

Towards a new magic bullet?

Professor Phil Taylor, Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, discusses the importance of winning hearts and minds...

If you haven't heard of the phrase 'strategic communications' yet, you probably will very shortly. In Washington, there is a growing – if somewhat belated – realisation that it may be the key to winning the 'global war on terror'. This follows the publication in 2004 of the Report of the Defence Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication¹, which is highly critical of US attempts to project itself effectively in the global information environment. 'To succeed', it argues, 'we must understand that the United States is engaged in a *generational* and global struggle about ideas, not a war between the west and Islam' [emphasis added].

In some respects, however, it is new wine in old bottles. For strategic communications is really the deployment of information designed to win 'hearts and minds', and, in its most recent incarnation, this means winning the propaganda war against a terrorist 'organisation' that has proved particularly adept at exploiting the vulnerabilities of western democracies in their attempts to justify the war on terror not just in the Islamic world but also at home amongst their own populations.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Americans agonised over the question about 'why do they hate us so much?' On the day after this so-called wake-up call about the dangers of international terrorism, 'Le Monde' declared that 'We are all Americans now'. Yet today, four years later, levels of anti-Americanism worldwide are at an all-time high, even in countries that regard themselves as traditional allies. In Islamic societies, the situation with regard to public opinion is appalling, despite a slight improvement in places like Indonesia that can be put down to US humanitarian assistance after the tsunami disaster. But a key question remains: how could a nation that boasts the most advanced communications system in the world – from Hollywood to Microsoft – have allowed this to happen?

It is partly due to Al Qaeda's skill at manipulating the global information space. From the beginning, terrorist thinking is about communications – communicating fear that prompts a reaction (for example, in the form of legislation that impinges upon normal democratic freedoms). Whether or not they were behind the London bombings, they have appropriated them by issuing warnings that more are to come. It is asymmetric thinking in which communication is perhaps the principal weapon at their disposal. 9/11 itself is a classic example of the 'propaganda of the deed'. In the 16 minutes between the strikes on the Twin Towers, New

York's newsrooms had scrambled their helicopters to capture the second tower being hit – live to a global audience. 'It was like watching a movie' say so many people. That was precisely the point. In this new struggle, the media are a major battle front.

Al Qaeda's central leadership structure has a dedicated media and communications committee tasked with issuing reports and statements in support of its operations, including a dedicated studio, known as the Al Sahab Institute for Media Productions. They have shown great skill in terms of timing, they use the internet effectively, and they have now successfully established a link between their goals and Iraq – which was not there before the 'liberation' or 'invasion', depending on which side you are on.

In December 2004, Bin Laden identified the Iraqi insurgency as 'a golden and unique opportunity' for jihadists to engage and defeat the United States in what he described as 'a Third World War, which the Crusade-Zionist coalition began against the Islamic nation'. He declared Baghdad as the 'capital of the caliphate' and asserted that 'jihad in Palestine and Iraq today is a duty for the people of the two countries' and all other Muslims.

The United States was shocked to discover from public opinion polls after 9/11 that Bin Laden commanded more respect in certain parts of the world than the American President. Certainly, many mistakes – propaganda own goals – have been made. Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, erroneous stories about abuse of the Koran, the President's early and unfortunate use of the word 'crusade' – the list is a lengthy one. But perhaps the biggest mistake of all was the failure to join-up various pre-existing organs for strategic communications with some new initiatives.

The surviving pieces from that previous global ideological struggle, the Cold War, had largely been wound down in the 1990s, culminating at the end of the decade when the United States Information Agency was folded into the State Department. Voice of America broadcasts in Arabic were by then down to only a few hours per week. It was this information and interpretation vacuum created by the downgrading of US Public Diplomacy after the so-called 'triumph' in the Cold War that was filled by the terrorists on the internet and through new regional Arab media players like Al Jazeera. 9/11 may have been the wake-up call, but the voices that had for half a century explained and justified US



An example of the kind of mobile strategic communications laboratory that can be deployed to win hearts and minds

policies to the rest of the world had largely fallen silent, while other voices filled the vacuum.

Hence, a lot of the nonsense that was disseminated in the aftermath of 9/11 is still widely believed in the Islamic world today. These include the belief that 4,000 Jews failed to turn up to work in the World Trade Centre on 9/11, that the Pentagon was not even hit by a plane, that lead hijacker Mohammed Atta is still alive, and even that 9/11 was engineered by Mossad and the CIA to provide a pretext for a war in Afghanistan to seize the oil pipelines. Of course, most Afghans had not seen images of the Twin Tower attacks because the Taliban had banned television.

The challenge is therefore formidable. The new initiatives to meet it are the creation of Radio Sawa ('Together') and al Hurrah ('The Free One') TV, but they have proved largely unsuccessful because they are merely dubbed 'US propaganda'. Credibility is everything in this business – and credibility takes time to establish but is very quickly lost. The White House now has an Office of Global Communications and the Pentagon was to have an Office of Strategic Influence before news of it was leaked, causing a media outcry and forcing Donald Rumsfeld to close it.

When a nation is 'at war' – as the United States perceives itself to be – it is inevitable that the lead agency should be the defence department. The problem is that US military thinking in the realm of what is described as 'Information Operations' is too heavily geared to military campaigns rather than a broader strategic communications vision more appropriate to winning hearts, minds and credibility away from their opponents. Info Ops embraces traditional military communications skills such as Psychological Operations, but is still too heavily obsessed with systems – such as Computer Network Operations – at the expense of human factors. For it was people who flew old-fashioned aviation technology into the buildings in New York and Washington, and, as we are now seeing in the aftermath of Europe's first suicide bombings in London, it is people who pose the greatest threat in the war on terror.

To change the minds of fanatics prepared to kill themselves for their cause is probably impossible. Strategic Communications is a long-term business and it really needs to tackle the minds of the young before they get poisoned. The President has warned that this war will be

fought over the long haul. If so, it needs its allies (who often do not share the US view that they are 'at war' with terrorism) to do whatever they can to eradicate the sources of poison from within their midst. That is why pressure on some of the maddrasas in Pakistan is now beginning to heat up.

In the meantime, the West has wasted too much time agonising over 'the Arab street'. The 9/11 hijackers were mostly highly educated men, and the Islamic concept of the Umma means that Cold War espionage tactics are unlikely to succeed. In fact, the very concept of waging a 'war' against terrorism is deeply flawed. The second Bush administration has only recently begun to re-brand it as 'the global struggle against violent extremism'. It was a mistake in the first place to call it a 'war'. This is a conflict that will be won in the minds of people. The ability to communicate with the right target audience with the right messages at the right time and over time will prove decisive. Statements like 'you are either with us or against us' or 'there is no neutral ground in the war on terror' have proved extremely unhelpful. For it is in the minds of neutrals who have yet to take sides that the conflict will be won. As such, the first battles of this 'war', in Afghanistan and Iraq, may well prove decisive in restoring US and Western credibility in the minds of those yet to be born. But if the West is to convince the Islamic world that its values are not a threat to its existence, it must be careful that in the process of selling democracy it does not sell it out.

¹ www.acg.osd.mu/dsb/reports/2004-09-Strategic_Communication.pdf



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