



HARNESSING ONLINE VOTING COMPETITIONS TO IMPROVE THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES' PEOPLE CAPABILITY

Lieutenant-Commander Trevor Robinson

JCSP 50

Service Paper

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LEARNING FROM *BOATY MCBOATFACE*: HARNESSING ONLINE VOTING COMPETITIONS TO IMPROVE THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES' PEOPLE CAPABILITY

ABSTRACT – CREATIVE FICTION

It is September 4th, 2028, in Toronto, Ontario. Gabriel Lindt is on cloud nine. His gaming console has just received a reprieve from the hours of intense controlling. The crowd of 16,342 fans at the Drone Racing League (DRL) event erupts in screams and applause.¹ Gabriel nurses his exhausted hands as an event organizer shows him a sheet of paper. He quickly selects a name from a list of five options – the finalists of a massive online voting campaign. Seconds later, in front of thousands of young attendees with an average age of 23, the arena darkens. A video appears on several large screens showing a sleek grey Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) MQ-9B Sky Guardian drone – officially called a remotely piloted aircraft system (RPAS)²– descending from clouded skies. The MQ-9B reports a ship polluting Canadian waters, to the cheers of those in attendance. In a flash, the drone finds and reports the location of a lost Canadian Ranger on the outskirts of Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. In another flash, the MQ-9B launches a missile at a hostile target in an unnamed overseas country, enabling Canadian Special Operations Forces (SOF) members to escape a harsh firefight. As the MQ-9B flies away, the camera zooms in on the dark lettering adorning its side. Gabriel beams with pride as he sees the callsign he had just selected come into focus: Vigilance. The crowd starts shouting, “Vigilance! Vigilance! Vigilance!”

Gabriel, who just won \$50,000, thinks the RCAF video is cool, though he does not want to join the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).³ However, his sentiment is not shared by several people in attendance. Sarah, in section 314, is proud she just graduated from Seneca's School of Aviation. She likes the idea of saving people and pulls out her phone to research more about the CC-295 Kingfisher Search and Rescue aircraft.⁴ Mohamad, in section 203, wonders if his experience flying small drones for his dad's real estate business could help him pilot the MQ-9B. He quickly bookmarks a link to the RCAF website. John, watching online, is curious whether the CAF could be an alternative to bouncing between contract Information Technology (IT) jobs. He starts comparing CAF and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) salaries. Yet, given the large variance after only three years, John determines the CAF website must be outdated.⁵ Eric, in section 214, thinks selecting a drone's callsign is a nice reward for Gabriel. Recalling some recent online polls, Eric hopes his votes are the winning options for His Majesty's Canadian Ship (HMCS) REGINA's 'dazzle' paint scheme and HMCS FRÉDÉRIC ROLETTE'S indigenous gunshield art.

As the crowd cheers, Gabriel Lindt speaks into a microphone and thanks everyone for their support. He does not know that he was an integral part of a deliberate strategy to build the 'people capability' of the Canadian Armed Forces. And he never will.

¹ 'The Drone Racing League: The Premier Drone Racing League.', accessed 20 February 2024, <https://www.drl.io/>.

² Ken Poole, 'Canada to Acquire Fleet of MQ-9B SkyGuardian Drones', *Skies Magazine*, 20 December 2023, sec. Military, <https://skiesmag.com/news/canada-to-acquire-fleet-of-mq-9b-skyguardian-drones/>.

³ Trevor Mogg, 'Teen Bags \$24K Top Prize at World Drone Racing Championships', *Digital Trends*, 5 November 2018, <https://www.digitaltrends.com/cool-tech/teen-bags-24k-top-prize-at-world-drone-racing-championships/>.

⁴ Department of National Defence, 'CC-295 Kingfisher', not available, Government of Canada, 10 July 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/en/air-force/services/aircraft/cc-295.html>.

⁵ Royal Canadian Mounted Police Government of Canada, 'Salary and Benefits: Royal Canadian Mounted Police', 1 May 2016, <https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/salary-and-benefits>; Department of National Defence, '2024 Regular Force Pay by Rank', 19 January 2024, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/benefits-military/pay-pension-benefits/pay/regular2024.html>.

