pan-government strategy must be developed that includes standing or rapidly-delivered political guidance, along with ample delegated authorities and boundaries within which officials are empowered to respond and engage. Further, the government must seek to partner with media, 'think-tanks,' opinion-leaders, and others in civil society in order to foster cooperation, coordination, and resiliency in the face of potential adversarial information campaigns. Time is short, as the 2019 federal election in Canada is an obvious target for hybrid action. The specific details of such a whole-of-government strategy are outside the scope of this article, but one key civil-military question remains: should the CAF engage in activities aimed at influencing Canadians and generating desired effects among the population?

The Question of Influence and Countering Narratives

Given significant shifts in the information environment, it is time to reconsider whether it is necessary and appropriate for domestic public affairs activities to attempt to *influence* Canadian and allied audiences. Current Canadian public affairs (PA) doctrine is fourteen-years-old, and based upon principles of openness, transparency, credibility, and the duty to *inform* Canadian and international audiences of CAF activities.³⁸ Conversely, the recently-updated information operations (IO) doctrine is aimed at affecting the will, capability, and understanding of a range of actors and audiences, but strictly in accordance with laws, policies, doctrine, orders, and directives. Traditionally, PA has been used within Canadian and Allied territories to *inform* populations, while IO has been leveraged in overseas environments to *dissuade* and *counter* the efforts of potential adversaries while *attracting* the support of local populations. Within Canada, IO is only conducted under Crown prerogative, which occurs exclusively under exceptional circumstances.³⁹ With PA limited to *informing* activities, and with IO *influence* normally limited to overseas operations, how can the CAF hope to permeate the complexity of the current information environment? A small

group of political activists and select journalists seem troubled by the prospect of CAF influence in Canada, and conjure images of propaganda machines, the "weaponization" of public affairs, and the muzzling and intimidation of journalists.⁴⁰ In short, they fear that the CAF will engage in many of the very same tactics that potential adversaries employ on a regular basis. Such arguments ignore the fact that it is virtually impossible to inform audiences without engaging in some degree of influence. When communicators seek to educate, they approach subjects from a particular viewpoint, and they possess conscious and unconscious biases that are impossible to escape. To successfully



DND photo

Brigadier-General Jay Janzen, the current Canadian Armed Forces Director of Public Affairs.

The Directorate of Public Affairs crest.

inform, one must earn the trust of audiences, which also requires *targeted persuasion* to generate specific effects such as trust and learning. The question then, is not *whether* CAF commanders and communicators should influence, but rather *how* they should govern attempts to persuade.

Ethical Influence – A New Approach

In order to interact with Canadians in a meaningful and visible way, the CAF should consider the formal adoption of a concept of *ethical influence* into updated CAF PA doctrine. Limiting domestic communications to *informing alone* risks being drowned-out and possibly outmanoeuvred by adversarial efforts. On the other hand, the CAF cannot compromise its moral standing and credibility by leveraging the tactics of authoritarian states and extremist groups. The concept of *ethical influence* offers a clear solution to this dilemma.



DND photo

To be permissible, domestic PA influence efforts should be required to meet four key criteria: they must be *truthful, transparent, helpful, and limited*.

The motto of the PA Branch is ‘*Veritas*’ (Latin for truth), and all practitioners must consistently strive to uphold this maxim. In the ‘post-truth environment,’ *credibility* is more essential than ever, necessitating the need to ensure all PA communications are truthful and grounded in fact. This should not preclude the use of narrative devices such as storytelling, framing, metaphor, and emotion; so long as the collective results of such efforts affirm *facts*, rather than elicit *deception*. Truth must remain the primary and inviolable principle behind all communications to domestic and allied audiences. In overseas theatres, information practitioners not simultaneously employed in PA positions may use tactical deception and misinformation to lure adversaries into making bad decisions. This is fair game during armed conflict, but such activity must not be conducted by those currently performing a PA function, and should be limited to adversaries to the greatest extent possible. Deceiving an in-theatre civilian population is counterproductive to overall efforts, particularly in counterinsurgencies, where establishing trust is pivotal to success.⁴¹

Second, PA influence must always be *transparent*, meaning all communications efforts must be *attributable*. Some activities may be more or less formal than others,

but the responsible agency or individual must always be real and identifiable. The use of covert proxies to achieve direct information effects should never be permissible in PA campaigns. CAF officials may seek to inform Canadian stakeholders and opinion leaders, but must never attempt to control how those entities communicate with their own audiences. Similarly, PA officers may attempt to persuade journalists during background conversations, but media remain free to report in any way they see fit.

