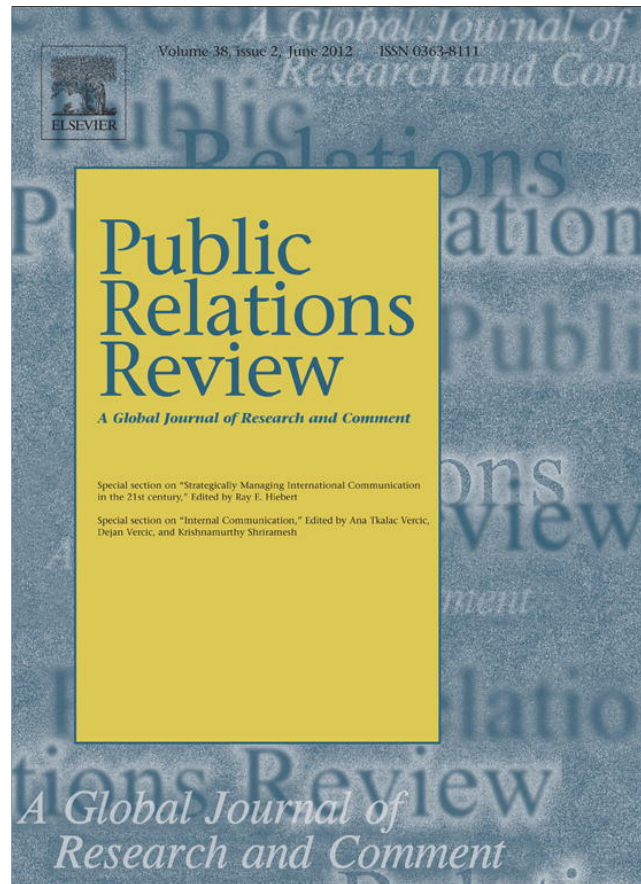


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Shaping the zeitgeist: Influencing social processes as the center of gravity for strategic communications in the twenty-first century

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ABSTRACT

We face new dynamics in the world, new problems. Dynamics of social change and the social construction of reality lie at the root of both contemporary security problems and of a clear understanding of the role of strategic communications in resolving them. Success in the current environment is not defined by military victory but by building peaceful social orders, and defeating opponents in the psychological and sociological domain. To understand the role of strategic communications in this new security environment requires an alternative paradigm of sufficient coherence to replace, or supplement, the traditional state-centered security paradigm. We argue that using social change as an alternative paradigm, framed around the theoretical vocabulary of the social construction of reality, generates insights into the role of strategic communications in supporting foreign policy and national security objectives. These are explored in eight lessons learned from our experience of implementing communications for social change in conflict environments.

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1. Introduction

The course of history is punctuated by short periods of intense upheaval and innovation that have profound and lasting social and political effects. Gutenberg's printing press made it possible for half a million books to be produced within 50 years, enabled individuals to own a copy of the Bible, and opened the way for the Protestant Reformation, radically altering the structure of society. The first decade of the twenty-first century is likely to be judged as another such period. The impact of new communications technologies, the rise of China and India as major global powers, popular assertion and upheaval in the Middle East and North Africa, the expansion of a global economic community, all suggest that we are bearing witness to a period of rapid, intense, and multi-dimensional change.

In such a period, the ultimate origins of our most vexing security challenges come not from rational national agendas, coherent sovereign states, or massed armies, but from a complex and challenging mix of history, social conditions, ideologies, newly assertive identities and "marginalized states of mind". It is a complex social-psychological emergent ecology of conflict, in which concepts such as globalization and the "youth bulge" are as critical to our understanding of current problems as "mutually assured destruction" was to the Cold War. Our security problems are, we argue, "social change problems". Their origins lie, and they can only be understood as, the complex product of social structures and social and psychological dynamics. The "political agendas" of actors are better seen as a product of these dynamics rather than a primary cause. Whether we look at the challenge of violent extremist terrorism, Iranian nuclear ambitions, or assertive Chinese nationalism, the challenges we face are grounded in social and psychological dynamics. Addressing these challenges may require military

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forces, the threat and use of force, but they are much more than war. Understanding this environment, how to act effectively in it, is the central American strategic dilemma of the coming decades.