LEARNING FROM *BOATY MCBOATFACE*: HARNESSING ONLINE VOTING COMPETITIONS TO IMPROVE THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES' PEOPLE CAPABILITY

AIM

1. In advocating for 'people' to be recognized as a unique and distinct 'component capability' within the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), this informational service paper aims to provide some options on how the CAF can improve its personnel crisis. Specifically, by linking component capabilities to bespoke social media online voting campaigns, the opportunities the CAF offers can be better advertised across a wider audience of potential recruits.

INTRODUCTION

2. Having voluntarily accepted the risk of unlimited liability, CAF members differ from public servants, and are essential to the 'product' the CAF provides to the Government of Canada: readiness. Yet this readiness is being strained. For well over two years, senior CAF leaders have highlighted a growing personnel crisis that is compounded by increased demand for CAF resources domestically, notably in response to forest fires, and internationally, to meet various commitments in Europe, the Middle East,⁶

3. In their article for the Australian Army Research Centre, Nitin Gupta highlights the importance of the 'Strategic Trinity' components of "people, platforms and partnerships" and advocates that developing a military's 'people capability' – or skillsets – is of "primal importance from a strategic planning perspective."⁷ However, developing a workforce's skillsets without people is extremely hard. Interestingly, while the term 'personnel' is one of the 6 'PRICIE' functional components of Canada's Capability Based Planning (CBP) model, 'people' are not one of the fourteen elements of "strategic and operational" imperative identified in the CAF's recently launched Pan-Domain Force Employment Concept (PFEC).⁸ Consideration must be given to identifying people as a unique component capability for the CAF so that the personnel crisis can be better understood and addressed.

⁶ The Canadian Press, 'Senior Military Leader: Canadians "overly Comfortable" as Global Security Shifts', *Yahoo News*, 31 December 2023, <https://ca.news.yahoo.com/senior-military-leader-canadians-overly-204004469.html>.

⁷ Nitin Gupta, 'Part 1: People Capability - The Military's Strategic Imperative', Australian Army Research Centre (AARC), 8 December 2020, <https://researchcentre.army.gov.au/library/land-power-forum/part-1-people-capability-militarys-strategic-imperative>.

⁸ Department of National Defence, *Pan-Domain Force Employment Concept: Prevailing in a Dangerous World*, 2023, 7; Aaron Taliaferro et al., 'What Is a Capability, and What Are the Components of Capability?', in *Defense Governance and Management: Improving the Defense Management Capabilities of Foreign Defense Institutions A Guide to Capability-Based Planning (CBP)* (Institute for Defense Analyses, 2019), 7–8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep22853.5>.

DISCUSSION

4. A component capability is not a capability without the people who employ or maintain it. Yet by extracting the people who enable component capabilities and treating them as a unique capability in and of themselves, the challenge of finding activities that connect people to materiel resources becomes less objective and more subjective – or human. Today, the perception of human connection is achieved, for better or worse, through the power of social media. To improve the CAF’s people capability, a fresh look on how the CAF employs social media to generate interest in the organization is needed. Moreover, this re-examination may find value in linking component capabilities with online polls to drum up interest in what the CAF offers. This service paper thus presents three options for online polling, each with the end goal of increasing the CAF’s people capability: MQ-9B Sky Guardian Callsigns, Naval Gunshield Art, and Admiralty Disruptive Pattern Camouflage.

MQ-9B Sky Guardian Callsigns

5. In December 2023, the Government of Canada announced its intention to “spend \$2.5 billion on 11 remotely piloted aircraft systems (RPAS) and associated training and infrastructure.”⁹ Capable of a wide range of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and combat missions, the MQ-9B will be an effective addition to the CAF.¹⁰ The MQ-9B acquisition also provides the RCAF a hook to potentially recruit RPAS operators – or pilots for other RCAF aircraft.