Third, all PA efforts to persuade must be *helpful*. For example, a campaign to solicit interest among Canadians in joining the CAF would be considered

by most to be *beneficial*, not *harmful* information. Similarly, seeking support and understanding for ongoing CAF deployed operations will be viewed by the majority of Canadians as normal and permissible activity. There are definite grey areas, however, particularly in areas of policy and procurement, where CAF members must tread with extreme caution. CAF campaigns to solicit increased defence funding, or the procurement of specific equipment, for example, would be highly inappropriate, as such decisions fall squarely under the purview of the civil authorities. Decisions regarding the deployment of troops, policy development, and matters before government must always be considered off-limits for comment by uniformed members. On the other hand, efforts highlighting the interesting and valuable service of military members among Canadians is not a harmful activity, and thus, should be conducted with creativity, pride, and flair.

Finally, CAF efforts to influence domestic populations must be limited. Campaigns should strive to be noticed in a crowded information landscape, and efforts should be made to engage Canadians to the point where they consider and understand the military viewpoint on appropriate issues and subjects. CAF efforts should cease at this point of understanding, leaving citizens free to make informed decisions based upon context that includes military perspectives. The military should never engage in lobbying or attempt to manipulate public opinion on defence issues. Doing so would be counterproductive and likely lead to reduced respect and credibility among the population.

Ethically-based military influence should also include the ability for CAF commanders to respond to criticism, from media and from pundits, particularly when arguments lack context, or are based upon factual errors. For example, isolated incidents and the words of a few disgruntled members are occasionally leveraged by media to portray a narrative of widespread institutional crisis and ineptitude that is not reflective of wider reality. CAF officials must be free to counter negative commentary in the media by contributing valuable context to public debate, so long as such activities remain outside the realm of major policy and procurement decision-making. Commanders should also be at liberty to highlight the presence of adversarial information activity in the Canadian environment, and to encourage citizens to engage in critical thinking and information verification. As with a pathogen, the best defence to disinformation is not an antidote, but rather awareness and protective measures.⁴² The CAF should be free to foster healthy skepticism ahead of anticipated information attacks, and military communicators should actively undermine adversarial campaigns and reinforce Canadian narratives whenever practicable. Countering disingenuous narratives and highlighting potential adversarial influence is not a nefarious and weaponized activity. Rather, it stems from a transparent desire to provide valuable context to Canadians. Direct public responses to sensational reporting may cause angst for a small minority of journalists with lower professional standards and ethics. Undoubtedly, this will lead to reactions regarding CAF counter-narrative efforts, necessitating the need to assess risk, and to engage only when appropriate and strategically beneficial. The criteria ‘truthful, transparent, helpful, and limited’ must be considered holistically, and assessments must be unambiguous prior to taking action. These standards should be enshrined in CAF PA doctrine, as failure to fulfill them will result in a loss of credibility and the moral high-ground relative to the conduct of our adversaries and critics.

Altruistic Adaptive Communications Engagement

Today’s chaotic information environment is a high-stakes affair, necessitating the need to minimize risks and maximize payouts. To ensure a winning hand, the CAF needs to play an ‘ace,’ by adopting a methodology of Altruistic, Adaptive Communications Engagement (AACE). This article will now outline the key tenets of such an approach, and then conclude with associated recommendations to ensure future success.

“Narrative is another powerful tool that must be harnessed by military communicators.”