Most of us recognize that military action alone is insufficient to meet these challenges. The term 'whole-of-government approach', with its emphasis on integrating "hard" and "soft" power, is no longer a neologism.¹ The diplomacy and development aspects of 'soft power' are now widely recognized. What is missing is a consensus on the strategic communications dimension of the 'soft power' approach. The National Framework for Strategic Communication (White House, 2010) illustrated the effort being made to address confusion over the term, and to coordinate all components of strategic communications (public diplomacy, public affairs, and military information operations). This progress notwithstanding, we still lack conceptual clarity on what strategic communications is about, and what its role is in addressing the challenges presented by the new global security and information environment. We all know it is important but we remain dissatisfied with the use of strategic communications as a component of national power.

Progress in this area, however, will only happen if we move beyond the traditional understanding of strategic communications rooted in the state-centered security paradigm. Unless we develop a perspective that enables us to understand and shape the social processes which lie at the root of our security problems, and can guide our efforts to resolve them, we will continue to lack real understanding of the role of strategic communications in national security. We aim to contribute to the emergence of such a perspective by offering insights drawn from our experience employing strategic communications to support conflict transformation efforts in various operational environments; and to share how we have been thinking about the application of effective communications strategies in an increasingly complex and uncertain world.

2. The central dilemma

The biggest obstacle we face developing a conceptual framework for strategic communications that is relevant to the new security landscape is moving beyond the thinking associated with the Global War on Terror (GWOT). The problem is that even though most of us implicitly recognize that the term 'GWOT' is an anachronism when it comes to understanding contemporary security problems we continue to use the noun 'war' quite broadly, as the central framework to conceptualize our security challenges.

The 'war frame', appears to be a North Star above a sea of uncertainty.² In fact it offers us false directions on the way ahead. Through the 'war frame' we make a set of assumptions about what is going on, and how we can meaningfully, and effectively, act. We argue that applying the war frame to current security problems obscures the essential nature of the problems we face, and hides the critical role to be played by strategic communications in addressing these problems. While the 'war frame' provides moral certainty to kinetic operations against violent extremists, it blurs our understanding of successful tactics and necessary outcomes. In the new security environment, success is not defined by military victory over an opponent but by building peaceful social orders and defeating opponents in the psychological and sociological domain.

Critically the persistence of the 'war frame' distorts our understanding of the role of strategic communications. Terms such as 'information war,' 'war of ideas,' or 'war of narratives,' remain stock phrases.³ This terminology gives rise to conceptually flawed metaphors such as 'ideas as weapons,' with messages analogized as bullets. There are problems with this line of thinking. It confuses messages with effects. It gives insufficient attention to how communications activities have an effect on the processes we seek to influence. Implicitly, the notion of 'ideas as weapons' evokes the false assumption that a bombardment of evidence through various media formats will ultimately convince people to come round to our way of thinking. But effective communications in today's operational environments is not simply about factual evidence, or a set of talking points. It is not about winning an argument. Fundamentally, it is about systematically moving people, cognitively and emotionally, in groups, through a process of change.

The problem is that we have yet to develop an alternative frame (or paradigm) of sufficient coherence and authority to replace, or at least strongly supplement, the 'war frame' and inform our understanding of the role of strategic communications

¹ To fulfill its potential as an effective formula for accomplishing conflict prevention and conflict transformation objectives, the 'Whole-of-Government' approach needs to be built on a sound theoretical understanding of social change processes, and the on a detailed understanding of the specific social systems of the operational environment; together generating specific theories of change for each effort. It has not yet reached this level of development: at present, our understanding of this approach does not really extend beyond its operational function as a framework for coordinating and deconflicting departmental mandates in operational environments. Conceptually, it needs to be understood in much broader terms. If the dynamics of social change and the social construction of reality lie at the root of both security problems and their solutions, then the 'Whole-of-Government' approach in each country needs to be structured around these dynamics.

² We refer to this as the 'war frame'. By that we mean frame in the classic sociological sense – a schema for interpretation, a collection of anecdotes, stereotypes, expectations, rules and practices that make life interpretable and meaningful. Frames define situations, and in turn enable us to act in them. They answer the question "what is it that's going on here?" (Goffman, 1961, p. 8). We also, interchangeably for the purposes of this article, use the term paradigm (Kuhn, 1996). While there are significant differences in the concepts, they both highlight the importance of the basic, most often taken for granted, assumptions and vocabulary we use to understand the social world. It is this central difference between the world, and the ideas we use to see and understand the world, that we wish to highlight here.

