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WHAT IF THE PEN IS A SWORD? COMMUNICATING IN A CHAOTIC, SENSATIONAL, AND WEAPONIZED INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

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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 paper 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 paper will next consider implications for Canada's civil-military relationship, including the need to add *ethical influence*

¹ David Ronfeldt, John Arquilla, *The Advent of Netwar* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1996), 328.

to the CAF public affairs toolbox. It will then advocate for a refined strategic communications approach: *Altruistic Adaptive Communications Engagement* (AACE). The paper 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,

² This paper is focused at the strategic level and will not delve into the operational initiatives currently underway, such as the operationalization of military public affairs. It is believed that the strategic recommendations contained herein will mesh seamlessly with advancements at the operational level.

³ Jones, Nigel, and Paul Baines, “Losing Control? Social Media and Military Influence,” *RUSI Journal* 158, no. 1 (March 2013): 73.

⁴ John Herrmann, “Truth: Why Spock is Such an Unusual Character.” in *Weaponized Narrative: The New Battlespace*, The Weaponized Narrative Initiative White Paper (Phoenix, Arizona State University, 2017), 27.

⁵ Nathan Rabin, “Interview with Stephen Colbert,” *AV Club*, 25 January 2006.

and spaces once controlled by media and governments are now teeming with new players with a myriad of 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 sees 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 politi-

⁶ James R. Compton, review of *News as Entertainment: The Rise of Global Infotainment*, by Daya Kishan Thussu, *Canadian Journal of Communication* 34, no. 1 (2009): <https://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/2154/3077>

⁷ Edelman Corporation, “2018 Edelman Trust Barometer,” Last accessed 16 May 2018. http://cms.edelman.com/sites/default/files/2018-02/2018_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report_FEB.pdf

⁸ David L. Atheide, *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis* (London: Routledge, 2018), 19, 47-49.

⁹ A review by the author of decisions by the National NewsMedia Council (<http://mediacouncil.ca>) revealed that in 2017 a total of 8 complaints were filed regarding accuracy (5 upheld) and 4 complaints were filed regarding opinion (all dismissed). The Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (<http://www.cbsc.ca>) received only 4 complaints in 2017 that pertained directly to news reporting. In cases where wrongdoing was found, the most severe consequences were recommendations for outlets to post corrections.

cal 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 like 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 of 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 frequently 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

¹⁰ Donald Savoie, “Accountability: I take the blame, but I’m not to blame,” in *Court Government and the Collapse of Accountability in Canada and in the United Kingdom* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 260.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 286.

¹² *Ibid.*, 267.

¹³ Open School of Journalism, “Module JG170: Gotcha Journalism,” Last accessed 16 May 2018. <https://www.openschoolofjournalism.com/distance-education-program/courses/gotcha-journalism-jg170>

¹⁴ Peter Aucoin, and Mark D. Jarvis, *Modernizing Government Accountability: A Framework for Reform* (Ottawa: Canadian School of Public Service, 2005), 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Savoie, 260.

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 malign 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, 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 vary 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

¹⁷ Brad Allenby and Joel Garreau, “Weaponized Narrative Is the New Battlespace: And the U.S. is Behind its Adversaries,” in *Weaponized Narrative: The New Battlespace*, The Weaponized Narrative Initiative White Paper (Phoenix, Arizona State University, 2017), 27.

¹⁸ Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science in Anticipating” [in Russian], *Military-Industrial Courier* (February 27, 2013): <http://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>.

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, predetermined course of action). Russian officials have also spent considerable resources developing global information platforms including overt media like 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, like fake Twitter personality Jenna Abrams, are quoted by top media and 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 online magazine Dabiq.²³ The terror group has even employed drones to record aerial propaganda foot-

¹⁹ Reuters Staff, “Russia counting on more propaganda: NATO official,” *Reuters*, 14 May 2018.

²⁰ Dana Milbank, “Putin’s Useful Idiots,” *The Washington Post*, 20 February 2018.

²¹ Mark Molloy, “Alt-right Twitter blogger Jenna Abrams unmasked as creation of Russian ‘troll factory,’” *The Telegraph*, 3 November 2017.

²² Michael Raska, “China and the ‘Three Warfares,’” *The Diplomat*, 18 December 2015.