The ‘altruistic’ aspect of this outlook is primordial, and has already been discussed at length in the previous section on *ethical influence*. It is critical that all military communications bear the hallmarks of ‘truth, transparency, limits, and helpfulness’ in order to reinforce the credibility and moral authority of the CAF and its commanders amid a toxic post-truth environment. This altruistic moral stance may limit the availability of short-term tactics and tools, but it will prove to be a clear strategic advantage over the course of a long-term battle of narratives.

The second precept of the AACE methodology is ‘adaptive communications.’ Military leaders and communicators should seriously consider leveraging the principles of narrative and design thinking in order to achieve enhanced results in the current information domain. Design thinking is a creative problem solving process that employs empathy, experimentation, and the analysis of interplay within systems in order to arrive at innovative solutions. The armed forces of several allied nations are applying this process to military strategy, and this article argues that this utility extends into the domain of strategic communication. Wilbur Schramm, an American authority on mass communications, advanced a classical linear model of communication that no longer applies in today’s ‘many-to-many’ networked and contested communications environment.⁴³ General James N. Mattis rejected linear approaches in strategy, noting that a “...joint force must act in uncertainty and thrive in chaos.”⁴⁴ Multiple, creative, and constantly evolving solutions will be required for success in the information environment, necessitating ‘outside-the-box’ thinking

that considers interrelationships between actors, the dynamics of complex audiences, and the identification of potential boomerang effects that may arise as a result of CAF communications actions. Design thinking will place more emphasis upon listening, empathy, creativity, and the interconnectedness of the information environment. It is argued that by leveraging this non-linear process, new and more creative communications campaigns will result.

Narrative is another powerful tool that must be harnessed by military communicators. Traditional news releases and talking points must give way to the use of emotion, metaphor, and imagery to convey essential information to selected audiences. Cognitive psychologists agree that the human brain is six-to-seven times more likely to remember facts associated with stories as opposed to facts in isolation.⁴⁵ Strategist Emile Simpson argues that future conflict will centre upon “competition to impose meaning on people,” which is “as much emotional as rational.”⁴⁶ As the CAF seeks to counter sensational and adversarial information, it must leverage the persuasive power of narrative in its communication campaigns. As Nassim Taleb, the thinker behind the concept of the ‘black swan,’ wrote: “...you need a story to displace a story... my best tool is a narrative.”⁴⁷ An insurgency may adopt a ‘David versus Goliath’ narrative to rally a population, necessitating the need for government forces to respond with another culturally-appropriate archetype to combat it. The human brain is hardwired to recognize the narrative form, making it an effective vehicle to describe conflict, identify desire, and drive audiences towards potential satisfaction.⁴⁸ In other words, they enable a “normative leap” from fact to values, and from observation to action.⁴⁹ Such



Gary Doak/Alamy Stock Photo/GYK4G1

Sir Lawrence Freedman, Emeritus Professor of War Studies and author, 24 August 2016.

constructs can be disarming to antagonistic and agnostic audiences, and they are difficult to disprove. Simpson borrows from Aristotle in arguing that effective narratives must blend rational argument (*logos*), with passion (*pathos*), and moral suasion (*ethos*). Logic alone lacks impact, while emotion can sway populations, but it is imprecise and open to misinterpretation. When the foregoing elements are grounded in morality, and the sender of the information is viewed as credible, a powerful narrative trinity takes effect.⁵⁰ Narrative should be aspirational, tap into the identity of intended audiences, borrow from historical motif, and adapt over time to remain enduring and relevant.⁵¹

Noted strategist Lawrence Freedman remarked that power comes less from knowing the *right* stories than from knowing *how* and *how well* to tell them.⁵² This leads to the concept of framing, which relates to appealing to cognitive bias by prepositioning a particular outlook around a given situation. For example, a military operation could be presented as having a 60% chance of improving security (positive frame), or having a ‘four out of ten’ chance of failing to fulfil its objectives (negative frame). Frames are closely related to generative metaphors, which entails borrowing from an existing