³ The phrase "Ideas as Weapons" is the title of a very useful book, edited by G.J. David Jr. and T.R. McKelden III. Our criticism of the concept of 'ideas as weapons' should not be read as an attack on the perspectives put forward by the contributing authors to the book. The authors, some of whom we know and all of whom we admire, have won significant praise for the book; it contains a number of significant insights on the role of information operations in contemporary operational environments. We recommend it highly. Our issue is with the title of the book rather than its content. Using 'Ideas as Weapons' as the title for an influential book lends authority to a flawed concept, thereby reproducing the very problem it seeks to overcome.

in contemporary operational environments. We went to ‘war’ with the ideas we had, not the ideas we might have wanted. An alternative paradigm would provide us with a theoretical vocabulary, analytical frameworks, and practical guides to action. Unless we understand these dynamics, in terms of how they function and how they can be addressed in local contexts, we will continue to lack an approach to communications capable of delivering the long-term effects demanded by policy objectives. We need a paradigm that ensures ‘strategic communications’ is actually strategic.

In the following pages we suggest an alternative (or supplementary) paradigm, moving beyond the classic “Clausewitzian” or “Westphalian” one, to broaden the aperture of our understanding, distilled from our analysis of the factors defining the new security landscape.⁴ The final section of the paper discusses the implications this has for thinking about strategic communications, and developing communications approaches appropriate to contemporary challenges.

3. The dynamics of contemporary security problems

Today we see an increasingly uncertain and interconnected global landscape: profound industrial and economic changes, mass migration, the rising power of non-state actors, and transformative technical changes in communications. States and societies are in flux, albeit with markedly different characteristics: political upheaval in the Middle East and North Africa, an insurgency in Afghanistan, ethno-sectarian clashes in Pakistan, and internal ideological clashes in Iran. China and India are developing “middle classes” at a significant rate yet remain societies with great inequality. At the same time equally substantial changes have been occurring in “settled” societies such as the United States, Europe, and Japan.

Much of this is misleadingly labeled “globalization” (grouping vastly different processes under a single rubric), yet at the same time, the label fits. It highlights a cause and consequence of the majority of these changes: the spread of ideas and information through a globalized economic and information network creating social networks, perceptions of interests and identity constructs which transcend national boundaries. Today, few people do not incorporate reference to “others” physically and socially far removed from their daily lives into their sense of the world.

In today’s world global networks and actors are wielding powers that had traditionally been the preserve of nation states. As social media expert Brian Solis pointed out in his book *Engage*, “With platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, anyone can now find and connect with others who share similar interests, challenges and beliefs” (Solis, 2010, p. 5). Anyone with a cellphone camera, a decent signal, and a story to tell can engage in the global conversation. From a national security perspective, the democratization of information flows has precipitated the growth of international terrorist networks and extremist ideologies, and the emergence of transnational social movements motivated by a broad spectrum of grievances.

It has also increased “strategic compression” or the ‘glocal effect’: what happens at the local level can now have a global effect and vice versa. A preacher in Florida can act, for reasons that make sense within his local context; these actions, because of the global information environment, can have effects across the globe. In turn, others can act, also profoundly local in meaning, but which feedback to the preacher in Florida. This is not a physical connection, or a strange quantum mechanical effect of extremism and idiocy, but one where the connection is narrative and emotional. It is one of the transforming characteristics of our contemporary security problems.

When we reflect on the pace and scale of developments happening around us, we are asking ourselves, ‘what is going on?’ The answer is social change. Whether we live in a suburb of Washington, DC or North Waziristan, Benghazi or Beijing, we are living in societies that are experiencing intense social change, triggered by the social, economic and technological aspects of globalization. It is dissolving the effectiveness of national borders as a means of controlling the diet of information available to local populations, placing institutionalized social orders under strain, and creating new social structures and value systems.

This complex process of social change, and the efforts of people to make sense of what is going on, is the central feature of the contemporary security environment. Security dynamics are not those of rational interest and calculation, but of sense-making and the social construction of reality. And therefore the processes of sense making, and the social construction of reality, must be at the center of our understanding of contemporary security environments, and the role of strategic communications in resolving them.

