



# Strategic Communications and National Strategy

A Chatham House Report

Paul Cornish, Julian Lindley-French and Claire Yorke



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September 2011



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# Preface and Acknowledgments

Good communication is both a function and a proof of good governance: in a democracy informative and transparent communication is essential to the maintenance of a productive and enduring relationship between the executive, the legislature, the judiciary and the electorate. Communication therefore has a constitutional significance, in other words, and the democratic process can be damaged when communication is insincere, inadequate or incomplete.

But what is meant by *strategic* communications? And what place do they or should they have in the planning and implementation of national strategy? The UK Strategic Defence and Security Review published in October 2010 answered these questions clearly enough: ‘The National Security Council will [...] consider the infrastructure and governance arrangements required for marshalling and aligning the full range of communications resources across and beyond government.’ But why is it that governments (in the UK and elsewhere), private-sector organizations, analysts and commentators have all become preoccupied with strategic communications? Is this merely a response to the latest intellectual and public policy fashion, or are there more substantial and serious dynamics at work? Are governments drawn to strategic communications merely in order to communicate national security strategy, or is there more at stake? Do strategic communications have more to offer than has so far been supposed?

Building on the work of the International Security Programme at Chatham House on strategy (including the report *Strategy in Austerity*, 2010) and security and defence policy, this report asks what should be expected of strategic communications and whether their potential is being either under-estimated or exaggerated. Should they be associated largely with traditional strategic activities such as military or police activity, with the purpose of explaining intent to allies and adversaries alike, and to the domestic electorate and media? If so, is the UK government’s investment of time and resources proportionate to that relatively straightforward goal? Or is there more to be expected, to be done and to be invested? Has the full potential of strategic communications so far been overlooked? Are they better understood as a more complex, cross-governmental activity; as the means for presenting and explaining ‘comprehensive’ or ‘integrated’ policies? Is it conceivable that they might be granted equal status with other levers of governmental power and influence such as diplomacy, economic and trade relations and the threat or use of military force? And if so, is the UK government’s interest and investment in strategic communications proportionate to this potential?

This report provides a concise analysis of the background to an emergent public policy debate and assesses the potential of strategic communications as a component of national strategy. The report is informed and shaped by discussions with representatives of government, the armed forces, the private sector and the media, all of whom should be thanked for being so generous with their time. We are also grateful to all those who commented on drafts of the report and contributed to the project. Finally, we would like to thank Bell Pottinger Public Advocacy for their support of this project.

The views expressed are those of the authors alone and any inaccuracies of fact, interpretation or judgment are their own responsibility.

Paul Cornish  
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*University of Bath*

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## About the Authors

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# Foreword

Do we need yet another report on ‘strategic communications’?

In our view, the answer is an emphatic ‘yes.’ The reason is simple: we’ve come increasingly to understand and experience the limits of ‘hard’ military power in confronting today’s security challenges. The ‘soft’ power of persuasion and influence is as central to our achievement of national strategic goals as any ‘kinetic’ effort. We’ve seen at first hand its ability to reduce or transform conflict; to nurture the emergence of stable, inclusive social and political orders; to advance ideas and narratives that challenge violent extremism; and to influence and shape complex processes of social and political change.

Yet this realization has not been simple to implement: governments have struggled to conceptualize the proper role and use of strategic communications, and other ‘soft’ power elements, in meeting diplomatic, security, and development challenges. Equally, the practice of ‘stratcom’ in the field has been uneven, confused and often counter-productive.

We approached Chatham House some months ago to explore the role and application of strategic communications in the national security context, and to produce a report that might serve as a summary of the state of discussion and a platform for confronting key issues.

Few are likely to take issue with its main conclusions: that the process of strategic communications remains essentially reactive and military-led; that government’s approach is insufficiently ‘joined up;’ and that we’re being ‘out-communicated’ – not only by our enemies but by a wide range of alternative voices and perspectives that are sometimes hostile, sometimes indifferent, to UK national objectives.

A central observation struck us. Despite numerous reports on both sides of the Atlantic, 10 years of operational experience in the most challenging conflicts, fundamental political and social changes in the role and place of the state, and in the face of newly emerging social media and mobile communications technologies, we’re still ‘stuck’ in a set of abstract debates over definitions and organizational frameworks that have been in discussion for many years.

The clear implication (borne out by this report) is that governments have not yet fully confronted the fundamental insights of the past 50 years of marketing, advertising and public relations best practices; nor started to really think, substantively, about ‘doing’ strategic communications. While questions of organizational structure and resource are important, relatively little attention is paid to core questions regarding the actual conduct of strategic communications activities in the contemporary environment.

What can we learn from the practice of strategic communications over the past decade, so that we avoid mistakes in the future – not to ‘refight the last war’ but to avoid the next?

Taking the final section of the report (the ‘how’ of stratcom) as a point of departure, several questions occur:

- How do governments move beyond the traditional framework of target audiences, messaging and products to understand and address the complex psycho-social structures and dynamics that lie at the root of our security problems?
- How do we cope with the rapidly changing technological environment – an era of pervasive communication in which narrative is something that can no longer be controlled or ‘owned’, and in which every problem exists within a simultaneously global and local environment?
- What options are there for intervening and shaping situations to prevent conflict from occurring – particularly in instances where social movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah both claim to act on behalf of the people and support, or potentially support, violent extremists?

- How can we engage in, and shape, narratives about the relationship between ‘the West and the rest’, in ways that help build long-term productive relationships between the UK and key regions?

For us, these are not abstract questions. Over the past eight years, Bell Pottinger has been extensively involved in efforts to employ strategic communications activities to undercut radicalization and violent extremism, and to build viable peace, in a variety of operational environments.

We know from experience that strategic communications have a greater contribution to make – not because we are practitioners, though we are, but because we understand that we live in a world of meaning, stories,

emotions, interpretations, fears and hopes, and that these are the stuff of communications. We believe that we are not doomed to wait for terrorist attacks, expensive wars or failed negotiations.

We believe that we can do better, and we think that the UK can lead the world in finding creative ways to tackle efficiently and effectively the national and human security challenges facing us today. To do so, we must confront a new set of questions – questions that fundamentally engage the way the world works, and how to change it. We hope this report helps in this effort.

Mark Turnbull  
*Managing Director*  
*Bell Pottinger Public Advocacy*

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# Executive Summary and Recommendations

Despite greater debate about the function and scope of strategic communications – communication through words and deeds in pursuit of national strategic objectives – discussion and practice currently remain too closely focused on the management of messages rather than the delivery of policy. This report aims to raise awareness of the role and potential of strategic communications as a means of delivering policy. It seeks to clarify how strategic communications can help government manage and respond to current and future security challenges. It places strategic communications at the heart of the development and implementation of national strategy, and argues that it must be the business not only of the highest levels of government but of all its constituent pillars (including the armed forces, diplomacy, trade and aid).

Recent allied operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya have underlined that foreign policy goals cannot be achieved by military power alone. The common refrain that allied forces should also seek to win ‘hearts and minds’ as a means to deliver enduring peace and stability speaks to the importance of non-military means and ‘soft’ power in connecting with populations both at home and abroad. Strategic communications, correctly understood, are an integral part of this approach.

At present, the debate on the role of strategic communications in national strategy too often reflects a ‘whole-of-military’ concept and culture rather than the essential

whole-of-government approach. Although the UK government clearly has a good understanding of the importance of strategic communications, this understanding is relatively limited in its sophistication and imagination, and policy in turn becomes difficult to coordinate and implement. The potential of strategic communications remains under-exploited.

A broader understanding of strategic communications would allow communications activity to function as one of the executive levers of national strategy, rather than being seen as a mere adjunct. If properly understood and designed, strategic communications are not just about words, explaining intentions or actions, but should also be about achieving the required ends of national strategy, not least by exploiting the communicative power of military and non-military deeds.

Strategic communications also support another critical strategic commodity – influence. Strategic influence is wholly dependent on effective coordination across and beyond government in order to achieve national strategic goals. Given the centrality of influence to national strategy, a strategic communications framework must be intrinsic to strategic planning and policy preparation and implementation.

Strategic communications are not best achieved through a fixed, separate, central structure – an ‘Office for Strategic Communications’ of some sort. What is needed is a shared strategic communications mindset, integral to every department of state and at every level of national policy and strategy. It is the fostering of a strategic communications culture, rather than the design of more formal structures, that will promote the necessary changes in current practice. This means creating a self-sustaining and iterative system that allows for an exchange of information and experience involving leaders, communicators, agents and stakeholders. In each situation, the centre of strategic communications activity will depend on the nature and focus of a crisis or strategy, the audience(s) of concern and the means available to influence or bring about change. High-level political ‘ownership’ is thus vital, but it must be properly resourced and built on a sound and credible strategy that reaches across government and into individual departments.

Strategic communications should be visible from the outset in the activity of each government department, in a number of ways. First, there should be evidence of a high-level understanding of the broader effects that policies should and might have. Second, there should be sensitivity to the possibility of a variety of interpretations and implications of policy in different quarters. Third, there should be an awareness of the influence required to achieve consensus and support for any given policy. And finally there should be recognition of the affected stakeholders and audiences, whose support will be necessary for the fulfilment of given national strategic objectives and government policies.

It follows that strategic communications should be both a ‘centre of government’ concern (i.e. an organic and critical part of the policy-making and strategic process at the highest levels) and a tool to unite the whole of government (i.e. a common feature of all activity at all levels of government).

At their most basic, effective strategic communications are a two-way process, relaying the reactions and views of the various audiences involved. This audience feedback should inform the periodic adaptation and adjustment of policy and strategy. This means moving away from an approach to communications that focuses disproportionately on domestic media relations, ‘sound-bites’ and ‘photo-opportunities’ at the expense of a stronger, but perhaps more subtle, strategic message. More ambitiously still, strategic communications could be understood as going beyond media messaging to help develop a targeted campaign of behavioural or social change informed by close knowledge of the audience.

Strategic communications are not an optional adjunct to strategy. They must be tailored and shaped to serve the strategic political objectives set at any given time. If used to lay the groundwork in the early stages, they can reduce the need for more assertive action. Rather than being limited to a semi-detached supporting role of communicating a separate and inflexible national strategy, they should therefore be seen as an *enabler* of national strategy. Moreover, if strategic communications are to be truly national, they must reflect not only government policy and an executive message but a national narrative that is understood, owned and endorsed across society.

## Recommendations

We recommend a number of changes to:

### 1. *Establish a clearer definition of what strategic communications are, and their place in national strategy:*

- Strategic communications should become a more prominent component at the highest levels of government, at an early stage in the development of government strategies, during a crisis response or a contingency operation and generally as a critical component of policy-making.
- In planning government strategies and the delivery of policy, activities should be considered and undertaken as much for their communicative value as for their physical impact. But messaging and narrative alone will do little without constructive and credible actions to reinforce the message and address audiences. Consistency should be sought between spoken and practical means of communication, or more simply between words and actions.
- Strategic communications should not merely be part of a one-way process where the narrative flows from the core of government to be applied unquestioningly by agents and stakeholders. Rather, they must be responsive and flexible so that they can simultaneously respond and adapt to facts on the ground, and to the reaction of target audiences and adversaries.
- In addition to understanding the what, why and where of strategic communications, governments and strategic communicators across the policy process must be able to recognize the ‘who’: the audience to whom policy is addressed. Strategic communications must recognize the diversity in audiences and their different motivations, interests and ideas.
- There is a need for a greater connection between the national strategic and operational levels of stability operations and a systematic attempt to connect the communicative value of words and deeds. In conflict and crisis situations people must

be able to communicate quickly and accurately within an established structure. Strategic communicators should be included within the process as early as possible within the conflict cycle.

- In counter-radicalization efforts, strategic communications can have particular potency in addressing the early phases, including pre-emptive and non-violent intervention carefully targeted at those most susceptible to radicalization. Strategic communications could be used simultaneously as a tool of social deterrence and social inclusion.

## **2. Reform how strategic communications are managed within government:**

- In order to organize and manage strategic communications there must be an effective culture within which they are acknowledged to be a normal and fully integrated part of the policy and strategic processes. This culture should be guided by a shared and implicit awareness of the role and value of strategic communications.
- More importantly, this environment must be seen to have a strong and credible leadership operating within a framework of responsibility and accountability without seeking to exert complete control over either the ‘message’ or the ‘medium’. Within this environment people at all levels, both civilian and military, must be empowered, trusted and taught to be effective strategic communicators.
- There should be one end to government communications, rather than several conflicting aims. If several strategic objectives are in play then each should address a discrete area within this overarching common purpose.
- People at all stages of policy delivery should feel they have a stake in the bigger picture and the

wider message. In so doing, they must be aware of and attuned to the objectives of national strategy while in turn being encouraged and enabled to feed information back to the policy core.

- As an intrinsic part of national strategy, strategic communications must be clear and consistent. A doctrinal or framework approach would assist in socializing the idea and practice of strategic communications across government.
- At times of crisis, the government could consider the establishment of ad hoc committees or coordinating bodies to oversee the communications strategies of government departments and agencies.
- As part of stability operations, and in order to ensure the centrality of strategic communications to planning and action, there must be a much tighter relationship between political leaders, military commanders and communicators. Civilians should be given greater status to contribute to the overall message.
- There is a need for greater recognition of the ability of those outside government to communicate strategically through local engagement and outreach within and between communities and populations.

## **3. Take account of developments in new information technology, especially in cyberspace:**

- Cyberspace can offer a feedback loop through which public policy can be subjected to critical appraisal from a variety of audiences.
- A broader and more imaginative approach to the challenges of cyber security that enabled a greater appreciation of an array of disciplines including sociology and social psychology might encourage a more holistic view of the dynamics at work within a rapidly evolving environment.



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# Introduction

The title of this report juxtaposes two ideas – ‘strategic communications’ and ‘national strategy’. ‘Strategy’ is a term in such widespread use that in many cases it has come to mean little more than ‘deciding’, ‘planning ahead’ or merely ‘doing something’. Properly understood, however, strategy is a collection of ideas, preferences and methods which explain activity and give it purpose, by connecting it to a desired effect or a stated goal. Strategic planners and military professionals often describe strategy in terms of a formula with three variables. In the words of the 2010 UK National Security Strategy, ‘A national security strategy, like any strategy, must be a combination of ends (what we are seeking to achieve), ways (the ways by which we seek to achieve those ends) and means (the resources we can devote to achieving the ends).’<sup>1</sup> In other words, strategy is the interface which provides governmental policy with its ways and means (or its capability), and which gives activity – military or other – its ends (or its purpose).<sup>2</sup>

In general terms, the ends or the purpose of national strategy might be to gain some form of advantage, to maintain or protect assets and interests, or to effect a desired change of one sort or another. The ways and means available at the national level include the traditional levers of power – diplomatic persuasion, economic pressure and military coercion – as well as so-called ‘soft power’ methods such as cultural attraction and influence. What is key is that none of these levers or methods – traditional or new – is a sufficient or self-validating explanation of national strategy; these are all variables which are made coherent by the

formula described above. ‘Ways’ and ‘means’ make no strategic sense in their own terms; they must be informed and validated by an overarching strategic purpose.

The goal of this report is to ask where communications should sit alongside other strategic levers and methods, both traditional and non-traditional. Communications have always been an aspect of strategy, but they are traditionally viewed in a subordinate or peripheral manner, or as a reactive tool after the event. By this we mean that communications can always be useful in support of, or as an adjunct to other strategic levers and methods and that it is common practice to explain and communicate intentions and successes and (albeit with less enthusiasm) failures. Can communications be more genuinely and convincingly *strategic*? Is there something about communications that is being overlooked or underused in the strategic debate? Can communications be a ‘ways and means’ variable in more of its own right which both shapes and is governed by the national strategic formula?