constellation of ideas in order to cause a situation to be perceived in new ways.⁵³ For example, familiar concepts such as ‘sickness versus health,’ ‘authentic versus artificial,’ and ‘wholeness versus fragmentation,’ can be leveraged to generate cognitive bias and to help establish framing. If a general was to speak of the need to ‘eradicate the scourge of terrorism,’ for example, he would be employing the ‘sickness versus health’ metaphor, which the audience would unconsciously apply to the opposing force. These devices are being employed by CAF adversaries and critics on a regular basis, which necessitates efforts to reframe issues and situations in order to successfully apply a Canadian military perspective. Practitioners must ensure such devices are: grounded in truth, ethical, eloquent, coherent, inclusive to intended audiences, and useful in achieving strategic objectives.⁵⁴ All these narrative tools help raise values and emotions to the surface of communications, which translates into *resonance*. For example, instead of explaining *what* the CAF does, the focus should be on *why* our members serve.

An additional fundamental for inclusion in adaptive communications campaigns is the need for clear, attainable objectives, as well as for constant evaluation and adjustment. In order to measure and evaluate effects in the information environment, one first needs to understand the dynamics at play inside the current system. Such environmental analysis is a significant challenge, given the volume of information, the sheer number of influencers, and the pace of shifts and trends in the domain. No perfect solutions exist, and resources are scant, but the CAF has begun to experiment with methodologies that will help identify the most prominent information trends and impacts within the defence information environment. These initiatives are currently in their infancy, and should be prioritized and resourced in order to mature. If this occurs, enhanced information awareness will help inform communication campaign design processes and improve efforts to evaluate communications effectiveness.

Establishing relevant objectives and evaluating the success of communications campaigns present unique challenges. First, the CAF must not overestimate the potential to shape beliefs or perceptions among populations. The key is to set objectives that focus upon incremental changes in audience behaviour, and then, to identify and to reinforce success. For example, it would be unrealistic to attempt to convert disinterested audiences into

CAF supporters or potential recruits overnight. A more realistic objective would be to identify and concentrate upon the most amenable audience segments, conduct targeted activities designed to pique their interests, and evaluate the percentage that elected to seek further information. Such efforts will do little to change values and beliefs, but they will build rapport, enhance credibility, and establish networks. Naturally, it is critical that actions match words, since the ‘say-do gap’ will rapidly destroy even the most effective campaigns and narratives. The CAF must work to improve its baseline understanding of the complex information environment, and then adopt practical tools in order to assess whether strategic communication objectives are being achieved.

The final component of the AACE methodology is ‘engagement.’ General Stanley A. McChrystal once wrote that

“Establishing relevant objectives evaluating the success of communications campaigns present unique challenges.”



Canadian Airborne Regiment commando Corporal Frank Mellish on patrol in Somalia.

“it takes a network to defeat a network.”⁵⁵ An important first step is to conduct research regarding the networks an organization desires to influence, employing a process known as target audience analysis. This detailed procedure enables the mapping of both *supportive* and *adversarial* audiences, and can be extremely useful in identifying vital points of effort. Next, networks must be effectively exploited. CAF members all possess their own unique networks, which represent an untapped resource with tremendous potential. Unfortunately, CAF regulations such as QR&O 19.36, 19.37, and 19.375 are highly restrictive, and they leave members with the distinct impression that there is very little that can be communicated publicly regarding their military employment. The Commission of Inquiry into the deployment of the Canadian Forces to Somalia recommended that these regulations be updated in order to allow military members greater freedom of expression within constraints.⁵⁶ Obviously, some restrictions on communications are required to ensure operational security is maintained, and that matters of policy are not publicly debated by military members. That said, there is a plethora of material ‘inside the lanes’