We have available to us a robust sociological vocabulary to understand these processes. Most of us recognize that we live in social systems that are constantly being “constructed” through our everyday actions (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Major social institutions (for example, the US Army) are constructed, and made meaningful, through our actions (cf. Eyre, Segal, & Segal, 1993). The US Army is made through the daily introduction of individuals in the news media as “officers” and by the fact that another group of people, labeled “enlisted”, salute them when they see them in a particular set of clothes – “uniforms.” Social order is constantly being remade through these actions, and so is sense – we see each other performing

⁴ We work in the spirit of, and drawing upon the prior work of, a sustained critique of the Clausewitzian paradigm. By this, we mean, not what Clausewitz actually wrote, (which is dense, textured, nuanced, and substantially unread by the vast majority of practicing security professionals) but Clausewitz as understood and embedded as a taken for granted feature of the public culture of national security. In this effort, we follow Barnett (2004), Covey, Dziedzic, and Hawley (2005), Keegan (1993), Smith (2007), and Van Crevald (1991). We emphasize that war is not an eternal feature of human society but a product of social conditions and circumstances. This is not an observation on the perfectibility of humankind but a more mundane observation: the nature and pattern of violence in society is the product of social conditions. Intra-state war is the product of the particular features of the Westphalian/Palmerstonian social order. The 21st century features significantly different social conditions and circumstances, therefore the pattern and nature of violence will be different. We must shift our analytical vocabulary, our frames or paradigms, to understand these dynamics.

these actions, we have stories about them, and so they become real. Perceptions are not reality – there is a “brute reality” out there independent of our existence (Searle, 1995). As they interact, humans constantly negotiate order, structure and cultural meanings among themselves.

A key point of emphasis is how the modes we use to socially construct reality differ during what sociologists refer to as ‘settled’ and ‘unsettled’ times (Swidler, 1986). During ‘settled times’ social reality is reproduced through institutionalized social orders. Meaning becomes a habit, ‘this is the way we do things; this is the way we are’ is not problematic. Institutions, as predictable, dependable packages of narratives, networks, identities, and interests, order our lives, enable us to predict the actions of others, and provide us with a meaningful social world.

In ‘unsettled times’ the normal order of things is disrupted. Globalization generates unsettled times: it changes local, stable packages of narratives, identities, networks and interests. Everything (it seems) is in flux: social institutions (family, community, tribal, religious, economic) are disrupted by the processes of globalization, and vast tracts of social reality are now subject to contention, doubt, and re-interpretation. Taken for granted reality becomes fragmented as we negotiate new identities, construct new narratives, recalibrate our perceptions of interest, and move in different networks in response to the changes that occur around us. As a consequence, conflicting versions of reality emerge, responding to, and creating, social tensions that often spill over into conflict.

While stable societies are able to absorb, address and overcome change precipitated by globalization, many societies, facing social change tsunamis, struggle to cope. Castells (2004) theorizes that in an increasingly globalized world, where the predominant social and economic model is found to be profoundly marked by individualism, people respond to the threat this poses to their traditional identities by resorting to an “identity oasis” based on ethnic, religious or other values. This phenomenon is not unique to non-Western societies but the societal impact may be more severe where the state structure is less established. As people retreat behind more ‘localized’ identities, cross-community links are often undermined. Interests tend to be interpreted through a communal rather than a national lens, and narrative frames emerge which socially construct realities fostering suspicion and distrust of other communities. As a consequence the moderate center, which serves as the catalyst for the emergence of peaceful social orders, contracts. This is happening in Yemen, in Pakistan, in Kenya, and in a host of other countries that are either enduring violent conflicts, or are at risk of social tensions erupting into violent conflicts. Our problems can no longer be understood in the framework of the state but must be understood through the dynamics of the people.

Our problems are not the result of political agendas: political agendas for individual actors emerge out of these circumstances, and in turn shape them, but are not the primary cause of them. Rather, it is the set of complex social processes which enable radical individual or group agendas and in turn threaten security and stability: the emotional dynamics of loyalty and group cohesion, radical extremism and recruitment, incompatible definitions of interest, ethno-sectarian and identity dynamics, social movement mobilization processes, and competing visions of ideal social and political orders are key. These social dynamics are the joint product of exogenous social change (“globalization”) and the sense-making processes that are occurring. People are socially constructing new realities in response to radical social change. Fear and vulnerability are generating violent conflict or passive support for those engaged in violence.