²³ NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, *Daesh Information Campaign and its Influence* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2015), 37-41.

age of attacks on 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 on competitions between strategic narratives, meaning 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 legitimacy. This assault has dangerous consequences including weakening society's "resiliency to weaponized narrative that a respected

²⁴ Herbert Lin, "Towards an Adequate Response," in *Weaponized Narrative: The New Battlespace, The Weaponized Narrative Initiative White Paper* (Phoenix, Arizona State University, 2017), 41.

²⁵ Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 61.

²⁶ Peter Feaver, "Crisis as Shirking: An Agency Theory Explanation of the Souring of American Civil-Military Relations", *Armed Forces and Society* 24, no. 3 (Spring 1998), 409.

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

²⁷ Scott Ruston, “Defending: Awareness and Protection,” in *Weaponized Narrative: The New Battlespace*, The Weaponized Narrative Initiative White Paper (Phoenix, Arizona State University, 2017), 39.

²⁸ Richard A. Kohn, “How Democracies Control the Military”, *Journal of Democracy* 8, no. 4 (1997), 1.

officials lack “the power, the expertise, and the interest” to engage in serious accountings of complex military issues.²⁹ He argues parliamentarians are constrained by restrictions on the accessing of military information as well as by limitations on their time. Politicians therefore, have a strong tendency to focus on 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 and 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 on 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 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 on how to respond to information attacks. As General Sir Mike Jackson 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

²⁹ Stephen Saideman, *Adapting in the Dust: Lessons Learned from Canada’s War in Afghanistan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 58.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 68.

³² Yagil Levy, “How the Press Impairs Civilian Control over the Armed Forces: The case of the Second Lebanon War”, *Journal of Power* 3, no. 2 (2010), 249.

³³ Ibid., 249-251.

³⁴ General Sir Mike Jackson, “The Realities of Multinational Command: An Informal Commentary,” in *The Challenges of High Command: The British Experience*, ed. Gary Sheffield and Geoffrey Till (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2003), 143.

extremely difficult to detect? Crown ministers are consumed with the frenetic issues of the day, often fuelled by media and opposition activity. This leaves military leaders in a dilemma. If political direction is not forthcoming, should generals accept the risks of active engagement in the hybrid information environment? 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 on using its public relations machine to stifle political debate and 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 on this matter among senior political, military, and government officials. A pan-government strategy must be developed that includes standing or rapidly delivered

³⁵ Savoie, 258, 264.

³⁶ For an example of media reaction, see in particular: https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/yves-engler/canadian-forces-media_b_14636256.html

³⁷ Justin Kelly and Mike Brennan, *Alien: How Operational Art Devoured Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2009), 78.

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 paper, 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 on 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,

³⁸ Department of National Defence, *Joint Public Affairs B-GJ-005-361/FP-000* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2004), 1-1 - 1-3.

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 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

³⁹ Department of National Defence, *DND and CAF Policy on Joint Information Operations* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2018), 3-4.

⁴⁰ Yves Engler, “Canada’s Largest PR Machine Complains that the Media is Being Unfair,” *Huffington Post*, 9 February 2017.

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

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, practitioners outside the PA community may employ 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 PA, and should be limited to adversaries to the greatest extent possible. Deceiving the wider 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 for PA practitioners.

⁴¹ Kurt M. Sanger and Brad Allenby, “Marines: Tell it to The,” in *Weaponized Narrative: The New Battlespace*, The Weaponized Narrative Initiative White Paper (Phoenix, Arizona State University, 2017), 29.

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.

Finally, 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 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.

While the military must avoid publicly influencing public policy and procurement debates, there should be scope for the voicing of opinions on purely military matters. In particular, CAF commanders should be free to respond to criticism from media and from pundits, particularly when arguments lack context or are based on 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 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 engage only when appropriate and strategically beneficial. The criteria ‘truthful, transparent, and helpful’ 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 moral high-ground relative to the conduct of our adversaries and critics.

Altruistic Adaptive Communications Engagement — AACE

⁴² Ruston, 38.

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 paper will continue by outlining the key tenets of such an approach, and then conclude with associated recommendations to ensure future success.

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, 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 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 paper argues that this utility extends into the domain of strategic communications. Wilbur Schramm's classical linear model of communication no longer applies in today's 'many-to-many' networked and contested communications environment.⁴³ General James

⁴³ Jones and Baines, 74.

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 on 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 6 to 7 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 on “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

⁴⁴ General James N. Mattis, “USJFCOM Commander’s Guidance for Effects-Based Operations,” *Parameters* (Autumn 2008), 19.