With this goal in mind, the report asks a number of questions. What is meant by the term ‘strategic communications’? What, if anything, is new and distinctive about this idea? How should the relationship between strategy and communications best be understood? Or in other words, what is the role and relevance of strategic communications in the formulation and delivery of national strategy? And finally, how much should be expected of communications as a variable in national strategy as described above? To what extent can strategic communications help to generate synergy and responsiveness at all levels of national planning, decision-making and activity: national; departmental (e.g., in the case of United Kingdom, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development or the Ministry of Defence); at the campaign or theatre level; and finally at the local level?

In the course of answering these questions it became clear not only that this is a complex subject concerning the sociology, psychology and technology of modern communications, the nature of national strategy and the functioning of democratic government, but also that these

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1 HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty – The National Security Strategy*, Cm 7953 (London: The Stationery Office, 2010), p. 10, para. 0.14,

2 Paul Cornish, Written evidence submitted to House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee Report, *Who Does UK National Strategy?* (London: The Stationery Office, HC 435, 18 October 2010), p. Ev 84, para. 2.

questions are strikingly familiar, yet curiously unresolved. Sophisticated discussion of the meaning and role of strategic communications has been taking place for at least a decade, in the United Kingdom, the United States and elsewhere. Frustratingly, however, this is a public policy debate that tends more to discussion than to decision. In the United Kingdom, for example, in spite of the promise made in the October 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review, almost twelve months later no such document has been released by the government.<sup>3</sup> The ambition of this report is to nudge the strategic communications policy debate towards a more mature and durable conclusion.

The report adopts a simple structure common to much of the published work on strategic communications – a structure which itself is indicative of the still-emergent nature of this subject. Thus, the report examines the relationship between national strategy and strategic communications in four parts: ‘What?’, ‘Why?’, ‘Where?’ and ‘How?’ In Chapter 1 we ask what is (or should be) meant by strategic communications. Chapter 2 then considers why there should be so much interest in the subject. In Chapter 3 we examine the modalities and processes of strategic communications. Finally, in Chapter 4 we consider the relationship between strategic communications and national strategy on a more practical level, in the context of four policy areas. In the first, concerning national strategy itself, we ask whether there is evidence of a ‘higher level’ of strategic communications commensurate with growing expectations for a comprehensive or integrated approach to security and defence policy. If so, to what extent can strategic communications provide the ‘glue’ for such an

approach? We then examine stability operations and ask how well strategic communications complement current UK stabilization operations in thought and practice. Would strategic communications improve the possibility of a more effective approach to such challenges? The third policy area concerns counter-radicalization and more specifically the revised ‘Prevent’ strand of the UK counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST); could strategic communications contribute to improved counter-radicalization by providing the means with which to transform the outlook and allegiance of minority communities and individuals in the UK? Finally, we consider the threats and challenges to national security emanating from cyberspace. The internet is an information and communications environment which also enables security threats and challenges. Should strategy or communication be government’s priority in cyberspace?

The report refers to *strategic communications* (plural), rather than *strategic communication* (singular). This relatively minor distinction is central to the debate as to whether strategic communications should be primarily defence-centric or (the authors’ preference) should involve a much broader policy/practitioner community, concerned with national strategy as a whole. The report focuses on UK and US practice because in the authors’ assessment experience from operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere demonstrates British and American leadership of strategic communications, concepts, structures and development. Finally, in the course of the project the authors undertook a series of non-attributable interviews with opinion-formers in order to inform the research. These are referred to as ‘Interview [A]’ etc. and listed in the Appendix.

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# 1. Strategic Communications: *What?*

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.<sup>4</sup>

Marshall McLuhan's well-known observation is central to the two questions at the core of this report: what are strategic communications and what is the relationship between strategic communications and national strategy? A clear understanding of what is meant by 'strategic' here is critical if strategic communications are to support the effective design, implementation and influence of national strategy.

Despite strategic communications having been traditionally defence-led, more comprehensive concepts of strategic communications are gathering pace as the need to communicate strategically has begun to be recognized at the highest levels of government. This is particularly true in the United States, where the relationship between grand strategy (the organization of large national means in pursuit of large national ends), government organization and available resources is acutely felt. The White House National Framework for Strategic Communications

was established in 2010, while the United Kingdom is also moving (albeit more slowly) towards some form of National Strategic Communications Strategy (NSCS) located primarily in the Cabinet Office. Indeed, this report is partly a consequence of the growing recognition by central government of the significance of strategic communications to national strategy in its broadest sense. There is a concerted effort to 'demilitarize' strategic communications, bringing them out of strategic military headquarters to establish a concept, a process and possibly even a capability at or close to the highest levels of government. However, as visible both from the interviews conducted for this report and from the published literature, there remains much debate about whether strategic communication is best considered to be a 'natural' process of policy convergence and integration or a discrete capability.

In the current context, strategic communications suffer from three main deficiencies. First, even the experts cannot define what they are and the search for definition hinders their systematic application at the policy and strategy levels. Second, the development of strategic communications in practice has tended to emphasize a very narrow concept with a close focus on media communications. Finally, while efforts are being made on both sides of the Atlantic to ensure strategic communications become more central to national strategy, policy-level acceptance of the idea is still cautious at best, and significant resistance can still be found when cross-government action is required. A key challenge to governments, therefore, is not merely to 'do' or even 'control' strategic communications more effectively, but to rethink the purpose and dynamics of communication and action altogether.

## Definition

The search for a common definition has often hindered rather than helped strategic communications. Indeed, the ideally flexible and adaptive nature of strategic communications means no single definition will suffice. Nevertheless, strategic communications are seen to comprise four main components: information operations; psychological

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4 M. Federman (2010), 'What is the Meaning of "The Medium is the Message"?'; see [http://individual.utoronto.ca/markfederman/article\\_mediumisthemessage.htm](http://individual.utoronto.ca/markfederman/article_mediumisthemessage.htm).

operations; public diplomacy; and public affairs. These in turn contain common elements. First is the need to inform, influence and persuade audiences at home and abroad, whether friendly, adversarial or merely a member of the public. Second is the need to promote coordination across government to avoid what the US Army calls ‘information fratricide.’<sup>5</sup> Third, the need to communicate strategically is itself dependent on the ability to communicate actions to all affected and interested audiences and to ensure that *actions* are themselves communicable, i.e. complementary to and supportive of strategic objectives.

Given the many possible approaches and the inherent definitional challenges, this paper takes as its point of departure the following, more simple, definition of strategic communications:

A systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences and, identifies effective conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behaviour.<sup>6</sup>

In *Strategic Communication*, Christopher Paul tries to define strategic communications as support for national strategy rather than as an essential element of it – as ‘coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signalling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences to support national objectives.’<sup>7</sup> Paul recognizes the essential relationship between national strategy and strategic communications, observing that communicating strategically can only be meaningful when:

we have clearly stated national objectives, which contain nested intermediate or supporting objectives; nesting all the way down to the operational and tactical level. These clear statements make it easy to see which objectives can be realized through influence or persuasion, and which

can be supported through such efforts. In pursuit of these objectives, appropriate priority is given to influence. Not that influence is always the primary means for pursuing policy but that it is always considered for possible primacy in a policy or operation, and is the top priority when it is appropriate for it to be.<sup>8</sup>

It would seem evident that the US is largely ahead of the UK in thinking about strategic communications at a whole of government level. The US Department of Defense 2009 Report on Strategic Communication refers to ‘emergent thinking’ which is seen to be ‘coalescing around the notion that strategic communication should be viewed as a process, rather than as a set of capabilities, organizations, or discrete activities.’<sup>9</sup> In its broadest sense, ‘strategic communication’ is the process of integrating issues of audience and stakeholder perception into policy-making, planning, and operations at every level. As the Joint Staff’s October 2009 Joint Integrating Concept for Strategic Communication (SC JIC) puts it,

Strategic communication is the alignment of multiple lines of operation (e.g., policy implementation, public affairs, force movement, information operations, etc.) that together generate effects to support national objectives. Strategic communication essentially means sharing meaning (i.e., communicating) in support of national objectives (i.e., strategically). This involves listening as much as transmitting, and applies not only to information, but also [to] physical communication – action that conveys meaning.<sup>10</sup>

The 2009 SC JIC further acknowledges the problem of locating strategic communications too firmly at any one level of planning or activity. Yet, at present as has already been stated, strategic communications still too often reflect a ‘whole-of-military’ rather than a much-needed ‘whole-of-government’ concept and culture. This is in part

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5 This is an allusion to the Cold War problem of ‘missile fratricide’ whereby the strategic effect of a missile attack might be diminished as the blast from one missile destroys another on its approach

6 Steve Tatham, *Strategic Communications: A Primer*, ARAG Special Series 8/28, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom (2008), p. 7.

7 Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts and Current Debates* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), p. 3.

8 Ibid., p. 174.

9 US Department of Defense, *Report on Strategic Communication*, December 2009 (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, December 2009), pp. 1–2.

10 US Department of Defense, *Strategic Communication: Joint Integrating Concept* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 7 October 2009), p. ii.

due to the enthusiasm with which military organizations have taken to strategic communications: communications, and particularly the communicative value of action in a conflict space, is a fundamental part of military activity and armed forces are the servant of national strategy. The US Department of Defense *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, while recognizing the military predominance in this field, makes a welcome concession when it describes strategic communications as

Focused US Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of US Government interests, policies and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages and products synchronized with the actions of *all* instruments of national power [emphasis added].<sup>11</sup>

The 2010 White House National Framework for Strategic Communications, referred to earlier and overseen by Vice-President Joe Biden, reflects this developing ambition and the expansion of strategic communications into national strategy.

We describe ‘strategic communications’ as the synchronization of our words and deeds as well as deliberate efforts to communicate and engage with intended audiences...<sup>12</sup>

The White House Framework continues and identifies some of the challenges for government:

Although the United States Government carries out deliberate communication and engagement worldwide, the priorities for our communication and engagement efforts are the same as overall national security priorities. Communication and engagement, like all other elements of national power, should be designed to support policy goals as well as to achieve specific effects to include:

- foreign audiences that recognize areas of mutual interest with the United States.
- foreign audiences that believe the United States plays a constructive role in global affairs;
- and foreign audiences that see the United States as a respectful partner in efforts to meet complex global challenges. Our communication and engagement with foreign audiences should emphasize mutual respect and mutual interest. The United States should articulate a positive vision, identifying what we are for, whenever possible, and engage foreign audiences on positive terms. At the same time, our countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts should focus more directly on discrediting, denigrating, and delegitimizing al-Qa’ida and violent extremist ideology.<sup>13</sup>

While the UK Cabinet Office is moving in a similar direction, this ‘all national means’ approach contrasts with the only currently published definition of strategic communications as offered by the British Ministry of Defence in 2011, in which strategic communications are placed very clearly at the defence-strategic level. According to a March 2011 Joint Doctrine Note, strategic communications should be limited to ‘advancing national interests by using all *Defence* means of communication to influence the attitudes and behaviours of people’ [emphasis added].<sup>14</sup> Although more cross-governmental approaches are evolving, the British approach has some of the appearance of the tail wagging the dog, in that until recently the defence contribution has been offered before a national concept has been established.

## Strategic communications and public diplomacy

A contentious and persistent part of the definitional debate concerns the relationship between strategic communications and public diplomacy. This is partly because so many established public diplomats object to this new arrival

11 US Department of Defense, *JP 1-02 Department of Defense Dictionary of Associated Military and Associated Terms*, 8 November 2010, amended through 15 May 2011 (Washington, DC: Department of Defense) pp. 347–8.

12 White House, *National Framework for Strategic Communications* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2010) p. 2.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

14 Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, Joint Doctrine Note 1/11, ‘Strategic Communication: The Defence Contribution’, March 2011 (Shrivenham: DDCD) p. 1-1.

on their territory. Yet it is arguably the failure of public diplomats to think strategically that has led to the need to establish communications more centrally in policy and strategy. A 2009 Congressional Research Service report highlights the distinction:

Public diplomacy is defined in different ways, but broadly it is a term used to describe a government's efforts to conduct foreign policy and promote national interests through direct outreach and communication with the population of a foreign country. Public diplomacy activities include providing information to foreign publics through broadcast and Internet media and at libraries and other outreach facilities in foreign countries; conducting cultural diplomacy, such as art exhibits and music performances; and administering international educational and professional exchange programs.<sup>15</sup>

The implication here is that public diplomacy is about communicating US policy to foreign nationals and not specifically about strategy, or indeed about using communications to achieve strategic effect. Public diplomacy is better understood, therefore, as a subset of strategic communications. It should be considered as one component alongside, say, information operations; something that some public diplomats find distasteful. One key difference is that public diplomacy has traditionally been the practice of civilians, whereas the military remain prominent in the field of strategic communications.

## The information environment

Effective strategic communications must be established upon a strong understanding of any given information environment. As Paul suggests, strategic communications have thus far been stuck too often on the 'send button' (as in a radio transmitter), have tended to be too reactive to events and actions and have been driven by the flawed presumption that communications can be switched on or off (and controlled) by the government. As such they have

generally failed to respond to the ubiquity, immediacy and pervasiveness of the modern information and communications environment. Communicating has traditionally been understood to be a two-way process, and effective strategic communications, if properly configured (and not merely as a euphemism for 'megaphone diplomacy'), should inform the periodic adaptation and adjustment of policy and strategy.

Rather than conceive of communications as a linear activity taking place between 'speaker' and 'listener' – an activity that is to a large extent initiated and controlled by the 'speaker' – communications have become a necessity and a constant of experience in modern society. The challenge posed for national strategy in a rapidly evolving and borderless information environment concerns, first, how best to communicate strategically and thereafter how best to communicate this strategy consistently in the context of many competing messages and alternative voices. The challenge to governments is to move beyond communicating from 'us' to 'them' and embrace new technologies as they evolve, and recognize that the voice of government is but one of many: in the world of 'all to all' instantaneous information transfer there is no barrier to entering the world of strategic communications.

A broader understanding of the value of strategic communications might enable or improve national strategy, rather than simply seek to explain it. Indeed, the role of strategic communications should be to establish the conditions in which, and activities by which, a more ambitious national strategy can be implemented more effectively, rather than merely serving to communicate that strategy.

## Barriers to communicating strategically

The current narrowness of the debate over the role and utility of strategic communications in the pursuit of national strategy, particularly at a time of austerity, reflects an inability on the behalf of governments to respond to subtle shifts in the policy environment and in turn to inform and shape national strategy in an iterative and responsive process.

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15 Kennan H. Nakamura and Matthew C. Weed, 'U.S. Public Diplomacy: Background and Current Issues', 18 December 2009 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service) p. 2.

As Gowing and Paul argue so persuasively, the fundamental problem for strategic communications, as currently conceived, is a lack of a strategy. The result is an iterated, reactive approach to strategic communications that in itself is insufficient to cope with the relationship between strategy, policy, action and the 24-hour news cycle. This lack of coherence – and the resulting information fratricide it brings – tends to exaggerate errors and failures. This is furthermore a consequence of there being no measurable indicators of performance, meaning there appear to be few if any ways to establish a demonstrable link between messaging and effect.

Too often, strategic communications (and strategic communicators) tend to be brought in too late and at too low a level to influence and support strategy. Indeed, it is a central contention of this report that organic strategic communications must be seen as part of an emerging whole-of-government security concept and must develop in parallel with, if not within, such efforts and structures.