6. While aircraft callsigns are normally determined by the squadrons to which an aircraft belongs or ship from which it is operating, the MQ-9B procurement offers a chance to break with tradition. As fictionalized in this service paper’s abstract, a callsign naming option for each MQ-9B could be the pinnacle of a bespoke online voting campaign. In preparation, to create the shortlist, the RCAF would first need to decide on the target audience demographic. Should the RCAF target those already interested in aviation, such as Air Cadet enrollees or post-secondary aviation program candidates? Or would it be better to attract those with strong technical attributes, such as members of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) programmes?¹¹ A simple QR code poll amongst attendees at a CAF Appreciation-themed sporting event – such as the National Hockey League (NHL), National Basketball Association (NBA) or Major League Baseball (MLB) – could also be worth consideration. Regardless of the option selected, the CAF needs to appeal to mass by several orders of magnitude by making connections with, for example, the Drone Racing League (DRL), where “millions of fans watch [drones] race on NBC, YouTube, TikTok, Twitch, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.”¹² In short, acquiring eleven MQ-9B RPAS provides the RCAF with the option, if

⁹ Poole, ‘Canada to Acquire Fleet of MQ-9B SkyGuardian Drones’.

¹⁰ Department of National Defence, ‘Canada Acquiring Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems for the Canadian Armed Forces’, 19 December 2023, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2023/12/canada-acquiring-remotely-piloted-aircraft-systems-for-the-canadian-armed-forces.html>.

¹¹ Gwyn Morgan, ‘Canada’s STEM Education Gap: The Need for More Science-Based Professionals’, *C2C Journal* (blog), 25 November 2022, <https://c2cjournal.ca/2022/11/canadas-stem-education-gap-the-need-for-more-science-based-professionals/>.

¹² ‘The Drone Racing League: The Premier Drone Racing League.’

desired, to poll eleven different audiences to create shortlists. And eleven different high-profile events to announce the winning callsign.

Naval Gunshield Art

7. Naval guns provide warships with various capabilities, such as self-defence against incoming missile threats, warning shots for maritime interdiction operations (MIO) and shore bombardment.¹³ Yet, there is also a lesser-known role naval guns serve: the ‘canvass’ for naval gunshield art. Akin to “nose art” on Second World War aircraft fuselages, gunshield art was “prominent during the Second World War, particularly on the corvettes that served the RCN.”¹⁴ From crests of hometowns to cartoon characters, gunshield art connected warships to its sailors’ communities and served as an opportunity for camaraderie.¹⁵

8. Today, Canadian warships retain the practice of incorporating gunshield art on, for example, the cupula of the Bofors 57mm Mk 3 Naval Gun System. The RCN’s sailors who designed the current fleet’s gunshield art are applauded. Their talent and dedication have inspired a novel approach that links naval guns to three high-priority areas for the RCN. Specifically, raising awareness of the RCN within Canada, expanding recruitment audiences, and fostering indigenous reconciliation. Certainly, this approach seems quite far-fetched: how does the RCN link gunshield art to countering ‘maritime blindness,’ improving recruitment and bettering indigenous relations? By harnessing the lessons learned from *Boaty McBoatface* – albeit with a more deliberate, nuanced, and targeted social media approach.

9. In 2016, the United Kingdom’s National Environmental Research Council (NERC) solicited online feedback to name its new polar scientific research ship. The #NameOurShip poll design allowed anyone to submit a name for which additional voters could “up-vote” the names they liked the most. Of the over 7,000 suggestions, ‘Boaty McBoatface’ – proposed by James Hand – became the top choice with 33% of the vote.¹⁶ Exposure to the NERC was enormous. Whilst the NERC did exercise its right to vet the final decision – articulated from the get-go of the poll – and named the polar research ship *Sir David Attenborough*, the ship’s submersible was named ‘Boaty McBoatface.’¹⁷

10. A similar approach, albeit with many more controls, could be used for the RCN as it endeavours, for instance, to connect each Arctic and Offshore Patrol Vessel (AOPV) with select communities in the Canadian Arctic. Or to revitalize namesake city connections with its Halifax-class frigates in a post-COVID-19 pandemic world. How would such a process play out? First, the RCN could shape and leverage relationships with the Assembly of First

¹³ N.R.P., ‘Analysis : Importance of Naval Guns on a Modern Warship’, Defencyclopedia, 2 May 2016, <https://defencyclopedia.com/2016/05/02/analysis-importance-of-naval-guns-on-a-modern-warship/>.

¹⁴ n.a., ‘Gunshield and Shipboard Art on Ships of the RCN’, For Posterity’s Sake: A Royal Canadian Navy Historical Project, n.d., <http://forposterityssake.ca/RCN-SHIP-ART.htm>; Joanie Veitch, ‘HMCS Goose Bay Gunshield Art Inspired by Second World War Ships’, *The Maple Leaf*, 14 September 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/rcn/2021/09/hmcs-goose-bay-gunshield-art-inspired-by-second-world-war-ships.html>.