This analysis is supported by the words of the soldiers struggling to cope with this world, and by the policies governments are pursuing. Most famously, General David Petraeus, has observed that “We cannot kill our way out of this endeavor.” (Iraq COIN Guidance, 21 June 2008). When others note “people are the decisive terrain” they recognize this fundamental gap between the problems we face and the inherited vocabulary we employed to confront them. This statement reflects a critical insight into contemporary security dynamics, whether the specific problem is Afghanistan, Pakistan, or China. The problems we face cannot be solved through force alone, because the problems arise from social change dynamics.

In the vast majority of contemporary security challenges, our intent is not to defeat an enemy but to build social orders that prevent the emergence of problems: to change behaviors, to build new skills and institutions and to strengthen society. Whatever the security context, whether it is supporting the transition process in Egypt, countering radicalization in Somalia, or preventing state failure in Yemen, the basic objective remains the same: nurturing the emergence of stable, inclusive, social and political orders. Where military action is required, it is a defensive or enabling role, denying those who would use violence the space to establish their preferred order, and creating space for sustained social change operations. “Victory” in this environment is not compelling others through act of will, in classic Clausewitzian terms, but to change the conditions which give rise to instability and violence: to establish functional social orders which do not spawn destabilization or violence. Success is not defined by military victory over an opponent but by change in the psychological and sociological domain.

The traditional security paradigm does not provide us with the analytical frameworks and theoretical vocabulary we need to develop an understanding of this security environment. Neither does it reflect what our policy response is, despite the fact that our specific objectives of building peaceful social orders demonstrates that we explicitly recognize what needs to be done. To indulge a cliché, it misleads us into analyzing the symptoms rather than the causes. To understand this changing world, and how we need to respond, we propose an alternative paradigm: social change. We argue that a social change paradigm, framed around the theoretical vocabulary of the ‘social construction of reality,’ will generate the following:

- An analytical framework that enables us to comprehend the dynamics of social change and their security implications.
- A vocabulary which centers our analysis beyond the world of ‘states’ and on dynamics among the people, how they make sense of the world, and the social processes at the root of instability.
- A perspective on our activities that gives us greater clarity on how to address ‘dynamics among the people.’

4. The implications for strategic communications

If it's a world of globalization, and social constructionist ideas are necessary to understand it, and a functional social order is our most profound security objective, what are the implications for strategic communications? Can strategic communications be used to enable the emergence of stable social and political orders? The first thing we have to consider is the impact of the global media environment on how we communicate. McLuhan (1967, p. 9) astutely observed back in the late 1960s that, "It is impossible to understand social and cultural change without a knowledge of the workings of modern media." This statement, made during the era of "mass media", is equally true today, in the globalized era of "pervasive media." Today's environment, in which even the idea of "the web" or "the internet" as a separate sphere of life seems quaint, is marked by the inescapability of connection and the integration of two-way connection into all aspects of life.

It is a period in which 28-year-olds are "old school" and 15-year-olds integrate smart phones, media production and consumption, and "the cloud" into a seamless whole with their "real" lives. In an era of citizen-journalists, user-driven content, and the proliferation of new media forms, we have to rethink the basic concept of media, and how we use media to achieve communications effects. In the private sector social media is placing the fate and stature of brands in the words and actions of consumers. Brands have not just 'lost' control of defining impressions, businesses have the lost the ability to govern shared experiences (Solis, 2010, p. 11).

Shirky (2011) notes that, "(a)s the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action." We are no longer living in a world of 'states' as actors, where populations can only access information through a few controlled mass media platforms. Innovation has democratized access to information. In turn this implies that direct engagement with populations is an increasingly potent, and critical, tool for governments in pursuit of security objectives. A social change paradigm, with its emphasis on social change dynamics and the vocabulary of the social construction of reality, enables us to see the world of 'states' as an interconnected world of people, groups, narratives and emotions that are not confined within national borders.

We live in an age of dialogue not monologue, a time when many-to-many modes of communication constitute the communications zeitgeist. Yet, as Deutch (2010) has pointed out, "We are still (in government and the corporate world) operating under the auspices of the traditional influence model of communication, whereby one-to-many message projection is the predominant form of communication." This model relies on the premise that strategic communications is largely information transfer controlled by the sender, whose messages are assumed to act as persuasive sources of motivation on passive audiences. The emphasis is on our message, and what we want to say. Though we may have adapted technologically, this is not sufficient: tweeting our talking points is not enough.