## Developing a comprehensive approach

Recent experience in Iraq and Afghanistan would suggest a concept of strategic communications that emphasizes the need not only to place communications at the centre of all military campaign planning but also to locate all communications activities in an integrated and systematic campaign in order to shape the many narratives as part of moving communities beyond conflict and progress towards the achievement of strategic goals.

The first step to realize such a change in the status and role of strategic communications would be to harmonize definitions or to qualify such definitions depending on any given circumstance. At present there appear to be three levels of strategic communications: support for broad national goals, for narrower security and defence-strategic goals, and for mixed operational or local goals. At the very least, greater complementarity is needed across those three levels as a first step to making strategic communications truly strategic. Such a goal would require a more holistic approach to understanding the

role of communications in strategy in the current world. Such considerations would in turn enable a more unified understanding of the role of all components in the communications toolbox that are germane to responsive strategy.

In particular, in order to communicate strategically, strategic communications must be adaptive to the level and moment of application. The need for flexibility supports the view that strategic communications should be seen more as a framework than as a paradigm in its own right – i.e. cohesion and consistency are more important than structure. Indeed, the struggle to establish a common definition could perhaps be avoided if strategic communications were to be seen more as a pool of capabilities.

Strategic communications must by definition be at the heart of influence and engagement, and influence is fundamental in the pursuit of strategic goals. Striking the right balance between capability and structure will thus be essential if national strategy is to be realized. To that end, the US National Security Council has created a Global Engagement Directorate, while the State Department has created the Global Strategic Engagement Center. These moves are intended partly to centre the debate over strategic communications and partly to create alternatives ('global engagement') to a term that through its very lack of definition is losing credibility in high policy circles; ironically, just at the point when it is becoming most needed.

Effective strategic communications are challenged along a horizontal axis of elapsed time, which in the era of the 24-hour news cycle and of constant political oversight can militate against the effective, consistent and long-term communication of strategy. But they are also challenged along a vertical axis which shows that the strategic effort includes a range of constituent pillars with very different characters (military, trade, diplomacy, aid and so on) at different stages of development, and with different requirements as far as strategic communications are concerned. In these conditions, consensus and coherence may be impossible to achieve. Christopher Paul and John Robert Kelley highlight what they call the *Influence versus Inform versus Communication* debate, which can be broken down into three essential categories.<sup>16</sup> Information management

16 See Paul, *Strategic Communication*, p. 43.

takes place over the short term; influence takes place over the medium to longer term; and engagement builds relationships for the longest term. The challenge for effective strategic communications is one of cohesion, in that all three elements are distinct professional domains in their own right, with their own practitioners, cultures and doctrines. In this vein, Gowing gives a stark warning:

the time lines of media action and institutional reaction are out of sync. The information pipelines facilitated by the new media can provide information and revelations within minutes. But the apparatus of government, the military or the corporate world remain conditioned to take hours.<sup>17</sup>

Given that all engagement – civil or military – is an extension of policy, policy is today as much about the message as it is about substantive change. This would suggest that the first-order requirement is to see strategic communications as a means of pursuing the ends of national strategy, both at home and overseas, and thus establishing a transmission line between policy, strategy and action.

Given that imperative, a shared vision across the military and multiple civilian efforts must be central to effective campaigning and communications. Strategic communications are thus critical as a means of establishing coherence and imposing sufficient discipline on all those charged with its realization, and yet must be flexible enough to be adapted in the light of inevitable change. Such a ‘vision’ must by definition consider in the round short-, medium- and longer-term information, messaging and engagement, otherwise known as influence. Such components indicate not only the need for a close relationship between policy planning and implementation, and for some metrics against which to measure performance, but also for some mechanism at the heart of government to ensure consistency across government, in order to maintain the all-important interface between policy, strategy and action.

Strategic communications are more than a process, requiring the capability to consider, coordinate and communicate. To be effective, strategic communications

require a common culture of strategy and communications. Establishing such a common culture is a challenge both within and beyond governments, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Any strategic communications strategy worth the name requires several mutually reinforcing elements. These include the early establishment of credibility abroad, for example in military theatres, and at home; promoting shared values; promoting national and transnational values; and informing and communicating with key constituencies. Specifically, cultural understanding must be an early and integral part of strategic planning and policy development from the very outset. The impacts of words and actions on the media must also be assessed and anticipated by strategic communications experts before any action or implementation. Thereafter, consistency of message and coherence between act and word must be maintained.

Several other lines of operation relating to strategic communications should also be considered as organic to the planning process and not simply as a consequence of it. These include *inter alia* how to establish information superiority and information dominance, the relationship between information and education from the short to the longer term and an understanding of any opponents and their evolving strategic communications package – in terms both of message and use of media and of ways to counter opponents while still maintaining credibility at home and in theatre.

## Summary

Strategic communications should form the interface between national strategy and action. However, for all the ambition of recent government documents on both sides of the Atlantic, strategic communications remain an essentially reactive and characteristically military-led process.

Critical to the success of strategic communications will be high-level political ‘ownership’ of the idea and leadership across government. This must be supported

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17 Nik Gowing, *Skyful of Lies and Black Swans: The New Tyranny of Shifting Information Power in Crises* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 27.

by sufficient resources for the development of a credible communications strategy able to reach across government and down into the departmental level. This will in turn help foster a clear strategy at the heart of government as well as far better coordination across and beyond government to ensure the delivery of the required national strategic effect.

Strategic communications must be seen to reach out from central government to operational environments (both military and non-military) and to the local domestic constituency. Moreover, it must be perceived to be relevant, credible and authoritative at all levels of the governmental process, from the highest policy level to the practical levels where engagement takes place. In order to be effective, therefore, strategic communications should be both a

‘centre-of-government’ concern (i.e. an organic part of the policy-making and strategic process at the highest levels) and a ‘whole-of-government’ unifier (i.e. a common feature of all activity at all levels of government).

Finally, influence is integral to strategic communications and is thus critical to the relationship between policy, strategy and action. Given the intimate relationship between the act and the message, strategic communications design must take place in support of and in parallel with the design of policy. As such, effective strategic communications will demand early recognition of the concept of influence over the short, medium and longer terms within policy-making. Only then will government be able to communicate strategically to best effect.

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## 2. Strategic Communications: *Why?*

Chapter 1 discussed the nature and meaning of strategic communications and explored some of the obstacles (technical, bureaucratic, political and conceptual) impeding its wider development and application. Having thus given substance to a much-used yet rather imprecise term, and before discussing *where* strategic communications should be organized and managed within government, the next task is to ask *why* governments should have become so interested in the idea and practice of strategic communications. Strikingly, much of the current debate on the topic seems both commonsense and commonplace. But if so, why is it that governments, private-sector organizations, analysts and commentators have all become preoccupied with strategic communications? Is this a manufactured interest of some sort, merely a response to the latest intellectual fashion? Or are there more substantial and serious dynamics at work? Are governments drawn to strategic communications simply in order to communicate national strategy, or are strategic communications an altogether more complex, important and richer resource?

There are a number of reasons why governments might wish to develop a more elaborate and formal communications policy or strategy, not least to keep pace with a rapidly evolving information environment. The straightforward view of the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) is that ‘the

ultimate purpose of strategic communication [singular] is to advance the national interest and to support national policies and objectives.’<sup>18</sup> But this explanation says more about the objectives held by government than it does about the means chosen to achieve those objectives. Why should *communications* be considered part of, or a contribution to national strategy? In the first place, the 21st-century communications environment is evolving so fast, and reaching instantaneously into so many areas of public, commercial and private life that a response of some sort is demanded by those in government. If the internet and social media sites are acquiring a political character of their own, then governments must respond in some way. It is also clear, in the words of one senior military interviewee, that insurgent and terrorist adversaries have seen the merit of strategic communications in some form as an adjunct to their campaign; indeed, others would argue that communications are not merely an adjunct to but at the heart of insurgent and terrorist campaigns.<sup>19</sup>

For those governments involved in complex intervention and stabilization operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere, there is an urgent sense that the task of explanation has not so far been performed well. The UK MoD, for example, acknowledges the growth of interest in strategic communications within the MoD and across government, and attributes much of this interest to ‘the recent experience of our struggle to forge coherent strategies for our campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to communicate them to audiences in a compelling way against a backdrop of 24-hour, and increasingly pervasive, social media.’<sup>20</sup> These ‘audiences’, it should be noted, could be British, Iraqi, Afghan or indeed any other nationality or constituency thought relevant. And finally, there is a growing appreciation within government that strategic communications embody ideas and procedures which could make it possible for the various functions of government (including, of course, national strategy itself) to be undertaken more effectively and, with fiscal constraints in mind, more efficiently. In sum, what we find is that the UK government has an understanding of strategic communications which

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18 Ministry of Defence, ‘Strategic Communication: The Defence Contribution’, Joint Doctrine Note 1/11 (London: MoD, March 2011), para 106, p. 1-2.

19 Interview C.

20 MoD, ‘Strategic Communication’, para 2, p. i.

is fairly limited in its sophistication and imagination, yet even this proves difficult to coordinate and implement.

With these and other motives in mind, this chapter suggests four broad reasons why governments should take an increasing interest in strategic communications. At the most general level there is a *constitutional obligation* laid upon democratic governments to communicate and explain. Strategic communications also offer the opportunity for governments to establish their *competence and credibility*. Third, they can help to encourage *coherence and consistency* within government communications and to ensure that what is declared is not contradicted by what is done. And finally, they might also offer the prize of enhanced *comprehensiveness and cooperation* in the achievement of strategic-level goals and within government.

## Constitutional obligation

At the heart of a parliamentary system of government lies a complex relationship between the executive (i.e. the government of the day), the legislature (i.e. parliament itself), the judiciary and the electorate. In order for this relationship to be kept in equilibrium it is required of the executive, within reason, to communicate its intentions, goals, achievements and failures. Without such a passage of information it is unlikely that the ‘checks and balances’ usually associated with a functioning democracy could have the desired effect. Communication is also expected for other, less formal reasons: it is regarded generally as an attribute of democracy and the reluctance to communicate could convey an adverse impression as to the executive’s democratic credentials. Democratic legitimacy and power are, of course, based on consent. But democratic consent is impossible without understanding, just as understanding is impossible without communication. As Manuel Castells has observed, ‘How people think about the institutions under which they live, and how they relate to the culture of their economy and society define whose power can be exercised and how it can be exercised.’<sup>21</sup> ‘Thinking about

institutions’ should be a substantial, empirical and well-informed exercise rather than a flight of fantasy. This exercise requires communication; an executive that is willing and able to explain itself is more likely to be able to listen and respond to the electorate, to parliamentarians and to the judiciary, and thereby to fulfil its constitutional obligation.

Whilst some argue that the state as an entity is weakening, it remains the focal point of identity and governance. The National Transitional Council in Libya is not seeking to replace the Libyan state with some form of Caliphate. Indeed, much of the Arab Spring represents a struggle for a better state, and a more accountable democratic state. Accountable representation can only take place within borders. Strategic communications, while able to exploit the borderless capabilities of new communications technologies, must therefore ultimately be focused on how better to strengthen the state institutions of target audiences. Indeed, the very ethos of the struggle since 9/11 has been that of the state versus the anti-state. The place of the state at the centre of life is itself dependent on communications, which by extension reinforce the state system upon which all national strategy is predicated.

Public communication is therefore at the heart of democratic government, and particularly so in the age of near-instant mass communication across a wide variety of media. In these circumstances, how could government *not* communicate? And since political parties and politicians are communicating with an electorate that will assess their promises and performance and decide whether or not to elect (or return) them to office, it should be no surprise to find that this communication is regarded as ‘strategic’, in the loosest sense of that term.

Democratic communication is not simply about the passage of information, however. Communication is also a matter of trust: trust that what is being said is accurate and based upon reliable information and intelligent assessment; and trust that the communication is, above all, designed to inform the electorate rather than manipulate it. It is here that both parliament and

21 Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 417.

the electorate – and indeed the media – become most sensitive to the possibility that government communication can be characterized more by ‘spin’ than by transparency. Governments seem, nevertheless, to find this a tempting possibility. We have referred earlier to Gowing’s argument that the ‘main instinct’ of government is still drawn to ‘spin’ and even ‘official bullying’ and ‘dishonesty’ in order to dominate the ‘information High Ground’.<sup>22</sup> However, when policy draws upon spurious analysis or manipulated statistics, or when the information upon which policy is said to be based is revealed to be knowingly and deliberately incomplete, then there is likely to be a corrosive effect on the relationship between executive, legislature, judiciary and electorate.

The relationship might also be damaged through over-use as much as misuse. In *The New Machiavelli*, Jonathan Powell’s provocatively entitled memoir, the former Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Tony Blair describes the executive becoming almost obsessed with winning over the media: ‘Our primary target was Rupert Murdoch, and Tony went out of his way to woo him.’<sup>23</sup> Powell’s memoir describes a political culture in which the media were so powerful that politicians and the executive could no longer be content with mere communication, as we must expect of them, but sought to control the message. The subtitle of Powell’s book is clear enough: ‘How to wield power in the modern world’. Powell warns against too deep an obsession with the media and against too close a relationship between the executive and journalists. But we should look across the political divide, and to a more recent political controversy (albeit one which also involves Rupert Murdoch) for a more vivid account of the damage that a misguided communications strategy can do to the constitutional system. Following the collapse of the tabloid newspaper *News of the World* in 2011, after allegations of telephone hacking, Peter Osborne, the chief political commentator for the *Daily Telegraph*, excoriated what he saw as ‘the Murdoch system of government’:

The Murdoch empire was fundamentally hostile to British history and institutions, and intrinsically opposed to the rule of law. It pressed for a powerful republican agenda and effectively occupied a great deal of the public space which previously belonged to Parliament. It became normal for ministers to make important announcements through the press, bypassing the House of Commons and causing it to lose its historic role as the forum where governments first made information known.<sup>24</sup>

In summary, we can say that in a democracy informative and transparent communication is essential to the maintenance of a productive and enduring relationship between the executive, the legislature, the judiciary and the electorate. Communication therefore has a constitutional (or ‘strategic’ in that sense) significance and the democratic process can be damaged when communication is insincere, inadequate or incomplete. There is also a more straightforward political motive at work, in that the executive can become highly sensitive to the possibility of reputational (and therefore electoral) damage caused by miscommunication or misunderstanding. And when, as a result, the executive develops a very closely managed communications strategy this can also do damage to the democratic process as the electorate and the media come to perceive government communications as intended to manipulate or deceive. If it is possible, therefore, for governments to communicate either *too little* or with insufficient thought, or disingenuously, it is also possible for governments to communicate *too much* and with an excess of planning. But there is a third possibility to which we now turn: having a communications strategy that is *just right*.

## Competence and credibility

One should expect democratic governments not only to meet their constitutional obligations but also to seek to prevent adverse impressions and misunderstandings taking hold. These two imperatives can come into conflict

22 Gowing, *Skyful of Lies and Black Swans*, p.19.

23 Jonathan Powell, *The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern World* (London: The Bodley Head, 2010), p.190.

24 Peter Osborne, ‘In the post-Murdoch age, politics can develop genuine substance’, *The Telegraph*, 28 July 2011: <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/peterosborne/100099006/in-the-post-murdoch-age-politics-can-develop-genuine-substance/>.

with each other, as we suggest above. But in the words of a popular song of the 1940s, as well as ‘eliminate the negative’, governments are also motivated to use a communications strategy in order to ‘accentuate the positive’ – to demonstrate their competence, affirm their credibility and perhaps even establish their legacy.