of the average CAF member, and leveraging individual experiences across networks would generate exponential effects. Regulations should be updated and clarified, and leaders at all levels should encourage subordinates to connect appropriately within their communities. Further, CAF members with extraordinary networks and communications talents should be identified, selected, and trained to help amplify strategic narratives. For example, some CAF members have established thousands of virtual followers, due to their outside interests and proficiency at social media engagement. If a group of these likeminded troops were provided with narrative material regarding recruiting campaigns, and were willing to occasionally raise such issues on their networks and in their own words, the results could be highly compelling. For this reason, it is recommended that the CAF experiment with the idea of a ‘social media task force.’ Clear guidelines and training would need to be developed, along with approved narrative material and measurable objectives. Initial efforts should be modest, focused, and closely monitored with a view to enhancing success and reducing risk. Regular monitoring of participants would be critical to ensure guidelines were followed, and CAF-related content appropriate. Political and marketing experts Nigel Jones and Paul Baines believe that engagement activities such as military blogging can be extremely effective, especially at lower levels, where *risk* is accepted in order to achieve *relevance*.⁵⁷ Key to this and all of the aforementioned approaches is to conduct *listening* as well as *engagement*. As such, it will be essential to establish mechanisms to ensure that data collected by troops conducting listening and engagement is passed to commanders. If done correctly, the engagement and listening generated by a ‘social media task force’ could produce considerable outcomes for a very low-level of investment.

A second aspect of ‘engagement’ that the CAF should seriously consider is the establishment of official strategic spokespersons. The Chief of the Defence Staff is the principal spokesperson for the CAF, but his engagements need to be carefully managed in order to conserve effect for when they most advantageous or urgent. It would be unwise to expose Canada’s top general to frequent media engagements on non-critical subjects, diluting the impact of his appearances and limiting flexibility in the event of mishaps, not to mention the demands placed upon his time. Most other senior officers are reluctant to provide on-the-record briefings to press, as they represent significant risk and effort for benefits that may not be readily apparent. Operational updates to media are exceptionally rare, considering the number of significant missions the CAF is currently conducting. This article has explored several reasons why military-media engagements can be adversarial, but it must be stated that a major source of dissatisfaction for journalists is the lack of frequency of such opportunities. And yet, many senior officers lack the time, training, and desire for public exposure. Contrast this with the United States, where a senior military

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The Pentagon, Washington, DC.

spokesperson conducts weekly media briefings for the Pentagon press corps. A team of full-time, trained military spokespersons work daily to stay informed on important issues, refine communications approaches, and engage with the media and public. Their efforts reduce the burden upon senior commanders who can stay focused upon operational matters and save their public appearances for significant occasions and updates. Further, if a spokesperson becomes embroiled in controversy, the flexibility exists for senior commanders to follow-up and reframe the situation. These same spokespersons could also be leveraged as a strategic social media messaging capability, including countering sensational and adversarial narratives when required. One important advantage of such an approach is the rapport that permanent spokespersons can potentially build with both journalists and the public. Over a period of time, trust and credibility can be established, and unique personality traits can cause audiences to become more sympathetic and receptive to strategic narratives. Such approaches are far superior to bureaucratic, institutional communications, which are faceless, distant, and incapable of effective interaction and listening. The CAF, therefore, should seriously consider employing spokespersons at the strategic level, and seek to leverage tactical networks for additional effects via experimentation with a ‘social media task force.’ As the CAF continues to confront adversity and chaos in the information battle-space, a foundation of ethics, adaptation, engagement, and listening, such as that advocated by the AACE methodology, will be essential for success.

Wildcards – Barriers to Advancement

While the timely playing of an ‘ace’ can be impactful, strategists must remember that ‘wildcards’ can quickly neutralize their effectiveness. In order to successfully leverage the AACE methodology, senior government and military leaders will need to be cognizant of two potential barriers to progress. First, government and military officials must prudently increase their level of risk tolerance in the domain of communications. It is somewhat ironic that the defence institution is prepared to accept ultimate risks on the battlefield, yet it tends towards a risk-averse approach in the public domain. The motto “who dares, wins” is as applicable to strategic communications as it is to warfare. Canada’s adversaries are demonstrating a growing willingness to take risks in the information domain, and as strategist Mikkel Rasmussen indicates: “...in a risk-averse world, the risk-taker is king.”⁵⁸ In the ‘many-to-many’ communications environment, the loss of direct control is unavoidable, as is risk. Rasmussen notes that such risks can never be *eliminated*, but some can be *filtered* at a cost, which necessitates careful deliberations regarding risk tolerability.⁵⁹ Senior CAF and departmental officials must carefully consider the level and areas of risk they are prepared to accept in order to access the benefits of enhanced engagement in the information domain. If authorities want to avoid ‘handing the crown’ to a potential adversary in this environment, then a significant increase in current communications risk resilience is required. Canada’s Auditor General once noted that if employees are to be empowered and encouraged to innovate, leaders must be prepared to accept *risks* as well as *mistakes*, and focus upon *learning*, rather than *blame*.⁶⁰