⁴⁵ Shawn Callahan, *Putting Stories to Work* (Melbourne: Pepperberg Press, 2016), 25.

⁴⁶ Simpson, 35.

⁴⁷ Nassim Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable Fragility* (New York: Random House, 2007), xxxi.

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 hard-wired 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 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 is imprecise and open to misinterpretation. When the above 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 hav-

⁴⁸ German Bundeswehr, *White Paper: Narrative Development in Coalition Operations* (Mayen, Germany: Multinational Information Operations Experiment, 2014), 9.

⁴⁹ Donald A. Schön and Martin Rein, *Frames of Reflection: Toward the Resolution of Intractable Policy Controversies* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 26.

⁵⁰ Simpson, 210-225.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Lawrence Freedman, “Stories and Scripts,” in *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 617-618.

ing a 60% chance of improving security (positive frame), or having a 4 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 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 of 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. The military must strive to balance operational security restrictions with the need to ensure troops can recount their compelling stories to Canadians. In Afghanistan, the embedded media program gave journalists access to CAF members, which subsequently generated hundreds of feature stories of the bravery and determination of Canadian women and men on operations. Contrast this with the current mission in Ukraine, which is almost unknown domestically due to heavy security restrictions. While caution is certainly justified, mitigation

⁵³ Schön and Rein, 27.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 44.

measures must be identified to allow powerful personal narratives to reinforce support for deployed missions. Naysayers may point to drawbacks including increased visibility of combat fatalities as allegedly occurred in Afghanistan, but new research has shown that Canadians were quite tolerant of the mission's fatalities.⁵⁵

Words are certainly powerful, but the addition of imagery greatly enhances communications effectiveness. In order to maximize influence in the digital information domain, armed forces need to be more creative in leveraging the mediums of photography and videography in support of strategic narratives. Efforts are ongoing to better position CAF imagery technicians within the organization so their talents and skills can generate enhanced strategic effect. This is an important initiative, the details of which are too nuanced to adequately cover within the scope of this paper.

An additional fundamental for inclusion in adaptive communications campaigns is the need for clear, attainable objectives as well as 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

⁵⁵ Jean-Christophe Boucher, "Evaluating the 'Trenton Effect': Canadian Public Opinion and Military Casualties in Afghanistan (2006-2010)," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2010): 254.

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 on incremental changes in audience behaviour, and then identify and 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 on 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. Of course, it is critical that actions match words, as 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 communications objectives are being achieved.

The final component of the AACE methodology is 'engagement.' General Stanley A. McChrystal once wrote that "it takes a network to defeat a network."⁵⁶ An important first step is to conduct research regarding the networks an organization desires to influence, em-

⁵⁶ General Stanley A. McChrystal, "It Takes a Network," *Foreign Policy* (21 February 2011): <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/02/21/it-takes-a-network/>

ploying 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 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 CF to Somalia recommended that these regulations be updated in order to allow military members greater freedom of expression within constraints.⁵⁷ 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

⁵⁷ Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of Canadian Forces to Somalia (CIDCFS), “Accountability.” Chapter 16 in *Dishonoured Legacy: The Lessons of the Somalia Affair*, 5 vols. (Ottawa: Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1997), 403.

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, focussed, 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.⁵⁸ Key to this and all of the above 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 CDS is the principal spokesperson for the CAF, but his engagements need to be carefully managed in order to conserve effect for when 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 demands on 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

⁵⁸ Jones and Baines, 73-77.

updates to media are exceptionally rare, considering the number of significant missions the CAF is currently conducting. This paper 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. Yet many senior officers lack the time, training, and desire for public exposure. Contrast this with the United States, where a senior military 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 on senior commanders who can stay focussed on 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 in-

formation battle-space, a foundation of ethics, adaptation, engagement and listening such as 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 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.”⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ 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

⁵⁹ Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, *The Risk Society at War: Terror, Technology and Strategy in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006): 40.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

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 on learning rather than blame.⁶¹

The second potential obstacle to advancing strategic communications 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.⁶² Despite this growing Russian investment, NATO and its member states have been reticent to establish new capabilities and direct funds towards strategic communications 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

⁶¹ Auditor General of Canada, “Modernizing Accountability in the Public Sector,” Chapter 9 in *Report of the Auditor General of Canada to the House of Commons*, (Ottawa: 2002), 16.

⁶² Tomáš Čížik, “Information Warfare as a Geopolitical Tool” (Research Paper, Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs, 2017), 4.

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. 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.

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. 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 com-

munications. 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.

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