This is scarcely a new phenomenon. Although several centuries before England and Britain can be said to have developed into a mature democracy, the ninth-century rule of Anglo-Saxon King Alfred the Great was, in David Starkey’s assessment, shaped by Alfred’s understanding that royal power should be popular rather than simply coercive. ‘To a remarkable extent,’ writes Starkey, ‘our image of Alfred as “The Great” is – still and after over a thousand years – a product of Alfred’s own self-invention. It goes without saying that such a view is not impartial. But it has survived only because Alfred’s achievements matched the grandiosity of his vision.’ Alfred was, in short, ‘his own Minister for Information and, as in everything else he did, a highly effective one.’<sup>25</sup>

A ‘positive’ reputation can be ‘accentuated’ through a combination of actions and words (and images). Furthermore, while it is well established in communications theory that the substance, accuracy and veracity of the *message* should receive careful attention, so too should the *medium* by which the message is to be conveyed. Certain forms of communication, in other words, might be better suited than others in relaying certain messages to certain audiences. It might be better, for example, for a local government authority to pass information about youth employment opportunities via some form of social media than via an advertisement printed in a centre-right newspaper.

Strategic communications are not, however, concerned simply with the passage of information; they are also concerned with reputation. And reputation is consensual: without some expectation, if not guarantee, that the ‘positive’ will indeed be seen as such, reputation-building could prove to be a wasted effort. It follows that government communication should not merely involve

the passage of the most persuasive information by the most favourable means, but should also have a more cognitive goal; an attempt to influence and shape the very framework against which the government’s performance is to be judged. In crude terms, a government will prefer that the criteria by which it is to be assessed are those most likely to produce a favourable judgment. As well as managing the message and the medium, therefore, strategic communications also offer an opportunity to shape the interpretation and assessment of the information being conveyed (as well as the choice of medium) in order to ensure that observers (or the electorate) come to their own favourable conclusions about the government’s performance. A government that aspires to be the judge in its own cause is not likely to have much credibility where parliament, the electorate or the media are concerned.

The importance of this cognitive manoeuvring can be illustrated in one simple example: by mid-2011, as the effects of the international economic crisis were beginning to be more keenly felt at the national level through policies of retrenchment in public spending, it had become important for the government of the United Kingdom, not least with a future general election in mind, to be seen as the government for fiscal responsibility and careful management, rather than as one willing to use the fiscal crisis as a means to achieve the ideological goal of ‘small government’ through a series of spending cuts in the arts, education, defence, inner city services and investment, the national health service, the transport infrastructure and so on. Hence, UK government announcements generally avoid the use of the term ‘cuts’, preferring instead to paint a picture of a more responsible and constructive approach to the economy through reference to ideas such as ‘balance’, ‘prudence’, ‘taking stock’, ‘deficit reduction’, ‘long-term recovery’ and so on. ‘Agenda-setting’ is usually associated with the activities of the media, but there seems no enduring reason why governments should not attempt something similar, or perhaps seek to exploit their media connections to that end.

25 David Starkey, *Crown & Country: A History of England through the Monarchy* (London: Harper Press, 2010), pp. 45, 49, 56.

## Coherence and consistency

In whatever circumstance the term is employed – personal, political, commercial or military – ‘strategy’ is usually taken to imply careful analysis leading to well-reasoned choice and decision, with singularity of purpose and the efficient coordination of efforts and resources to achieve that aim. It would be considered unusual – indeed, non-strategic – for an army, a police force or a commercial enterprise to respond to a challenge or crisis by producing a range of different action plans, each apparently as plausible as the others and each with a different aim. In a similar way, *strategic* communications implies that the discipline of strategy can be infiltrated into the often rather disordered world of government communications in order to achieve coherence and consistency. For the purposes of this report, to discipline government communications in a strategic manner would require that attention be paid to the dynamic relationship that is at the heart of strategy – the relationship between ‘ends’, ‘ways’ and ‘means’.<sup>26</sup>

The first implication is that there should be one aim or *end* to government communications, rather than several. Or if there are several objectives in play, then each should address a different area, in a manner that does not conflict with other methods being used, and all to a common purpose. We return to this theme in the next section.

As far as *ways* are concerned, here the value of implementing a strategic communications framework would be to achieve coherence across a wide variety of communications sub-specialisms including public diplomacy, psychological operations, media relations, information operations, key leader engagement and influence campaigns. This is not to suggest that these different activities must be homogenized into a unitary and centrally managed communications effort. But some attempt should be made to ensure at least that one approach does not conflict with another and, at best, that the various communications methods contain mutually supportive messages. As we argue in Chapter 1, effort should also be made to ensure that communications

designed to address immediate or short-term goals are not inconsistent with, and will not be found to contradict, communications that have medium- and long-term effects in mind.

Finally, concerning *means*, a strategic communications framework should provide coherence and consistency in government’s use of new media. The twenty-first century communications environment continues to evolve, and rapidly. Technologically, the internet, the world wide web and personal e-mail are being supplemented (if not challenged) by new modes of communication such as social media and micro-blogging. Socially and politically, the significance is not only that these technologies might soon enable every person in the world to be connected electronically to every other person – the ‘all-to-all’ account of the contemporary communications environment – but that new political forces are evolving, represented by such terms as ‘citizen journalism’, ‘participatory web’, ‘peer-to-peer media’, ‘social networking’, ‘video-sharing’, ‘podcasting’, ‘lifestreaming’, ‘virtual world’, ‘web activism’ and so forth, which are far beyond the understanding and oversight, let alone the control, of conventional government. When government makes use of these different means of communication it will therefore be necessary not only to understand the breadth of the communications environment into which it ventures but also to ensure that the style of one does not undermine or contradict the content of another, and that authority does not become confused or even lost as a result. Here, a discussion over means must also consider level of ambition. MacLuhan’s observation that the medium is the message also concerned the very nature of the medium and how it shapes the communication process.

Consistency should also be sought between spoken and practical means of communication, or more simply between words and deeds. As the White House National Framework for Strategic Communications (discussed in Chapter 1) makes clear, ‘actions have communicative value and send messages’.<sup>27</sup> Incoherence and

26 In the words of the 2010 UK National Security Strategy, ‘A national security strategy, like any strategy, must be a combination of ends (what we are seeking to achieve), ways (the ways by which we seek to achieve those ends) and means (the resources we can devote to achieving the ends)’. HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, p. 10, para. 0.14.

27 White House, *National Framework for Strategic Communications*.

inconsistency between words and deeds could be costly: ‘If there is a disconnect between what we say, what we stand for, or our “narrative”, and the way we act, or are perceived to act, then we lose credibility in the battle of perceptions. We lose credibility, and then we lose authority.’<sup>28</sup> To some extent, deeds ‘speak’ for themselves; messaging by praxis, perhaps. If it is desirable that the practical and the spoken messages should be consistent, it is essential first to agree upon what the message should be and then to ensure that it is communicated accurately to various audiences. A strategic communications framework should be designed to achieve precisely these goals.

## Comprehensiveness and cooperation

The final set of explanations for the growing interest in strategic communications concerns the quality of the strategic process as well as the inner functioning of government. If strategic communications are intended, as we have suggested, to demonstrate competence and credibility and to bring about a more coherent, consistent and disciplined (albeit not homogenized) approach to government communications, then a number of important advances could be gained.

First, if it is considered that a well-designed and effective strategic communications framework would be an asset to government, then with some reverse engineering this aspiration could serve to catalyse and improve national strategy as a whole. As one interviewee observed, without the ability to *think* strategically we cannot *act* strategically and cannot, therefore, *communicate* strategically.<sup>29</sup> Since, by this view, the ambition to communicate strategically is premised upon there being a national strategic process of a certain quality, then perhaps that ambition could have a beneficial ‘pull-through’ effect upon practice.<sup>30</sup> In particular, strategic communications might be seen as a means to improve the *comprehensiveness* of national strategy.

Confronted by a broad range of complex security challenges, both overseas and domestically, governments in the

UK and elsewhere have sought to develop a cross-departmental, ‘joined-up’, integrated or ‘comprehensive approach’ to policy and strategy. An intriguing possibility presents itself: if the current preoccupation with strategic communications can help to make the case for the relevant departments and agencies of government (and, where necessary, non-governmental and private-sector bodies) to cooperate in pursuit of a singular national strategic purpose, then the result is likely to be a more efficient strategy (especially welcome in a time of economic austerity) and one that could achieve a more convincing and durable effect. Strategy is, of course, about the delivery of effect. And if lasting change is sought, in post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction operations for example, then it seems appropriate to draw upon a government communications framework that is explicitly concerned with effect ‘on the ground’, among ‘target audiences’ and so forth, and that, as discussed above, seeks to achieve consistency and coherence over time.

Finally, it should be considered that effective strategy is not solely a matter of coordinating a variety of ways and means in the achievement of an end that is both singular (e.g. the post-conflict stabilization of Afghanistan) and complex (involving, in this example, the diplomatic, developmental, economic and military functions of government). Effective strategy also acknowledges that governments will always have a range of ends in play; each department of government will have its own, specialist goal and all of these cannot and need not be homogenized around a singular purpose. National strategy can rarely, if ever, be encapsulated in a single plan to be carried to conclusion before anything new can be considered. Strategy is ‘multi-tasking’: several plans must often coexist in a complementary manner, and at other times must simply coexist. In this respect, the merit of strategic communication lies in the ability not only to explain that government departments do not and should not cooperate in every instance, but also to show that it is possible (indeed, necessary) to pursue a variety of specialist objectives simultaneously and coherently and without fundamental contradiction.

28 D. Barley, ‘Winning Friends and Influencing People’, *The British Army Review* (No. 148, Winter 2009–2010), p. 58.

29 Interview B.

30 Interview D.

## Summary

This brief discussion of the merits of strategic communications shows this to be a complex and sophisticated matter; more than a commonplace activity and rather more than common sense. There is, certainly, a fashionable aspect to strategic communications, making it difficult for governments to ignore the subject. Equally, the technological possibilities of early twenty-first-century communications make it inconceivable that governments should not wish for a more efficient and organized communications strategy. But there are more substantial reasons that explain the growing interest in strategic communications, as well as the growing literature concerning the subject. First, strategic communications satisfy an implicit *constitutional obligation* laid upon democratic governments to inform and explain and, therefore, to communicate. There is a fine balance to be struck here; it is possible for governments to communicate too little, or without sincerity, just as it

is possible for them to communicate too much and be accused of manipulation and ‘spin’. Second, when the desired point of balance is found, governments will find that strategic communications can help to ‘accentuate the positive’, as a vehicle with which to demonstrate *competence and credibility*. Third, in pursuit of *coherence and consistency*, strategic communications can not only have a disciplining effect on national strategic thinking, by requiring that strategy be clear and communicable, but also ensure that what is communicated by government is strategically credible. Finally, strategic communications can assist in the pursuit of comprehensiveness and cooperation in government policy. If correctly conceived, they can *improve* national strategy, as well as communicate it.<sup>31</sup> More simply put, strategic communications are a challenge to governments to explain themselves more clearly and convincingly in order to gain and maintain public support for policy, and to ensure that messages and actions do not conflict with each other and undermine the competence and reputation of government.<sup>32</sup>

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31 Interview A.

32 Interview J.

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## 3. Strategic Communications: *Where?*

This chapter asks where the design and activity of strategic communications should be situated within government and looks at the articulation and explanation of national strategy more generally. As we have argued, the terrain of strategic communications is diverse and complex: just as national strategy exists in the form of several plans running concurrently, so strategic communications must operate in a number of domains and in several different ways. Strategic communications are shaped by the national strategic objectives that have been set, by the nature and responsiveness of the audiences in questions, and by the level and intensity of the communications effort required. Where, then, should strategic communications be located within government? Who are the main actors involved? And how can such a complex activity be managed effectively?

Strategic communications can be understood as a relationship between several different levels of governance:

- the *advocates* or *stakeholders* beyond government who, though not directly developing national strategy and its accompanying narrative, are integral to its realization, whether consciously or otherwise.
- Across these levels strategic communications constitute a pool of capabilities, of which communications as traditionally understood are but one component. In the simplest terms strategic communications can be conceived as comprising the four main elements discussed earlier: information operations; psychological operations; public diplomacy; and public affairs. Though much of the literature treats these as separate entities, they are not mutually exclusive and can be used interchangeably and simultaneously to achieve the desired effect. Other relevant activities might include media operations; key leader engagement; internal communications; and interdepartmental public relations. With so many different components, and so many people already involved and employed in these activities, a question that is just as valid as ‘where are strategic communications?’ might be ‘are strategic communications where they should be?’
- In October 2010 the UK Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) assured its readers that ‘The National Security Council will [...] consider the infrastructure and governance arrangements required for marshalling and aligning the full range of communications resources across and beyond government.’<sup>33</sup> However, hindered by diverse understandings – or misperceptions – both of the concept and of the scope of its application, the experience of strategic communications has varied widely across Whitehall over the past year, shaped by the culture, mindset and priorities of each government department. Despite growing awareness of its potential, the government’s approach remains arguably too compartmentalized; strategic communications are still seen predominantly as the domain of communicators and media officials and as an activity to be managed within each department rather than as an inherent part of cross-governmental policy and strategy.
- In order for strategic communications to circumvent these perceived shortfalls and to function effectively at the heart of government, and in order to realize the

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33 Cabinet Office, Strategic Defence and Security Review 2010, p. 68.

principles set out in the previous section of the report – *constitutional obligation, competence and credibility, coherence and consistency, and comprehensiveness and cooperation* – one further component must be added: a political *culture* conducive to the development of national strategic communications, doctrinally as much as practically.

This chapter asks first where strategic communications should take place within the machinery of government in the United Kingdom and where responsibility and accountability should lie, before assessing the role of communicators (such as the media) and agents (such as the military). It concludes by asking how a more explicit and effective culture of strategic communications could foster greater coherence and cohesion in the management and coordination of strategic communications more broadly.

## Government

Policy, strategy and strategic communications should all be mutually reinforcing elements of the policy-making process. The function of strategic communications within this triad might usefully be described as ‘a tool of strategy, exercised by the most senior levels of government when they craft and weave the core messages in support of policy goals. It is one way by which the strategic leadership provides direction and guidance to the machinery of government.’<sup>34</sup> According to this view, responsibility for strategic communications lies with senior policy-makers and with political and military leaders who construct the guiding narrative and are tasked with weighing up the available options and making the decisions required.

Incorporated into the policy process from the outset, strategic communications should be a visible feature of the activity of each department, in a number of ways. First, there should be evidence of a high-level understanding of the broader effects that policies should and might have. Second, there should be sensitivity to the possibility of a variety of interpretations and implications of any given

policy in different quarters. Third, there should be an awareness of the influence required to achieve consensus and support for these policies. Finally, there should be recognition of the affected stakeholders and audiences, whose support will be necessary for the fulfilment of given national strategic objectives.

Each government department has its own approach and there is no uniform sense either of what strategic communications can bring to the functioning of that department or of the role each department plays as a part of wider government efforts to communicate national strategy. For example, although the Ministry of Defence might be considered relatively adept at talking in strategic terms and developing doctrine, translating this to other departments and stakeholders and being able to articulate the department’s vision often proves more complicated.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, although senior officials within the Department for International Development (DFID) are paying increasing attention to strategic communications,<sup>36</sup> a discrete culture of strategic communications is much less apparent than in other departments, despite the so-called ‘soft power’ role that DFID plays in terms of public diplomacy and the pursuit of national values and principles.