So how do we operate in this world to ensure strategic communications is effective in achieving fundamental national objectives? In the section below, we share some tentative insights from our experience of implementing communications for social change in complex environments.

5. Strategic communications in a social change paradigm

5.1. *Its not about us (but it sometimes is)*

Traditionally, security problems, and communications, are thought of as between "us" and "them". Yet a social change paradigm tells us to attend to both the global and local dynamics of the problem we face. These problems are seldom solely about "us" (as external interveners) and "them" as "locals". The dynamics of Afghanistan or Iraq, though profoundly shaped by external intervention, are fundamentally grounded in the narratives, networks, interests, and identities held by the people of those lands. The dynamics of Sunni and Shia and Kurd in Iraq, of center and periphery, are not about us. We of course become part of this social system when we intervene, but we do not become the center of it. The conflicts we have engaged in remain substantially about our "audiences", and their relationships with each other. We need to communicate with people in their language; about the things that are important to them; about their desires; about end-states that they believe in, and can realize through their efforts, support and participation.

5.2. *Deep understanding is therefore key*

To understand what effect a message is going to have, we have to understand the dynamics of the social systems of intended recipients. Social systems generate the frames through which communications activities are interpreted. This takes us back to the issue of conceiving of ideas as weapons. A "weapons system" model of ideas pays scant attention to what effect a message is going to have. If we are to shape the attitudes and behaviors of foreign publics we have to focus efforts on influencing the interpretative frames used to socially construct reality. If "(w)e behave as we do because we interpret our situation in a particular way" (Noble, 2000, p. 10), we, as communicators, need to understand the emotions (preconscious thoughts), loyalties, narratives and ideas which guide people's behavior. This means we have to listen, understand, and engage in local conversations. If the people are the focus of any successful communications effort, understanding the social structure, narratives and emotions, loyalties and rivalries, is the most fundamental precondition for success.

This is not merely a matter of “public opinion” (as a set of “values” or “attitudes”) but of understanding narrative structures, tropes and metaphors, allusions, rhetoric and references – the rich texture of meaningful communications. Critical to this process is constant learning, evaluation, feedback and refinement: this challenge can only be met by viewing the overall campaign as a whole, devoting substantially greater resources, not to research in the abstract, but to research tightly tied to the communications effort, and tightly tying research and analysis to the entire process, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Media analysis is critical, not just to understanding substantive issues, but also the communications environment and messaging context.

5.3. *It's much more than influencing the 24-h news cycle*

Strategic communications campaigns designed to nurture the emergence of peaceful social orders, are much broader than traditional public relations. This is not to devalue the importance of rapid response and “being first with the truth.” Engaging the 24-h news cycle through press statements and press conferences is a fundamental aspect of the broad spectrum of communications activities. Communications for social change however, is not about operating at the short-term tactical level. It does not function in the traditional PR space. This is an important distinction for communications practitioners to understand.

One of the major insights we have gained from our experience of operating in complex environments is that strategic communications has to be understood as a long-term engagement effort. Though this “insight” is something closer to a cliché, it remains a lesson we have not yet learned. Encouraging people to disavow the use of violence to achieve their objectives, to adjust to the new rules of the game associated with the evolution of new democratic orders, and to reconcile with those who were formerly perceived as the enemy, takes time. Change communication is analogous to rain on sun-baked land. In areas which suffer from long dry spells, a quick burst of intense rain has no effect, it rolls off hard-packed soil just as an intense short-term media campaign will not change engrained behavior and attitudes. To add moisture to the soil in long parched areas requires sustained periods of rain. Similarly, in fragmented societies undergoing rapid change, achieving positive change effects requires sustained engagement.

5.4. *The medium is not the solution*

McLuhan's profound insight – content is not separate from medium, each media format, each unique medium both shapes the nature of the “message” it transmits, and has a social effect in itself – is far richer than a summary can portray. Our lesson is simpler, however. The medium is not the solution. In dynamic, complex, and evolving media systems, no single medium (print, face-to-face, community theatre, TV, radio, internet, mobile phones) by itself guarantees an effect. Both the individual message and the “dissemination” media plan must be crafted with insights grounded in an understanding of social dynamics, the effects sought, and the nature of the media employed. Again, “tweeting our talking points” is not enough.