¹⁵ n.a., ‘Gunshield and Shipboard Art on Ships of the RCN’.

¹⁶ Jack De Graaf, ‘The Story of Boaty McBoatface - The British Research Vessel’, The Fact Site, 6 July 2020, <https://www.thefactsite.com/boaty-mcboatface-facts/>.

¹⁷ De Graaf.

Nations, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and the Metis National Council. Second, those organizations would self-select a process resulting in an artist (or co-artists) rendering two or three designs per naval gun. Third, the designs would be tactfully and sensitively vetted through a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA Plus) and Defence Advisory Group (DAG) process. Fourth, the eligible voters would be pre-determined through a thoughtful process, which could differ for each platform. The overarching vision would be for people eligible to join the RCN in the short to medium term. This means, for instance, all high-school students in a particular region or sea cadets across the country. Fifth, a contracted “Bay Street” advertising firm would run focus groups, for which a key task would be to trial the online poll launch and examine the art from all angles to avoid any unintended interpretation of an artistic element. Fifth, the contracted firm would launch the voting poll with accompanying information about the artist and their community, the vessel the gunshield art would be painted on, and useful links to RCN content, such as the Naval Experience Program (NEP). Sixth, the winning design would be officially unveiled on the ship with the artist and community elders in attendance. Afterwards, it would be prominently displayed in a museum of the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami or the Metis National Council’s choosing. Ideally, it would incorporate a deliberate theme – such as connecting the past, present and future by displaying it near, but not overshadowing, a future Franklin Expedition exhibit.

Admiralty Disruptive Pattern Camouflage

11. During the Second World War, “Canadian and allied warships frequently sported a kaleidoscopic variety of paint colours and patterns in bids to confuse their enemies.”¹⁸ Known as the Admiralty Disruptive Pattern Camouflage – or Naval Camouflage or “dazzle” paint – the mosaic of paint patterns enabled deception, intending to deter “a torpedo attack in the steps leading up to a launch.”¹⁹ Romanticized in art since the Second World War, the paint schemes evoke a serious ‘cool’ factor that, ironically, can aid recruitment efforts today.

12. During a recent Experiential Learning Visit (ELV) to Victoria, the author learned, but could not verify, that the Admiralty Disruptive Pattern Camouflage would again be reintroduced to the Halifax-class frigates.²⁰ Assuming this information is true, it follows HMCS REGINA and HMCS MONCTON’s successful adoption of the Admiralty Disruptive Pattern Camouflage in 2020 for the 75th anniversary of the Battle of the Atlantic. Yet, the question of who will select the design for the ship was left unresolved.

13. Assuming the Commanding Officers of Canadian warships are to decide on which Admiralty Disruptive Pattern Camouflage design to paint their ship, it does afford them a nice fringe benefit. However, keeping the design selection within the RCN is a missed opportunity to connect Canadians with their navy and aid recruitment efforts. Instead, the decision to reintroduce the Admiralty Disruptive Pattern Camouflage and then determine the final design via an online poll is a profound example of how the RCN can increase exposure amongst Canadians and subtly advertise its capabilities and career opportunities, such as the NEP.

¹⁸ RUSI(NS) Staff, ‘Naval Camouflage and Its Application on HMC Ships REGINA and MONCTON: A Brief History’, RUSI(NS), 24 March 2020, <https://rusi-ns.ca/naval-camouflage-and-its-application-on-hmc-ships-regina-and-moncton-a-brief-history/>.

¹⁹ RUSI(NS) Staff.

²⁰ JCSP 50 Experiential Learning Visit, Victoria BC, 5 February 2024.

14. The considerations for determining the target audience parallel those of a potential MQ-9B Sky Guardian ‘callsign’ campaign. However, the RCN has an advantage the RCAF does not: its network of Naval Reserve Divisions (NRD). By incorporating the NRDs into a deliberate campaign to generate interest in the RCN with a ‘dazzle’ paint design, participants have the opportunity for both virtual and, if desired, physical participation. For instance, the online poll could invite participants to ‘open houses’ at their nearest NRD, where they could see mock-ups of the proposed designs, view other static displays, and learn more about the NEP. Of course, not every city has an NRD, and this option would only augment information that would be readily found online.