Yet government departments, no matter how strong their culture and how distinct their area of concern, can never operate in complete isolation. Policies and strategies overlap, and the actions and messages of one part of government can either reinforce or undermine those of another. Nonetheless, despite a tendency for departments to work in so-called silos, the UK government has an ambitious approach to achieve greater cohesion in strategic communications across and beyond government. As part of this, there is an argument for a central body of some sort to coordinate efforts and create a regular forum for those involved in developing, implementing and articulating policy and strategy. Two options present themselves. The first is that the Cabinet Office, in its position at the heart of government, could provide a focal point for strategic communications. Its mandate is consistent with the needs of a cross-departmental effort and it is already tasked

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34 Joint Doctrine Note, p. 1-2.

35 Interview F.

36 Interview I.

with assessing the government's approach to strategic communications. However, given its existing role, it is unlikely to have the capacity required to be a leader in the field and may wish to be seen as a facilitator, better suited to 'socializing' the idea across government, and developing a common doctrinal framework without seeking to homogenize the strategic communications effort.<sup>37</sup>

The second option could be a model closer to the National Security Council (NSC).<sup>38</sup> Comprising senior ministers from all relevant departments and defence, intelligence and security officials as required, the NSC's regular meetings (at least once a week) have proved a positive step in promoting 'joined-up government' on national security issues that transcend departmental lines. However, this model is far from mature. Recent urgent operational commitments in Libya and the continued engagement in Afghanistan have often limited the National Security Council's ability to be genuinely strategic, with too much attention given to tactical or operational details.<sup>39</sup> For a model such as this to work and for such a body to coordinate strategic communications across the whole of government and its associated agencies and organizations, it would need to be able to do two things. First, it would need to establish the appropriate level of seniority and delegated authority for those who attend to take joint decisions and then to implement those decisions in their respective department. Second, and crucially, it would also need to be able to address issues of strategic significance in both the long and short term, rather than focusing on the tactical and operational processes of media management and outreach.

Though both options offer the potential for a more coordinated approach, there is a note of caution. There is a balance to be struck between a shared vision and a central voice. While a shared vision provides a stronger message and appearance of unity, one could argue that it is neither practical nor advantageous to have government speak as one unit with one message.<sup>40</sup> Departments speak to different audiences and stakeholders and their messages should be nuanced according to the guiding priorities of

their work. In sum, there seems to be a structural impediment to the SDSR's promise to 'marshal' and 'align' the activity of strategic communications with UK government.

Other than at times of dire national emergency, the goal of rational, decisive and efficient 'joined-up government' in the United Kingdom is more a matter of aspiration than achievement, as the fate of a number of recent cross-governmental initiatives would attest. The Prime Minister, as the leader of the government of the day, has considerable authority in that office. However, the various departments of state are usually led by people with very significant political reputations in their own right. And as we discuss at more length below, the 'departmentalized' bureaucratic structure of UK government militates against centralization and close control. The Cabinet Office, for the present at least, has more of a coordinating than a departmental leadership role, such that it would be inaccurate to describe it as a 'supervening' department of some sort. Only the Treasury could be said to fill that role, but usually in a tacit manner. What all of this means for national strategic communications is that the UK National Strategic Communications Strategy (NSCS), discussed in Chapter 1, must confront a number of constitutional, institutional and individual obstacles as it develops. Furthermore, the establishment of a head of national strategic communications, based in the Cabinet Office and with the authority and resources necessary to fulfil the role, could be a lengthy and contested process. Yet without such a person, such an office and such a strategy it is difficult to see how national strategic communications can achieve enough of its potential.

## Communication

Strategic communications can involve a very wide variety of individuals: not only those in designated communications roles, but also all those involved in communicating policy, whether through words or deeds. Arguably, officials

37 Interview F.

38 See <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/content/national-security-council>.

39 Interview K.

40 Interview I.

at every level should be aware of the communications dimensions of their role, within and beyond Whitehall. Yet there should be no doubt that it is the media professionals, press officers and strategic communications experts who can provide the specialist competence necessary for effective strategic communications: the ability to take complex policy and shape a message that is accessible and appropriate for the relevant audience and communicable via the most appropriate medium. Across the range of communicators, experience and ability will inevitably vary. However, many of those interviewed in the course of this report highlighted the prominent role of individuals such as Alastair Campbell, who was able to coordinate and manage the government message from Number 10 through his clear sense of the government view, the goals that were to be achieved, and the best means for realizing them.<sup>41</sup>

The downside of a very closely managed communications strategy, as we have argued elsewhere in this report, is that it may be perceived as government ‘spin’ and consequently lose credibility and persuasiveness. While a strong communications strategy can reinforce and support good policy, messages will be regarded at best as superficial and disingenuous if policy is perceived to be incompetent or misdirected in some way. No communications strategy, no matter how skilful and timely, should be expected to turn bad policy into good. Not least for this reason, policy and communications should not be seen as separate components of the process but should work together from the outset. A fundamental role of ‘communicators’, therefore, should be to ‘ensure that strategic goals and messages are understood at all levels’, and to foster the appropriate culture and awareness across government.<sup>42</sup>

Within Whitehall there is of course a clear awareness of the importance of priority audiences and key messages, and how these messages should reach the right people.<sup>43</sup> In 2004 an Independent Review of Government Communications (the Phillis Review) looked at the broader function of

communications across Whitehall and set out recommendations to enhance the interaction between government and politicians, the media and the public in the light of a perceived breakdown in communications.<sup>44</sup> Many of the recommendations of the Phillis Review would resonate in today’s political and media climate. However, the approach it prescribed, less than a decade ago, comes closer to an insistence upon good communications and media management practice than to making an argument for a more considered and ambitious approach to communications as a function of national strategy. It is this ambition that appears to be lacking. Too often the government’s approach to the media involves trying to sell the correct line or control a story, as discussed in Chapter 2. In recent years disproportionate attention has been given to sound-bites and photo opportunities at the expense of a stronger, but perhaps more subtle, strategic message. As one senior official observed, it is normally possible to ‘ride things out’ and withstand criticism if there is a clear narrative, although too often the focus is on short-term achievements and front-page stories instead of the bigger picture.<sup>45</sup>

Government relations with the media would benefit from being more mature, balanced and aimed at the expert level. As our media interviewees were keen to emphasize, journalists can see through attempts by government to manage the message too closely; their preference, not surprisingly, is for transparent assessments – even in adversity – and for as much information as possible to be shared about developments, as early as possible.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, while it is understood that there might be good reason to withhold classified or sensitive information, incomplete, wilfully misleading or inaccurate stories can do as much harm to broader national strategic objectives as no information at all. This more mature approach needs to be supported by decisive leadership and confidence in policy institutions, in the policy position and in the accompanying narrative. Inevitably, the relationship between the message and the

41 Interviews D and E.

42 White House, *National Framework for Strategic Communications*, p. 5.

43 Interview D.

44 Cabinet Office, *Independent Review of Government Communications 2004*, [http://www.ppa.co.uk/legal-and-public-affairs/ppa-responses-and-evidence/~/\\_media/Documents/Legal/Consultations/Lords%20Communications%20Committee/final\\_report.ashx](http://www.ppa.co.uk/legal-and-public-affairs/ppa-responses-and-evidence/~/_media/Documents/Legal/Consultations/Lords%20Communications%20Committee/final_report.ashx)

45 Interview K.

46 Interview O.

medium should also be considered. In *Communication Power*, Manuel Castells contradicts the received wisdom of Marshall McLuhan by arguing that ‘The medium is not the message, although it conditions the format and distribution of the message ... the sender of the message is at the construction of its meaning.’<sup>47</sup> Thus while the government may be the source of much of the national narrative, it is the media that provide the lens through which a message may be viewed. As such, in an obvious way the media are a key vehicle for government strategic communications and for the articulation of the national narrative more broadly.

The contemporary information and communications environment is a driver in its own right. In the age of the 24-hour news cycle the power of the media to connect with and inform domestic and foreign audiences in real time should never be under-estimated. For many people, the media – including print, broadcast, online and social networks – are the main point of entry to understand government policy and its implications for their lives and wellbeing. Yet for the most part the media have the initiative in the present real-time environment. As audiences see and hear events unfold in real time, the news of any developments, whether accurate or inaccurate, will often spread more rapidly by social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook than by traditional news outlets. As we have suggested, governments cannot ignore this phenomenon: any unwillingness or failure to communicate will not be neutral and will be a message in its own right.<sup>48</sup> The absence of a response from leading political figures within a certain period can almost say as much as a formal statement, and the space left by government figures will inevitably be filled by others willing to comment.<sup>49</sup>

With a wide variety of media available, it is essential to focus on effects, audience and influence in order to determine the most appropriate and effective medium. An associated and equally vital component of strategic communications is engagement. In order to create a

narrative that will resonate with target audiences and foster support it is necessary to identify the key opinion-formers and influencers within different sections of society, whether that be by involving influential clerics in Bradford in counter-radicalization efforts, building ties with community leaders in East London to minimize youth disengagement, or harnessing the power of tribal leaders, or shuras, to build stability in Helmand Province. These people can communicate a narrative or objectives more subtly and sensitively to local communities and may have more credibility as a result.

## Action

Within the domain of strategic communications the potency of action should not be under-estimated. All action has a communicative value and conveys a message. Action has the potential to influence or, more starkly, to exert power. In political terms, governments will be judged as much on what they can deliver as on the promises they make and the vision they provide. One senior official interviewed described this connection succinctly, arguing that strategic communications were ‘action reinforced by narrative and narrative reinforced by action.’<sup>50</sup> Words and actions are inseparable and efforts should be made to minimize disparities that might undermine both the strategy and the narrative – an interdependence referred to in the US White House Framework for Strategic Communications as ‘synchronizing words and deeds.’<sup>51</sup> Those working at the operational or programme level will inevitably have a different understanding of the environment from that of a policy-maker in Whitehall, and this understanding must influence policy and communications. Those on the ground will be able to see more clearly how policy translates into reality and should be in a position to identify where the strategic narrative is working and where it could be improved or reshaped

47 Manuel Castells, *Communication Power*, p. 418.

48 A thorough analysis of this can be found in Nik Gowing, *Skyful of Lies and Black Swans*,

49 See also Felix Preston and Bernice Lee with Gemma Green, *Preparing for Low-probability, High-impact Events: Lessons from Eyjafjallajökull* (London: Chatham House, 2011, forthcoming).

50 Interview K.

51 White House, *National Framework for Strategic Communications*.

to greater effect.<sup>52</sup> If the world of action is brought more deliberately within the iterative process of national strategic communications this could be an invaluable resource in improving the ‘engagement’ referred to earlier. While it is important that those working to realize the objectives of strategy also understand the communicative power of their actions, it follows that the consequences of those actions and their policy impact should simultaneously feed back up the hierarchy to further inform and refine the policy-making and strategic process.<sup>53</sup>

As key agents of foreign policy, the armed forces are particularly aware of the significance of coordinating action and messages in their operations. What the US military calls the ‘say-do’ gap<sup>54</sup> has become a more prominent part of UK military doctrine. Indeed, communications can be seen as the glue binding strategy to operations and then to tactics. This has not always been the case, however, particularly when strategy has been short-sighted and when the longer-term implications, operational requirements and cultural dimensions of a conflict or crisis have been insufficiently considered. Contemplating the US military response to 9/11, Philip Taylor argues that ‘Had the vision been clearer, had the longer-term consequences of the military response been thought through, and had the rhetoric of war not been so polarized, then the job of strategic communications would have been much easier.’<sup>55</sup> Clearly, it is not sufficient simply to align what is said with what is done: at the heart of the message and the activity there must be a purpose, a vision and a rationale.

As a tool of the political leadership and an extension of policy the armed forces are a particularly useful test case. Operating in a ‘mission command’ chain, where the senior political and military leadership sets the parameters for strategy and subordinate levels are encouraged to realize objectives appropriate to their level of activity and consistent with overarching aims, junior

officers and the so-called strategic corporals ‘may have to make decisions which have diplomatic consequences.’<sup>56</sup> Without a full understanding of the context of operations and the narrative behind it there is great potential for political damage in operations. On the one hand, argue Roxborough and Eyre, ‘top leaders should make all key decisions, leaving subordinates little discretion. On the other hand, if lower level commanders see the big picture, they can act rapidly to achieve operational goals, providing they understand them.’<sup>57</sup> There is a balance to be sought, in other words, between maximizing frontline capabilities and improving local knowledge within an established chain of command. But the importance of strong leadership and a clear vision stands out. One military official spoke of how British infantry company commanders on operations in Helmand were developing their own narrative when engaging with local Afghans, based on the best analysis they could find or undertake, largely because of the absence of a prevailing and consistent UK narrative to which appeal could be made.<sup>58</sup>

Although responsive to local circumstances, this might nevertheless reveal a weakness in communicating strategy and narrative down from the senior levels insofar as the development of messaging is left to the abilities of the individuals involved and their awareness not only of the operation in which they are involved but also of the audience with whom they are connecting. However, if individuals can be properly trained and taught in the relevance of strategic communications to their core function then any concerns over this approach should diminish. People should generally be given the responsibility to act in accordance with a central vision and expected to use their local knowledge to determine how best that central vision can be realized, relayed and interpreted to local audiences. This is the essence of the mission command doctrine so valued by armed forces.

52 Interview Q.

53 Interview A.

54 Joint Doctrine Note on Strategic Communications, p. 3-3.

55 Philip Taylor, ‘Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications’, in N. Snow and Philip M. Taylor (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 15.

56 Ian Roxborough and Dana Eyre, ‘Which Way to the Future?’, *Joint Forces Quarterly (JFQ)*, Summer, 1999, p. 34.

57 Ibid., p. 34.

58 Interview B.

Most importantly, in an operational context, strategic communications may also mitigate the need for assertive action or the use of armed force. As the UK Joint Doctrine Note on Strategic Communications notes: ‘Too often we have placed influence on the periphery of our operations, failing to understand that reinforcing or changing attitude and behaviour in selected audiences can have equal, if not greater, utility than force in securing our operational objectives.’<sup>59</sup> This idea is not confined to the military and is surely of critical importance in a wide variety of policy environments. The importance attributed to ‘upstream conflict prevention’ in DFID’s recent ‘Building Stability Overseas’ strategy document<sup>60</sup> implicitly speaks to the role of strategic communications in pre-emptive and preventative action in vulnerable regions. That said, while strategic communications serve as a powerful tool of ‘soft’ power, its capacity to deliver such effect remains under-used.

## Beyond government

A final area worthy of attention is what might be termed advocates or stakeholders.<sup>61</sup> If strategic communications in all their guises are an instrument of national strategy then they should include not only the political and military leadership but also, in its more subtle form, teachers,<sup>62</sup> trade officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private organizations and others who might operate, either consciously or otherwise, in the space of national strategy and in the pursuit of the national interest. Many of these can be seen as working within public diplomacy and, as we have argued, their efforts should be a constituent part of strategic communications. The role of these stakeholders is especially important in circumstances where strategic communications require subtlety of message and where the intended influence and outcome should not be seen as

connected in any way to government interests or aims, for fear of further alienating the audience. This is pertinent to foreign affairs in particular, where political and diplomatic sensitivities on the ground can make it difficult for governments to act overtly or to be seen to be influencing domestic populations or events.<sup>63</sup>

More generally, it is for this reason that the narrative at the centre of strategic communications should arguably not be a government narrative, but a national one.<sup>64</sup> It should reflect national interests and objectives as articulated and defined by the nation as a whole, to be realized and implemented through legislative and executive procedures. Underpinning this national narrative should be an understanding of how people within a given country make sense of their world, beyond their perceptions of government. It should identify the priorities for society as a whole and then seek to respond within that context.