Embarking upon significant culture change is another risk that must be considered when implementing the AACE methodology. For example, military planners will need to consider whether sending information or cyber messages might be as effective in some cases, as would be sending a missile. Defeating an insurgent group decisively on the battlefield using weapons and tactics has proven to be very difficult. The CAF should spend more time considering how to undermine an adversary's will to fight, or diminishing the reasons for fighting that such groups possess. Hard power will remain an important aspect of achieving such aims, as deterrence is only credible when backed by the threat of real force. Considering other tools such as information campaigns, however, will enhance the CAF's ability to achieve strategic objectives.

The second potential obstacle to advancing strategic communication capabilities is failing to adequately resource renewed efforts. Ideas alone will not be sufficient to counter the sufficient investments that potential adversaries are making in the information domain. In 2014, the Kremlin spent \$600 million USD on the operation of RT and Sputnik alone, not to mention the millions more spent on funding new military information capabilities and global information proxies.⁶¹ Despite this growing Russian investment, NATO and its member states have been reticent to establish new capabilities and direct funds towards strategic communication capacity. Canada is one of a handful of allies with a professional public affairs branch, and modest investment is being allocated towards further operationalizing this capability. That said, in order to solidify long-term success, a moderate level of additional capital and human resources will be required, along with the need to reallocate military communications resources

to create capacity at the strategic level. Currently, the few PAOs assigned to support the Strategic Joint Staff are also responsible for departmental coordination with commands and force generation for deployed operations. This small team has been chronically understaffed for the last several years, yet has managed to maintain a baseline of support. The AACE initiatives described in this paper cannot be delivered within existing resources — they come with a cost. A potential regrouping of PA assets within ADM(PA) may offer part of the solution, but a more holistic review of all military communications assets across the CAF may be required, along with a moderate level of capital and human investment. Some consideration should also be given to the idea of leveraging the skills of personnel from the IO community in domestic roles, but under public affairs doctrine and principles of *ethical influence* whenever they are employed in such a capacity. Both the IO and psychological operations communities are also in need of more formal career structures, training, and investment in order to maximize their potential for future CAF deployments. Public Affairs Officers require additional training and culture change in order to more effectively work with other information-related capabilities during overseas operations. If senior leaders are serious about defending Canada's interests in the future information domain, it is essential that the wildcards of risk-aversion and resources are addressed seriously and without delay.

“Canada is one of a handful of allies with a professional public affairs branch, and modest investment is being allocated towards further operationalizing this capability.”

Conclusion

Despite the pervasive chaos of the information environment, one thing is clear: coming narrative battles will undoubtedly unfold at the strategic level. This will create significant civil-military relations challenges for CAF commanders, given the difficulty in distinguishing legitimate democratic accountability activities from adversarial information attacks. A pan-government comprehensive strategy will be required to produce the required flexibility and speed necessary to manoeuvre in this rapidly-evolving environment. Cooperation with civil society, and a tacit understanding between government, opposition parties, and responsible media will also need to be seriously investigated.



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If the CAF intends to influence the outcome of future narrative battles and ‘whose story wins,’ then significant measures, such as those described in the Altruistic Adaptive Communications Engagement methodology, ought to be given serious and urgent consideration. The pen clearly has become a sword, which must be recognized as a dangerous and double-edged weapon in today’s information domain, necessitating a rethinking of

risk tolerance and new investments in the area of strategic communication. If the CAF can learn to leverage the information domain judiciously, ethically, and flexibly, it will help defend the fabric of democratic society and enhance operational effectiveness in Canada and around the globe.



NOTES

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