5.5. *It's not advertising*

Although superficially similar to commercial advertising and peace-time political communications, strategic communications for social change is substantially more complex and challenging. Key commercial communications ideas are designed to work within stable, highly institutionalized environments, within a robust social order in which individual and group identities are relatively fixed, the meaning of actions established, and the opportunities for action available. If you're selling Coke, or trying to convince someone to change cola brands, an entire social order supports the ability of individuals to make this choice. In complex social change environments, that very social order is under challenge.

The ‘unsettled’ nature of society means that any form of communication is going to be understood through a conflicting mix of interpretive frameworks and narrative streams. It is not a case of us ‘talking to them,’ (which is the basic premise of commercial advertising and political communications), but of influencing how ‘they’ perceive and talk to/with each other. While we robustly argue for the value of applying insights from commercial and political communications experience (such as target audience segmentation techniques and optimizing the emotional impact of communications products), doing so requires understanding of the profound differences in setting and objectives between traditional communications activities and the new challenges we face in these environments.

5.6. *Messages are not effects*

Strategic communications is about messaging for effects. Messages are not effects – what we communicate is not the same thing as the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, or socio-political changes we seek to achieve. Successful messaging is not done by telling (we are not trying to win an argument), but by moving individuals – both cognitively and emotionally – and by reframing, shifting the discourse to terms of reference that are favorable to our objectives. When designing communications strategies we need to think less about the actual message, or a particular talking point, and focus more on anticipating what the effect is likely to be, and whether the effect supports our objectives. As the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs said in 2009, “We've come to believe that messages are something we can fire downrange like a rocket, they are not.” (Mullen, 2009) We need to move beyond conceptualizing ideas as weapons. We are engaged in an ecology of ideas and feelings. We cannot

influence outcomes by 'firing ideas' into local discourse. Our communications efforts have to consider how we message from within, delivering effects which shape local conversations.

5.7. *There is no linear relationship between ideas and actions: saying and doing are both critical*

"Actions speak louder than words" has become a major theme of communications discourse. While the focus on the impact of our actions on perceptions is important, actions by themselves are not sufficient for communications because they are interpreted in a narrative context. One of the major lessons we have learned is that the relationship between ideas and actions is complex. American response to the humanitarian disaster after the floods in Pakistan illustrates the gap between noble intent and action, and interpretation. Anti-Americanism remains robust, despite flood relief that touched many more people than have ever been directly affected by drone attacks.

The reason is the robust anti-American narrative frames prevalent in Pakistani society which socially construct a reality in which America is viewed as a perfidious ally. As a consequence, media stories of American benevolence and solidarity during a time of crisis could be interpreted as acts of American self-interest or malign intent. Narrative structures provide the lens through which all activity is interpreted and understood. Narratives, for reasons that cognitive psychologists are beginning to understand, are resistant to change. In Pakistan and other countries where anti-Americanism is on the rise, diplomatic and development tools designed to promote stabilization and improve living standards, will continue to be misunderstood and distorted by our opponents, until the narrative structures that sustain anti-American sentiment are disrupted and transformed.

5.8. *It's all about narratives and emotions*

The central role of narratives and emotions in the change process is the most fundamental insight we have distilled from our experience. The social change effort is essentially a narrative process, one of on-going sense-making and meaning creation captured in stories, not an argumentative one. Narratives socially construct people's realities. They shape individual and social identities; link, sustain and create social networks; define perceptions of interest, and structure emotional states which influence strategies of action (Schank & Abelson, 1995; Bruner, 1991). Stories provide interpretive frames through which people make sense of what is going on. People are characters in the stories in their own heads, and as told by their societies. We must tell stories, and help people become protagonists in the stories that achieve strategic effects.

6. Moving forward: developing a communications model for social change

Shaping narratives, in a social construction processes, is fundamental to influencing the direction of social change dynamics in a given society. Narrative and emotion (strategic communication) is not the only tool to do this. "Kinetic" action – military force – and development practice are critical components. But it is in the area of strategic communications that we feel we need the most reconceptualization. While there is a broad consensus at the senior policy level that 'engagement' rather than 'persuasion' needs to define strategic communications efforts, there appears to be a lack of understanding on what 'engagement' means operationally when it comes to promoting social change orders. Engagement needs to be understood as a sustained long term effort to foster the narrative structures which enable the emergence of peaceful social orders, and undercut the emergence of narratives which are inimical to universal values and global stability.