While governments can be seen to focus on the crafting of a single message uttered consistently by a single voice, changes in the information and communication environment are accelerating a decline in the presence and authority of that voice – whether it be government or corporate. The private sector in particular can play a role in strategic communications, with notable examples in conflict stabilization and transformation. As Peter Cary notes, for some this has involved seeing strategic communications as a media and influence campaign.<sup>65</sup> Yet the involvement of the private sector brings a different set of skills to the field and may help to depoliticize and demilitarize strategic communications by operating outside government messaging.

The private sector can not only help to shape the political and social landscape but can also provide a link between ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approaches if coordinated with national strategic objectives. The comprehensive (or integrated) approach has suffered repeatedly from an

59 Joint Doctrine Note, p. iv.

60 DFID, *Building Stability Overseas*, July 2011, <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Media-Room/News-Stories/2011/New-strategy-to-build-stability-overseas/>.

61 C. Bird, *Engagement: Public Diplomacy in a Globalised World*, FCO, pp. 114–15.

62 Interview A.

63 For an interesting account of US-funded media projects in Iraq through third parties, see P. Cary, *The Pentagon, Information Operations, and International Media Development*, Report to the Center for International Media Assistance, November 2010.

64 Interview H.

65 Cary, *The Pentagon, Information Operations, and International Media Development*.

inability at the highest political and bureaucratic levels in national capitals to translate strategy into joined-up practice in the field through a wider engagement with different actors. In particular, the role of local populations and organizations as a source of creative input is vital. Experience suggests such involvement is critical if the national discourse is to be aligned with the objectives of national strategy.

Through interviews with members of the private sector, it is clear that a range of techniques is employed in the same way as government-based strategic communications, including public events, media campaigns, the promotion of new or alternative ideas, methods to increase audience participation and build capacity to realize a pre-determined 'end'. Moreover, methods have been developed to monitor performance more effectively, including the use of public opinion polls and sampling exercises to test shifts in views so that efforts to diminish the 'brand' of local insurgencies and obstructionist groups in particular can be more accurately targeted.<sup>66</sup> Approaches of this sort have been used to help with counter-radicalization efforts (discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 below) and conflict prevention. For example, the private sector has been involved in strategic communications efforts to help deter pre-jihadis from extremism.<sup>67</sup>

As with all strategic communications the aim of the communications effort is to catalyse change, shape outcomes and amplify messages. These private-sector media campaigns, creative strategies and outreach plans can have a place in the design and delivery of national strategy and enhance and promote greater engagement with a wider audience base.

Strategic and operational principles may be identified and lessons learned from the experience of the private sector, which might help to contribute to a less micro-managed communications environment. However, as it may work within areas of importance for domestic foreign policy, it is necessary for the private sector to operate within the context of national strategy. Messaging must be acceptable to host populations and governments; the target audience must be engaged without harm being

done; communications must be seen as authentic and not motivated by foreign interest; and care must be taken about how private-sector strategic communications might reflect on home societies.

Finally, there are questions to be asked about the function of strategic communications within international partnerships and collaboration. With an increasingly global agenda of transnational issues such as climate change, conflict and financial security requiring states to work more closely together – or at least to declare their intention to do so – how can strategic communications be coordinated and harmonized across the spectrum of different political and military agendas of the states involved? Moreover, how can strategic communications navigate the added complexity of national interests and different cultures and languages as well as the need for these policy concerns to be interpreted and articulated back to varied domestic and international audiences?

## Strategic communications culture

Across these different domains, strategic communications can be found with different applications at varying levels of intensity. There is no one-size-fits-all approach or method to be followed uniformly. In order to organize and manage strategic communications, therefore, there must be an effective culture within which strategic communications are acknowledged to be a normal and fully integrated part of policy processes. This culture should be guided by a shared mindset and implicit awareness of the role and value of strategic communications. More importantly, this environment must be seen to have a strong and credible leadership operating within a framework of responsibility and accountability without seeking to exert complete control over either the message or the medium. In the words of one senior military official, people at all levels both civilian and military must be empowered, trusted and taught<sup>68</sup> to be strategic communicators in order to ensure the message can have the widest possible reach and influence.

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66 Interviews G & H.

67 Interview G.

68 Interview C.

In an ideal environment, at least as far as Christopher Paul is concerned:

everyone in government speaks not with one voice like some kind of robot automaton, but with their messages aligned in the same direction, because everyone understands the nested objectives and how their own efforts support those objectives, and because they have (or have access to) requisite communication training and cultural knowledge. In this vision communication is not just [a] one-way broadcast, but is true two-way communication, engagement, or dialogue.<sup>69</sup>

In order to achieve this vision, strategic communications should be a self-sustaining system. Rather than a top-down hierarchy where narrative flows from the core of government to be applied by agents and stakeholders, strategic communications must be able simultaneously to respond and adapt to facts on the ground and the response of target audiences and adversaries. As noted earlier, people at the frontline of policy delivery should feel they have a stake in the bigger picture and be attuned to its objectives, while in turn people at the centre should be required to listen and respond.

Strategic communications should feature as a consistent and underlying component at every stage of the policy timeline. This requires questions to be asked by those who develop policy and strategy in the early stages. Although strategic communications should feature at each point of policy development, at what stage in each policy process are they likely to have the greatest impact? How can they be used in certain cases to minimize further expenditure for policy objectives? And which of their main elements (information operations, psychological operations, public diplomacy and public affairs) should be used when, and with what intensity?

As has been discussed at various points in this report, strategic communications are not an optional adjunct to strategy. Laying the groundwork in the early stages – which

Bird refers to as *insight* – is particularly important, taking strategic communications beyond media messaging to a targeted campaign of behavioural or social change through knowledge of the audience.<sup>70</sup> The process of gathering intelligence and understanding audiences, undertaken by researchers or analysts, by intelligence agencies or through local engagement is often overlooked but performs a key role at the heart of strategic communications. Prime Minister David Cameron and his coalition government have learnt the hard way when there has been insufficient ‘pitch rolling’<sup>71</sup> to prepare audiences in advance of policy announcements, as evidenced by what were perceived to be policy U-turns on such varied matters as National Health Service reform, sentencing policy and proposals to privatize woodlands.

Finally, within this environment the prevailing national narrative will always be juxtaposed with and challenged by competing narratives, each with its own vision and objectives. Strategic communications are not the preserve of Western states, despite their current prominence in policy and military circles in the US and UK in particular. Non-state actors and terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda have proved adept at using an ideology and a narrative to gain support and have been able to deploy politically motivated violence to achieve their own strategic objectives. As former Defense Secretary Robert Gates has asked, ‘How did we end up in a place where the country that invented public relations ended up being out-communicated by a guy in a cave?’<sup>72</sup> In effect, Osama bin Laden out-communicated the US because he understood, first, the relationship between action and communicative effect; second, the importance of narrative and emotion, over logical and factual argument; and, third, that communication strategy requires the ability to communicate with a population first and foremost if influence is to be exerted over the state. An awareness of and sensitivity to counter-narratives and malign influences as well as to the cultural, political and social context within which they flourish should therefore be used to enhance domestic strategic communications.

69 C. Paul, ‘Getting Better at SC’, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT366.html> p. 14, extracted from C. Paul, *Strategic Communication*.

70 C. Bird, ‘Strategic Communication and Behaviour Change: Lessons from Domestic Policy’ in *Engagement: Public Diplomacy in a Globalised World*, p. 110.

71 This term has been used regularly in relation to laying the foundations for a policy to be received. Most notably, proposed changes to the NHS are seen to have failed owing to inadequate preparation of the electorate. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/telegraph-view/8427902/Welfare-reform-is-a-policy-with-heart.html>.

72 Cary, *The Pentagon, Information Operations, and International Media Development*.

## Summary

Strategic communications operate within a complex ecosystem involving a broad range of organizations, actors and individuals, many of whom may be unaware of the communicative value of their role. Strategic communications should have a natural home in government as part of the processes of national strategy. However, the growth of strategic communications across government departments can only do so much, and far from being fixed in a static location, a strategic communications mindset should be an integral feature in every relevant department and at every level of national strategy. Fostering an appropriate culture

is imperative to bringing about the necessary changes in current practice. As part of this, a self-sustaining and iterative system of information and exchange across leaders, communicators, agents and stakeholders should help to foster a dynamic, versatile and responsive approach to policy. More importantly, where strategic communications should 'be' must be determined on a case-by-case basis by the effect required, the audience that is targeted and the means available to influence or bring about change. Finally, if they are to be truly national, they must reflect not only government policy and an executive message but a national narrative, owned and endorsed across society.

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## 4. Strategic Communications: *How?*

The first three chapters of this report examine the definitional (*What?*), conceptual (*Why?*) and procedural (*Where?*) aspects of strategic communications. What emerges most clearly from these discussions is that while the term ‘strategic communications’ may be widely and frequently used, there cannot yet be said to be a settled, universally accepted understanding of strategic communications, its meaning, uses, effects and value. Indeed, if there were such an understanding there would be little need for this report, the purpose of which is to encourage greater familiarity with and more effective use of strategic communications. Its argument is that strategic communications should – and can – be inclusive of a variety of communications-related activities, just as they should – and can – be adaptable to new challenges and circumstances. But, above all, strategic communications should at the very least be understood as an essential function of democratic government and as a central component of national strategy.

With these cautions and aspirations equally in mind, in this chapter we show how strategic communications might be put to good effect in four policy settings: national strategy itself; stability operations; counter-radicalization and cyber security. The purpose of these four brief studies is to continue the argument by example.

### National strategy

Chapter 2 (*Why?*) argues that a systematic (or strategic) communications framework should not only be central to the functioning of democratic government but should also be intrinsic to the design and implementation of national strategy.<sup>73</sup> We agree with many of our interviewees in believing that a carefully constructed and maintained communications framework can both facilitate and improve national strategy. We would even argue that to a considerable extent national strategy is *about* clear and timely communication: without a firm conceptual and narrative foundation to a national strategic framework it will be difficult for any democratic government, anywhere, to explain in clear and convincing terms how the country in question should position itself globally; what is at stake; who or what is to be defended or secured from which threats or challenges; and how much effort and public money should be expended to that end. And that explanation must be made to all those who should be concerned with national strategy: parliament, the electorate, the armed forces, allies, the media, and of course the country’s adversaries.<sup>74</sup>

But beyond the commonplace expectation that democratic governments should inform, explain and discuss their policies, what might it mean in more practical terms for communications to be *intrinsic* to national strategy? The converse case might almost be made: that the requirement to communicate national strategy might be at the expense of strategic efficiency and effectiveness. After all, it is clear that national strategy in the early twenty-first century involves a variety of government departments and agencies confronting a range of challenges (economic, diplomatic and military, for example) at different moments and at different levels of intensity and complexity, and with a variety of responses, not all of which may be mutually compatible. This report has argued that the purpose of strategic communications should be to support the most appropriate, timely and effective response to these various strategic challenges. The goal should not be to reinforce

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73 By ‘national strategy’ we mean the identification of national interests and ambitions and the use of various resources (national and other) to preserve or pursue those interests and ambitions.

74 P. Cornish, *Strategy in Austerity: The Security and Defence of the United Kingdom* (London: Chatham House, 2010), p. 7.

national strategy with homogenized, centrally managed explanations of complex strategic challenges and equally complex responses by government. In any case, some of what is planned or implemented in the name of national strategy might, for reasons of national security, not be appropriate for open, public discussion.

How then can the need to communicate clearly and purposefully be reconciled with the need to implement a broadly based and effective national strategy? In other words, how can the apparent singularity of strategic communications be reconciled with the evident diversity of the contemporary strategic environment? Here, the government of the United Kingdom provides a useful test bed for the development of an effective relationship between strategic communications and national strategy. The government of the UK is known for the ‘departmentalism’ of its bureaucracy:

Departmentalism refers to centrifugal pressures within a bureaucratic structure that strengthen the identity of individual departments and agencies. Agencies are thus able to pursue their own separate interests and resist both political control and broader administrative disciplines. The distinctive culture of a government agency is shaped by factors such as its policy responsibilities, the collective interests of its body of officials, and the interests of the client groups that it serves.<sup>75</sup>

The correlate of a departmentalized bureaucratic structure is a relatively weak centre. In the United Kingdom the obvious exception to this rule is the Treasury, or ministry of finance. However, while it is the function of the Treasury to manage the national economy, this function should not qualify it to decide upon or to implement specialized policy areas such as transport, healthcare and defence. As specialized ‘delivery’ departments and agencies respond to an ever-widening and overlapping array of

challenges, so it becomes clear that national strategy must, to a considerable extent, be a matter of coordinating different efforts. In the UK governmental system coordination is the role of the Cabinet Office, the department responsible for the publication of a series of three national security strategies in which communication has received what appears to be a steadily increasing emphasis. In the first UK national security strategy, published in 2008, the term ‘communication’ occurs nine times.<sup>76</sup> In the second, *Security for the Next Generation*, published in 2009, ‘communication’ or ‘communicate’ are used no fewer than 38 times and the document asserts in plain terms that ‘the domain of public opinion, of culture, and of information and influence, is a vital area to be considered in its own right.’<sup>77</sup> Finally, in 2010, although the latest version of the national security strategy<sup>78</sup> uses ‘communicate’ and related terms on only six occasions, its sister document, the Strategic Defence and Security Review, could not have been more explicit as to the weight now attached by the UK government to strategic communications:

Strategic Communications are important for our national security because they can positively change behaviours and attitudes to the benefit of the UK, and counteract the influence of dangerous individuals, groups and states. We will produce a National Security Communications Strategy which will, for the first time, set out how the UK will use strategic communications to deliver national security objectives. The National Security Council will further consider the infrastructure and governance arrangements required for marshalling and aligning the full range of communications [*sic*] resources across and beyond government.<sup>79</sup>

The approach taken by the UK government could be described as a declaratory engagement with the idea of strategic communications from what is (currently at

<sup>75</sup> A. Heywood, *Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002 [2nd edition]), p. 366.

<sup>76</sup> UK Cabinet Office, *The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Security in an Interdependent World*, Cm 7291 (London: The Stationery Office, March 2008).

<sup>77</sup> UK Cabinet Office, *The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Update 2009: Security for the Next Generation*, Cm 7590 (London: The Stationery Office, June 2009), p. 105, para 7.54.

<sup>78</sup> HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*.

<sup>79</sup> HM Government, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, p. 68, para 6.6.

least) a relatively weak bureaucratic centre and with the ambition being to coordinate different messages rather than homogenize them into one overarching statement. This description is not as self-contradictory as it might at first appear and corresponds closely with the approach to strategic communications advocated by this report. If the UK can be said to provide a ‘work in progress’ model for complex yet effective strategic communications in the early 21st century, that model should have three principal components. In the first place, clarity with regard to the aim of strategic communications is essential. The object should not be to devise one message which can carry equal weight in a number of different contexts, but to allow different messages to be generated to suit different audiences and according to prevailing circumstances. As one interviewee remarked on the subject of the UK intervention in Afghanistan, the message communicated to an audience in Helmand Province will be different from that communicated to a domestic UK audience.

But even though the two messages are different, they must be consistent.<sup>80</sup> What is essential is that different messages should not conflict with or undermine one another and should, ideally, be mutually supportive. This task could be the function of a strategic communications ‘clearing house’ of some sort established at the centre of government. It is not yet clear whether the Cabinet Office and the National Security Council, as the most obvious candidates for this central government role, will need to be strengthened substantially in order to be able to coordinate departmental communications with sufficient authority. Equally, it remains to be seen whether the National Strategic Communications Strategy proposed in 2010 will offer an imaginative and ambitious approach to communications and how effectively it will contribute to the achievement of national strategic goals.