Exercising Caution with Online Polls

15. The CAF must be cautious with online polls. First, professional advertising companies should be contracted to execute the campaign, with a minor profit incentive for each unique poll participant who enrolls in the CAF. Moderation by both industry and CAF members would be necessary to ensure the vote does not get hijacked by online trolls, political or religious ideologues, or nefarious actors. To accomplish this joint effort and ensure the necessary education levels to work with industry professionals, the CAF should consider marketing, advertising, and consumer studies among its sponsored post-graduate programs. Additionally, limiting the vote to discrete users would lead to more accurate poll results and engagement rates. Further, by only allowing voters to select from a list of pre-approved options, a ‘Boaty McBoatface’ scenario can be avoided. Second, such initiatives must be mapped out to ensure they do not conflict with various LIs or overshadow key government announcements. More importantly, the launching of polls must be conducive to events or routines in Canadians' lives and not just when convenient for the CAF. For example, targeting a poll campaign in the first couple weeks of the fall with high-school students as the intended audience – when kids and families are focused on “settling in” and getting back to school” – may not be the best timing. A better option might be to launch a vote for an indigenous artist’s gunshield design just before the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation. Third, the frequency of online voting activities should be often enough to maintain interest when they arise, but infrequent enough so they avoid becoming routine and thus ignored. Polling and survey fatigue, common within the CAF, are real phenomena. Fourth, the choice of polling platform should adhere to other Government of Canada messaging, such as avoiding using TikTok on government devices.²¹ Noting the “most used social media platform in the world is Facebook,” a rapprochement between Meta and the Government of Canada would also aid online polling efforts.²² Fifth, building a people capability in the CAF requires a deliberate “layered generational recruiting” strategy.²³ Interest in the CAF, through online participation activities, can be passively maintained throughout a potential recruit’s childhood and teenage years. Sixth, an approach that encourages divisiveness between stakeholders, such as a competition between two indigenous sub-groups, should be avoided. Should a situation of indigenous territorial overlap arise, a co-

²¹ Mike Wendling, ‘Canada Bans TikTok on Government Devices’, *BBC*, 27 February 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-64792894>.

²² Belle Wong and Cassie Bottorff, ‘Top Social Media Statistics and Trends of 2024’, *Forbes Advisor*, 18 May 2023, <https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/7pJrd/1/>.

²³ Gordon, Maxwell LCol (Discussion, Canadian Forces College, Toronto, ON, February 16, 2024)

artist option may be worth exploring. Similarly, an online poll that solicits feedback exclusively from one of Canada's employment equity groups would need to be 'red-teamed' with *extreme* prudence and caution. Lastly, if applicable, artists should be compensated fairly for their work.

CONCLUSION

16. Component capabilities that seem small can be creatively linked to other goals, such as recruitment or indigenous reconciliation – provided they are smartly rolled out genuinely and thoughtfully. Like how Canadians better resonate with the concept of one thousand dollars rather than one billion dollars, focusing on smaller capabilities can serve as a hook for potential recruits to subsequently learn about the bigger capabilities that larger capital assets provide.

17. In today's transactional world, the CAF must smartly create transaction opportunities between Canadians and their military. By participating in the selection of a warship's Admiralty Disruptive Pattern Camouflage design, voting on a MQ-9B Sky Guardian's callsign shortlist, or deciding between two AOPV gunshield art options, Canadians are contributing to something bigger than themselves. Without yet even wearing a CAF uniform, they are now 'invested' in a process, and the return to them is a sense of agency and pride. By complimenting the online polls with information about the component capabilities the CAF has or is acquiring, and the career opportunities the CAF provides, Canadians' curiosity in the CAF may rise. And, over time, the people capability of the CAF will improve.

RECOMMENDATION

18. Referencing the creative fiction within this service paper's abstract, it is recommended that various Level Ones consider how their component capabilities can be used in unique ways to garner interest in the CAF through bespoke online social media campaigns. It is further recommended that senior leaders consider ways to make people a unique and distinct component capability within the CAF and appropriately reflect it in CAF messaging, publications and policies.

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