As part of the conflict transformation effort, therefore, strategic communications has two key jobs to do: first, to go after the bad guys – undermine the ability of obstructionists to mobilize violence and achieve their strategic goals through force. Campaigns must systematically challenge and deconstruct the loyalties, narratives and justifications, (the stories) that are critical to recruiting participants and motivating widespread violence – to deny them both voice and the appearance of legitimacy. The second job is equally important – to build a coalition for positive change, to reconstitute the social and political structures that enable peaceful and orderly daily life. Through this process the intent is (broadly) threefold: mobilize the will of the people and build their capacity to lead the change process; strengthen the capacity of society to withstand shocks to the social system; and empower mainstream society's ability to resist and repel the ideologies of extremists.

The first step in designing a communications strategy for social change is to identify, understand and map the narrative structures which characterize the social systems that we are trying to shape, and understand how these narratives function. Specifically, we seek to understand: the narratives that we must undercut to diminish the influence of obstructionists; and the narratives we need to reinforce to support the evolution of the coalition for positive change. Of particular importance is identifying the narrative frames (or genres) which exist. Narrative frames make the telling of a story possible, they provide interpretive frames that can lend individual stories a wider meaning. Identifying the various narrative structures that exist guides our understanding of what stories are likely to resonate, and which ones risk being counterproductive. Through the process of narrative mapping we also seek to identify inconsistencies in belief structures which open up pathways for our messaging. After all, it is these contradictions and incoherencies which offer the genuine possibility of change.

So, how do we achieve the effects we desire? How do we shape mutual perceptions and influence the frames through which people socially construct reality? In short, it is by engaging their emotions. It is emotions that simultaneously prompt reasoning, frame understanding and mobilize actions (Castells, 2009; Damasio, 1999, 2003). Emotions are motivational forces, impulses for attention, thought and action (Brader & Corrigan, 2005). The power of emotions and their ability to

shape and set the tone for cognitive actions must be recognized and put at the core of communications efforts. And we engage emotions through telling stories.

Conflicts are grounded in the stories people tell themselves, and the emotions these stories generate. We engage people's emotions by telling compelling stories which fit within existing narrative frames, tap into existing belief structures, and are capable of challenging existing reality constructs. Communications for social change must therefore be viewed as large scale, evolving, story-telling efforts. A story must be grounded in the world as experienced by the audience, it must have a place for the audience in the story, and it must engage the audience in a way to shape behavior. But again, this must be understood as a long-term, incremental effort. Shaping loyalties, emotions, narratives, identities and beliefs, takes time. It entails moving people through various cognitive and emotional stages, in order to help them make the right choices and consequently influence the direction of the change process.

7. Conclusion

We have argued that our most problematic security challenges have their roots in the dynamics of contemporary social change. Strategic communications can productively be seen as a critical tool for addressing these challenges. But to do so, strategic communications for social change must be based on an understanding of the processes of social change, and most centrally of social construction. We achieve strategic security success only if societies change, and societies change only if people change. We must therefore put the dynamics of personal and social change at the center of our thinking. The social change paradigm, framed around the theoretical vocabulary of the social construction of reality, gives us greater clarity on the issues to be addressed, the role and processes of strategic communications, and how we define success.

Drawing on our experience of developing and implementing communications strategies within the framework of this paradigm, we emphasized that one of the major lessons we have learned is that a strategic communications approach which focuses on the long-term process of transforming the narrative structures which shape social systems, is fundamental to achieving policy objectives. From our perspective, communications in contemporary security environments is essentially about storytelling, influencing local discourse in order to nurture the evolution of stable social orders. And we, as America, will be characters in the various plots that shape this discourse. Regardless of the context, we will be part of the story of the change process. Our challenge is to be seen as protagonists and not antagonists; to be perceived as reliable, trusted, partners in the pursuit of stability and social justice. As Secretary of State Hilary Clinton said last year, "We cannot partner a country if its people are against us." (US Department of State, 2010, p. 5).

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