Second, as far as the licence or authority to communicate is concerned, strategic communications should allow and encourage a devolved approach. They should not

require a strong, directive centre and are in any case – as noted earlier – more effective when initiative is devolved and departments, agencies and subordinates are trusted to devise their own communications plan according to the circumstances they confront. Several interviewees argued for a more ‘Nelsonian’ approach to strategy and communication – an approach that armed forces know as ‘mission command’.<sup>81</sup>

Mention of military practices and ideas can produce an allergic reaction among UK government departments, sensitive to what they perceive to be the ‘militarization’ of government communications. Nevertheless reference to the armed forces introduces the third and final component to the evolving UK model: the claim that strategic communications should adopt a *doctrinal* rather than a *prescriptive* approach. In military training, the purpose of doctrine is to instruct on ‘how to think, not what to think’.<sup>82</sup> In *British Defence Doctrine* the idea is presented in the following way:

doctrine is a pragmatic basis for action, decision and reflection, which encourages, amid the uncertainties of crisis and conflict, the decisive contribution of individual initiative, enterprise and imagination in achieving success. It does not provide an algorithm that obviates the need for difficult decisions. It provides the bedrock on which such decisions can be based.<sup>83</sup>

In military circles, doctrine is therefore understood as a framework of principles, and much of the point of this framework is that it should be distributed, understood and implemented by a wide variety of users. As one interviewee responded when asked who in government should be responsible for strategic communications: ‘Everybody’.<sup>84</sup> In the broader context of national strategy a framework/doctrinal approach to strategic communications would assist in socializing the idea and practice of strategic communications across government, as we have argued earlier in this report.<sup>85</sup> Relevant

80 Interview F.

81 Interview E.

82 Ministry of Defence, *Army Doctrine Primer* (London: Ministry of Defence, AC 71954, May 2011), p. 1-2.

83 Ministry of Defence, *British Defence Doctrine* (London: Ministry of Defence, JDP 0-01 [3rd edition], August 2008), p. iii.

84 Interview C.

85 Interview F.

government departments and agencies would then be in a position to produce a communications plan tailored to the circumstances they confront, yet in a way which did not conflict, whether procedurally or substantively, with other departmental plans. In order to prevent conflicts in communications, as well as the central government coordination office or 'clearing house' discussed earlier, ad hoc committees could be established to coordinate the communications strategies of those departments and agencies involved in a crisis.<sup>86</sup> And the common goal of these various communications strategies, wherever they originate, at whatever level and whatever they address, should be to help in the achievement of national strategic effect.<sup>87</sup> Where central government is relatively weak or lacks information, or where its presence is resented within a departmentalized bureaucracy, the doctrinal approach will be the best hope of achieving the desired level of coordination. Finally, and ideally, departmental communications should in some way be governed by, or at the very least be consistent with the proposed National Strategic Communications Strategy. This would in turn require strategy itself to be reflective of a doctrine that is not merely a statement of principles, but an account of how those principles should be applied.

## Stability operations

We often speak disparagingly about our adversaries, but the reality is when it comes to strategic communications, they are very 21st century. They are far more agile than we are.<sup>88</sup>

The aim of strategic communications in stability operations is to influence the context of and behaviour within an operation and to preserve unity of effort and purpose. US Field Manual 3-24.2 of April 2009 defines stability operations as:

An overarching term encompassing various military missions, tasks, and activities conducted outside the United States in coordination with other instruments of national power to maintain or re-establish a safe and secure environment, provide essential governmental services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction, and humanitarian relief.<sup>89</sup>

Strategic communications are thus seen as an enabler of effect at both the operational and tactical levels. However, all civil-military operations must take place in a sensitive political and media environment.

Operational-level strategic communications are still seen as distinct from the national strategic level. In fact there is a patent and pressing need for far greater linkage between both the national strategic and operational levels of stability operations. Indeed, one of the drivers of strategic communications has been the impact of tactical and operational actions on national strategy given the 24/7 news cycle and the ability of adversaries to use strategic communications to their own ends. While Western armed forces are beginning to understand the true impact of low-level actions on strategy, hitherto it has tended to be only at the doctrinal level of what has been called the 'strategic corporal'.<sup>90</sup> Success in future stability operations will therefore depend on an ability to communicate strategically, fast and with accuracy if the West is to operate within the information/decision loop of its adversaries. This in turn will require much tighter links between the national strategic and the operational levels, as well as a much more systematic attempt to link words and deeds at all levels of engagement.

FM 3-24.2 reinforces this point:

At its heart, a counterinsurgency is an armed struggle for the support of the population. This support can be achieved or lost through information engagement, strong representative government, access to goods and services,

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86 Interview I  
87 Interview B.

88 US Joint Forces Command, 'Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy', Version 3.0, 24 June 2010, p. IV-6.

89 Headquarters, Department of the US Army (2009) Field Manual 3-24.2, 'Tactics in Counterinsurgency', p. 288.

90 In 2002 Lieutenant-General Peter Leahy, Chief of the US Army said, 'The era of the strategic corporal is here. The soldier of today must possess professional mastery of warfare, but match this with political and media sensitivity.' See Major Lynda Liddy, 'The Strategic Corporal: Some Requirements in Training and Education', *Australian Army Journal*, Vol. II, No. 2 (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2009), p. 139.

fear, or violence. This armed struggle also involves eliminating insurgents who threaten the safety and security of the population.<sup>91</sup>

Much has been learnt by US and allied forces in both Iraq and Afghanistan since November 2001 but it is clear that much more needs to be learnt if strategic communications are to help establish – as they should – the essential balance in stability operations between the kinetic and the non-kinetic with a view to treading as light a footprint as possible at all times.<sup>92</sup> However, from the research for this report it is evident that too many commanders see strategic communications as a mere afterthought or at best as a consequence of planning and action, rather than as fundamental or germane to it.

Effective strategic communications should play a vital shaping role in stability operations from the conceptual stage. This is because they are critical to establishing the all-important rationale for action within the context of a campaign. To that end, in stability operations strategic communications should not only take place through consultation over policy with key civilian partners, but should help inform a wider understanding of what comprises a communications ‘target’ (both friends and foes). Indeed, a communications strategy that places all actions within the broader political context should promote enhanced synchronization and de-confliction of efforts by partners. Yet it is the establishment and understanding of the broader context in which stability operations must inevitably take place that hard-pressed commanders still find difficult on occasion.

The centrality of strategic communications to planning and action could be assisted if civilians involved in initiatives such as Commander’s Initiative Groups (CIG) and Strategic Advisory Groups (SAG) were given an enhanced status so that they could indeed properly inform and influence the commander’s intent and act as a real-time link with their counterparts in capitals and/or strategic headquarters. Yet strategic communications and political advisers are still too often seen as second-order tactical

considerations. This is partly because such advisers themselves carry insufficient weight in theatre headquarters, strategic headquarters and/or national capitals. Only when civilian expertise is seen as central to security, therefore, will such experts enjoy sufficient stature and status. That in turn will demand that they are brought in early in campaign design.

Furthermore, the utility of strategic communications as an enabling package of statecraft, public affairs, public diplomacy and information operations is not helped by the diffuse and differing nature of all four elements at the political command level. Too often such disciplines represent different groups with different agendas, leading too often to an ad hoc approach to support for commanders in the field. Not surprisingly, in such circumstances the military seeks its own solution.

Stability operations are by definition strategic, i.e. the strategic goal is stability with operations seen as a means to an end and not an end in themselves. Too often commanders lack strategic guidance as to the minimum acceptable end-state, without which it is very hard to craft information strategies and thus see information as a key strategic ‘weapon’. This is particularly the case when capitals lack the same sense of urgency as commanders in the field. Not only do strategic communications too often become subject, as we have suggested elsewhere, to bureaucratic politics, but the ensuing vacuum tends to put the action wagon before the strategy horse. The military then communicates strategically through its actions, often undermining the all-important need for words and actions to be as one. In 2009 the US Department of Defense reinforced this point:

Equipping for the information-based present and future is more than acquiring the right hardware and software. It requires understanding and adapting to a dynamic environment that is both of the moment and persistent. A problem in the information-based present and future remains a continued perception that one-way communication is adequate. While this focus is to be expected from operational plans addressing specific problems and solutions,

91 Headquarters, Department of the US Army, ‘Tactics in Counterinsurgency’, p. 188.

92 See Paul Cornish, ‘The United States and counterinsurgency: “political first, political last, political always”’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 1, January 2009.

breaking this thinking is essential as time horizons must shift from mission-based to never-ending struggles. The definition of ‘victory’ must be changed in the struggle for minds and wills.<sup>93</sup>

What is needed is a strategic communications structure that is central in government at the most senior levels, such that it that can engage early in a campaign and ensure continued information oversight. This is precisely the role that Tony Blair’s press spokesman Alastair Campbell tried to play during the 1999 Kosovo campaign. Controversial though his approach was at the time, Campbell at least brought some rigour to NATO strategic communications during the campaign. This helped to ensure that the Alliance’s words and deeds were closely linked and understood to be so along the command chain, even if some NATO public diplomats felt that Campbell came on occasions perilously close to spin and propaganda. His aim was sound, however: to establish a vital relationship between policy, strategy, targeting, action and information.

Israel also faced a similar challenge during its 2006 campaign against Hezbollah. As the Pentagon pointed out,

By operating its own radio and TV network, in addition to controlling a sophisticated online presence, Hezbollah was able to manipulate public perception to actually project itself as winning the battle while helping to orchestrate a backlash in global public opinion against Israel’s military actions. The Israel Defense Forces faced similar information/perception issues during its recently concluded campaign against the radical Palestinian group Hamas in Gaza.<sup>94</sup>

This example highlights the need for Western armed forces to improve their respective strategic communications performance and to bring in strategic communicators early in the conflict cycle. The traditional kinetic focus of armed forces tends to undermine effective strategic communications, with the focus too often on justifying the

act rather than shaping the action. Edward R. Murrow, the first director of the US Information Agency, insisted that he had better be ‘in on the take-offs of policy’ if he was expected to be ‘in on the crash landings.’<sup>95</sup>

The centrality of strategic communications to stability operations is evident from the critical campaign tasks dependent upon it. These tasks include, *inter alia*, influencing foreign populations; providing public information; acting as the commander’s voice; countering enemy propaganda, misinformation, disinformation and opposing information. Indeed, all civil-military operations are dependent on an ability to communicate in theatre to critical communities and out of theatre to increasingly sceptical domestic and/or donor publics. Communicating strategically and effectively across a range of tasks and audiences is thus central to a range of stability operations including foreign humanitarian assistance, populace and resource control, national assistance operations, military-civic action, emergency services and civil administration.

With the practical dimensions on this subject in mind, one of the British Army’s leading strategic communications practitioners has developed a ten-point checklist based on his experience in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

1. **Command-led:** A command-led approach is vital, with command posited clearly at coalition or national level. If part of a multinational-level national operation, strategic communications must be properly nested in the multinational effort.
2. **Narrative:** A strong narrative base is needed that resonates among those who are the recipient of the security/stability effort. It is vital to avoid an ‘us versus them’ narrative. Rather, the focus should be on a ‘them and them’ narrative that aims to describe new and better futures. (Such campaigns tend to be constructed along similar lines to social change narratives, which are themselves akin to political campaigns.)
3. **Simplicity:** Messaging must be clear, consistent and straightforward, avoiding excessive nuance.

93 US Department of Defense, ‘Strategic Communication Science and Technology Plan: Current Activities, Capability Gap and Areas for Further Investment’, April 2009, p. 17.

94 Ibid., p. 16.

95 See Paul, *Strategic Communication*, p. 54.

4. **Consistency:** A clear and consistent understanding of the strategy served by strategic communications is critical.
5. **Research:** A good understanding of the audiences and how to engage them is central to strategic communications in stability operations. Such understanding must be based on sound and thorough research of both the people central to the narrative and the context in which they live.
6. **Coherence (or coordination):** Narrative discipline is needed – stick to the script, but script (or narrative) producers need to ensure the script is user-friendly.
7. **Indivisibility:** A single information domain uniting ‘out of theatre’ and ‘in theatre’ through and for strategic communications is not only vital but affords potentially the greatest challenge. National/coalition high command should seek to support in-theatre strategic communications with the primary stories focused on the in-theatre challenge.
8. **Dialogue:** Strategic communications must be a genuine two-way discussion. However, at present most communications tools are optimized for broadcast. The need for dialogue places a great premium on discussion with indigenous key leaders and opinion-formers/leaders and also requires an understanding at the highest political level that such dialogue must also inform national/coalition strategy.
9. **Timing and tempo:** Get the timing right and be ‘first with the truth’. This includes anticipating key events and ensuring the right effort to support such events. Events can range from holy/national days and key political conferences to cycles of military action. Moreover, longer-term communication efforts, for example strategy-based psychological operations programmes, need to vary the pace, focus and content to remain fresh.
10. **Assessment:** Assessment is critical and needs to be properly resourced. Understanding who is saying what to whom and about what is central to an adaptive, agile strategic communications strategy. Tracking media outputs and assessing how they affect

beliefs and perceptions is the most straightforward of approaches. Assessing polling/focus groups/atmospherics to understand how behaviour changes is more difficult, and requires a whole-of-government approach if all the critical metrics are to be properly assessed.

Lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq suggest a much tighter relationship is needed from the outset of campaign planning for stability operations between political leaders, commanders and communicators. Within such a framework leaders and commanders at all levels should articulate their intent in terms of information effect and influence sought, which should then become a central element of action. The conclusion of this brief case study is clear: strategic communications should be run from government rather than from the frontline of stability operations. However, such leadership should support and be responsive to the experience of the frontline and military theatre, but always in support of theatre, which is too often not the case today. Unity of effort and purpose remains central to effective stability operations, which are themselves dependent on consistent strategic communications from senior politicians and civil servants to the practitioner.

## Counter-radicalization

Military and kinetic responses to terrorist activity have yielded varied levels of success. As Rohan Gunaratna and Lawrence Rubin have observed, military action and repression can further radicalize individuals and tend to leave the ideologies and motives intact despite any apparent decrease in the operational abilities of terrorist groups.<sup>96</sup> This is, in essence, because terrorism is as much about ideas and their communication as it is about action. Beyond the threat of violence, terrorism offers its own strong and often very persuasive narrative with which it not only justifies its actions but also offers an alternative to the narrative of the state (or any organization) that it regards as its target. As an articulation of

96 R. Gunaratna, J. Jerard and L. Rubin (eds), *Terrorist Rehabilitation and Counter-Radicalisation: New Approaches to Counter-Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 1.

a political grievance or ideology, terrorist acts by their very nature are designed to communicate a message to a specific audience,<sup>97</sup> a message reflecting their perpetrators' ideas, objectives and motivations, and designed to bring about some form of societal or cultural change through the use of fear. With the rise in radical or extremist terrorism over the past fifteen years, whether by extreme Islamic groups such as Al-Qaeda or right-wing political groups or individuals, including most recently in Norway, increased attention has been given by governments and communities to addressing radical behaviour before it can manifest itself in violent action. Although strategic communications play a vital role across counter-terrorism policy, they can have particular potency in addressing these early phases, enabling pre-emptive, non-violent intervention and messaging for those most susceptible to radicalization.

The 2011 revised 'Prevent' strand of the UK Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CONTEST) places great emphasis on counter-radicalization efforts. Counter-radicalization is dependent 'on a successful integration strategy, which establishes a stronger sense of common ground and shared values, which enables participation and the empowerment of all communities and which also provides social mobility'.<sup>98</sup> In this regard strategic communications are arguably far less about government narrative and action, and far more about the skills of engagement and outreach of those classed as communicators, agents and stakeholders and discussed in the previous section of this report. Indeed, in this instance the narrative will be more powerful if it is subtle and not perceived to be an attempt on the part of the state to re-engineer a situation in order to minimize a perceived threat against it. The main actors in the counter-radicalization context are those with local influence, including community and religious leaders, teachers, families, youth workers and others. Through their words and deeds these figureheads can articulate an alternative set of values, ideas and opportunities to challenge the claims put forward by radical groups. They

can identify potentially vulnerable individuals and address their grievances, build greater cohesion, provide support for those who feel marginalized by society and look to fill the gaps in societal structures and provisions.

This long list of objectives will not, of course, be achieved through messaging alone. Where the causes of frustration and marginalization are linked to tangible public policy shortfalls, such as unemployment, a perception of lack of opportunities or education, for example, narrative alone will do little without constructive actions to reinforce the message and, more importantly, address some of the root causes of disaffection. It is in these policy changes that government can arguably deliver most effectively.

However, change in this instance is dependent upon the ability of leaders, communicators, agents and stakeholders alike to engage in a dialogue to understand the audience better, rather than merely seeking to change it, and to share information wherever possible in order to ensure a self-sustaining process. Cultural literacy has a part to play in this, especially in multicultural areas where there may be those who feel split in their identity and seek to find meaning and a sense of identity through a radical narrative. High levels of awareness by strategic communicators are key: for strategic communications to work it is necessary to identify the constituency and the dynamics, both psychological and social, to determine the drivers of radicalization. Both the audience and the phenomenon must be understood so that words and deeds are targeted correctly and sensitively applied.<sup>99</sup>

Al-Qaeda's narrative is in some respects a sophisticated form of strategic communications. Guided by a clear vision and objective, its brand and ideology have been crafted in such a way as to appeal to those susceptible to a narrative based on extreme religious views and a sense of oppression and injustice. It manages to exploit all tools of communication in both traditional and formal channels – such as its own magazine *Inspire* – and informal spaces on the internet. As some interviewees pointed out, the risk in competing with such a narrative is that the radical outlook

97 B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 229.

98 Cabinet Office, *CONTEST: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism* (London: The Stationery Office, 2011), p. 10.

99 Interview G. See also Matthew Goodman, *Right Response: Understanding and Countering Populist Extremism in Europe* (London: Chatham House, 2011); and Jay Ecdwards and Benoît Gomis, 'Islamic Terrorism in the UK since 9/11: Reassessing the "Soft" Response', Chatham House International Security Programme Paper 2011/03, June 2011.

will be dignified and strengthened as a result.<sup>100</sup> In this context, strategic communications could be seen at least as a form of social deterrence, designed to deter further or deeper radicalization. However, they could also be seen as a more constructive tool for social inclusion – a more positive message and application enabling the prevailing narrative among those vulnerable to radicalization to be subtly challenged and changed in order to bring it in line with more moderate views while in turn reducing the impact of certain claims and concerns.

There is, in addition, an important role for the media. The dominant narrative, particularly with regard to Islamic extremism, deals in brushstrokes rather than nuances and can be seen in some cases to misrepresent Islam as a homogeneous (and usually adversarial) entity to the detriment of wider community relations. There is a need for the government and the media to question and redress the prevailing public narrative, to ask whether the narrative is conducive to fostering greater social inclusion, and to assess what the language and chosen terminology reveal about wider public attitudes, which may need to be adjusted.

There is a balance to be struck. Developing an anti-radicalization strategy is, of course, highly dependent on the specific target audience. Messaging alone is insufficient and only useful as part of a consistent and well-crafted narrative that changes perceptions without spreading fear. Spreading fear merely does the work of the terrorist, acting as a recruiting sergeant for them.

Finally, in terms of UK national strategy, one interviewee spoke of the Prevent strand representing muddled thinking which confused policing with community tolerance.<sup>101</sup> While many of the frontline efforts of strategic communications may reside locally at a community level, at a national level the Prevent strand and the overall CONTEST strategy must be clear enough in their objectives and in their ability to unite the different stakeholders, communicators and actors under visible leadership. Moreover, there should be a reasonably clear articulation of the prevailing norms and values of society and a sense that these norms should at the

very least be made relevant, appealing and meaningful to those who feel most hostile or marginalized.

Strategic communications in counter-radicalization can serve to mitigate the need either for more kinetic action or for stricter government policy. As a tool for social inclusion and positive social change they can build bridges within communities and seek to identify the root causes and counter-narratives that drive vulnerable individuals towards more radical behaviour. As a social deterrent they can encourage people to see the adverse implications of extreme ideologies. Their success is dependent in part on engagement from all sectors of society and on an iterative relationship between government and the practitioners in order to ensure a united front of message and action and to build trust. However, in order to be effective, strategic communications must recognize the diversity in audiences and their different motivations, interests and ideas. It is in the nuances and subtleties of counter-radicalization that strategic communications will doubtless meet their hardest, yet most urgent challenges.

## Cyber security

Security of and in cyberspace is a mounting concern for liberal democratic governments around the world. In the 2010 UK National Security Strategy, 'cyber attack, including by other states, and by organised crime and terrorists' was judged by the National Security Council to be one of four 'highest priority risks' with which UK national strategy will have to contend for the next five years.<sup>102</sup> In stark terms, the document then claims that

Government, the private sector and citizens are under sustained cyber attack today, from both hostile states and criminals. They are stealing our intellectual property, sensitive commercial and government information, and even our identities in order to defraud individuals, organisations and the Government.<sup>103</sup>

100 Interview G.

101 Interview E.

102 *National Security Strategy*, pp. 11, 27.

103 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

If, as suggested, cyberspace can harbour threats and challenges to most, if not all, sectors and levels of society, then cyber security could be described as ‘a system-level challenge to society’<sup>104</sup> As such, the incoherence of the response to this challenge can only magnify the problem, simply because society

does not act and respond as a coherent system where cyber-security is concerned. Stakeholders remain segregated and concerned with security within their narrow ambit, and as a result fail to see that they can be affected by another stakeholder’s security, or lack of it. Thus the business community can be narrowly focused on cybercrime, even though cybercriminality increasingly exploits techniques and technology which have migrated from the world of espionage, for example. Equally, anti-government hackers have been known to use the techniques of cybercriminals.<sup>105</sup>

In order to meet this complex, society-wide challenge national strategy must therefore ensure that ‘the activities of different agencies and bodies complement each other and are mutually reinforcing, rather than conflicting’<sup>106</sup> This is particularly important at a time of rapid technological innovation and when government resources are tightly constrained. Furthermore, in many cases the ‘agencies and bodies’ concerned will have no formal involvement with government, not least because a very large proportion of cyber-based critical national infrastructure (in the UK as elsewhere) is owned by the private sector. In other words, the practices required to achieve security in cyberspace are remarkably close to those required for effective strategic communications: the timely exchange of accurate information between government and other bodies and individuals; devolved authority to act according to local circumstances; coordination; cooperation; and, above all, trust that all involved are working towards a common goal which they will ‘own’. Strategic communications are the means by which all these practices are made possible, yet communication is made more difficult (and perhaps

even counter-productive) when an increasingly important information and communications medium (cyberspace) has been compromised and has become a significant security risk in its own right.

Cyberspace therefore raises an important dilemma for government: should strategy (and national security) matter more than communication? Should national strategy focus on preventing and disrupting the misuse of cyberspace or on using cyberspace to ‘accentuate the positive’ and, in the case of terrorism, radicalization and crime, to provide credible alternative messages? It seems clear that both approaches must be worked simultaneously. Where counter-radicalization and criminal activity are concerned, for example, there are legal grounds for the disruption and disabling of certain activities in cyberspace, and for more elaborate practices such as the infiltration of internet chat rooms, and the use of these sites for the purposes of counter-radicalization. There are broader questions to ask, however, concerning the merits of disrupting cyberspace. Well-intentioned public policy decisions and messages might, for example, inadvertently worsen the situation by contributing to a climate conducive to radicalization, perhaps more so than any internet chat room. And disruption of chat room activity might in any case do little more than address the very late symptoms of much deeper problems in society. In this context, as we argue above, strategic communications should therefore address wider and deeper causes of radicalization, and should also offer a feedback loop through which public policy can be subjected to critical appraisal. One benefit of such self-criticism, for example, might be to understand the limitations of a traditional ‘security’ or ‘defence’ mindset when addressing the problem of radicalization. As suggested above, a broader and more imaginative approach would be preferable, whereby knowledge and expertise can be drawn from a variety of disciplines such as sociology and social psychology in order better to understand the dynamics at work.

104 P. Cornish, R. Hughes and D. Livingstone, *Cyberspace and the National Security of the United Kingdom: Threats and Responses* (London: Chatham House, March 2009), p. 20.

105 Ibid.

106 Ibid.

The need to provide ‘credible alternative messages’ is therefore clear enough. The Research and Information Communications Unit (RICU) was established in 2007 with the remit to counter and undermine the ‘single narrative’ propagated by Al-Qaeda and other extremist organizations. But this is not a simple task; as argued elsewhere in this paper, these organizations are often highly expert and agile users of the internet and other media, and are well aware that propaganda (or strategic *counter*-communications, perhaps) requires constant and careful management if it is to succeed. Furthermore, the popular narrative of radical Islamist organizations is largely that of a defensive *jihad*; a relatively simple message and in many quarters a very persuasive one. The most obvious counter-narrative to *defence* is *attack*, but this is unlikely to find much support among Western liberal polities and would in any case serve to validate the radical narrative. Strategic communications might, therefore, be used to project a counter-narrative of prevention and denial of terrorist success; ‘terrorism might persist, but it will never succeed against us’. Yet this is a largely passive position which does little to seize the initiative or to inspire confidence in a public which perceives itself to be existentially vulnerable, and still less to deflate the narrative of terrorist and radical groups. Rather than a *counter*-narrative, what is required is a more activist *alternative* narrative, one which projects the attractions and strengths of Western liberal society, through such ideas as democracy, rights and liberty. Something of this is provided by the UK’s first Cyber Security Strategy, published in June 2009:

The Government believes that the continuing openness of the Internet and cyber space is fundamental to our way of life, promoting the free flow of ideas to strengthen democratic ideals and deliver the economic benefits of globalization. Our approach seeks to preserve and protect the rights to which we are accustomed (including privacy and civil liberties) because it is on these rights that our freedoms depend.<sup>107</sup>

Liberal society can, however, be curiously reticent about the ideas upon which it is founded, and can suffer from the morbid fear that the projection of those ideas would

amount to illiberal proselytising. Another ‘credible alternative’ message could lie in the notion of community. There is already a good deal of interest in the ways in which the internet can be used to undermine the cohesiveness of local communities. But can it also be used constructively, to help develop a benign spirit of community? This question invites thought as to what is meant by community and whether it is reasonable or proper to see the concept of community as something manipulable. ‘Community’ is also a value-laden term, in that those communities that embody certain values and mores can be regarded as politically, legally and morally more virtuous than others. This is therefore an implicit challenge to government: to express a preference as to which types of community are acceptable to Western liberal society, and which are not. But to meet that challenge governments must first be willing to project the ‘activist alternative narrative’ described above.

Ultimately, however, when strategic communications address problems associated with cyber security a sense of proportion will be essential. If it can be argued that the challenge of cyber security is (or should be) as much to do with the technology of detection and interdiction as it is with social norms and attitudes, and the cohesion of communities, then it has to be asked how a community formed in cyberspace can be bound together (or indeed be said to exist at all) when it is to a considerable extent an anonymous community, as well as being global and virtual. If the bases of community are identity and cohesion (physical or otherwise), then the antitheses of community are anonymity and dispersion, where strategic communications might have very little to offer.

## Summary

This chapter has examined strategic communications in the context of four policy settings: national strategy itself, stabilization operations, counter-radicalization and cyber security. This is not to say, of course, that strategic communications should be concerned exclusively with these four policy areas: resilience to natural

107 UK Cabinet Office, *Cyber Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Safety, Security and Resilience in Cyber Space*, Cm 7642 (London: The Stationery Office, June 2009), p. 10, para 1.12.

disaster, economic collapse, widespread civil disorder, the outbreak of disease and large-scale terrorist attacks could all have been considered in a similar way. Nevertheless, in each of the four areas examined it is clear that strategic communications can make an important contribution to policy-making and to the delivery of strategic effect, thus achieving the authors' aim to argue by example for the utility of even the most basic understanding of strategic communications. Strategic communications, as defined and described here, are most suited to the development of national strategy by a liberal democratic government with a departmentalized bureaucracy. In stabilization operations, if strategic communications are considered at the earliest possible moment – even at the conceptual stage – then they can become an 'enabling package for statecraft' making use of such devices as the Commander's Initiative Group. In counter-radicalization, strategic communications can offer 'social deterrence' as well as being a 'constructive tool for

social inclusion.' Finally, where policy and strategy for cyber security are concerned we find close parallels with strategic communications in the need for information, cooperation, coordination and trust. But while cyberspace offers unprecedented speed and coverage in communications – available to governments, businesses and individuals alike – it can also have an atomizing effect which will challenge even the most subtle and sensitive strategic communications:

More people than ever, perhaps, have the opportunity to be makers of culture, even if that means more to choose from and, consequently, fewer standards and blockbusters shared in common. What it means, too, is this paradoxical feeling: that of being more connected than ever, with one-click access to so much of the world's cultural harvest, and yet, with the fragmentation and the constant whirl of these times, of being starved for like-mindedness, synced only with ourselves.<sup>108</sup>

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## 5. Conclusion

This report has made the argument that strategic communications should not be understood to be merely a messaging activity, but as the core of a comprehensive strategic engagement effort – integrating multi-media, multi-outlet, community outreach and face-to-face efforts in a single campaign designed for adaptation to a complex and changing environment.

The international security environment appears to be in a state of constant flux, as are information and communications technologies. National strategy, it seems clear enough, must embrace change if it is to retain its credibility over time. But this report goes further than to say merely that national strategy must be communicated effectively in times of uncertainty, urgency and technological complexity. Strategic communications are (or should be) a complex and sophisticated matter; more than a commonplace activity and rather more than common sense. Strategic communications should, moreover, contribute decisively to the design and implementation of national strategy. Strategy, as defined in this report, is a collection of ideas, preferences and methods which explain activity (whether diplomatic, economic, developmental or military) and give it purpose, by connecting it to the desired effect or a stated goal. By this view, strategic communications can assist in maintaining the essential interface between purpose and action.

However, for all the ambition of recent government documents in both the United States and the United Kingdom, strategic communications remain an essentially reactive and characteristically military-led process. As a result, their potential remains under-exploited. High-level political ‘ownership’ is thus vital, properly resourced and

building on a sound and credible strategic communications strategy that reaches across government and into departments.

As well as providing the interface between action and ambition, strategic communications also support another critical strategic commodity – influence. Strategic influence is wholly dependent on effective coordination across and beyond government in order that national strategic goals can be realized and maximized. Given the centrality of influence to national strategy, and by extension to the relationship between policy, strategy and action, a strategic communications framework must be intrinsic to policy preparation, strategic planning and campaign design.

On a more practical level, the report finds that strategic communications can have a disciplining effect on national strategic thinking; strategy must be clear and coherent before it can be communicated. It follows that strategic communications can also have a quality control function, by demanding that what is communicated by government is strategically credible. Another possibility thus presents itself, whereby strategic communications contribute to the development of comprehensiveness and cooperation in government policy. In this regard, the report finds that they can *improve* national strategy, as well as communicate it. In more straightforward terms, they are a challenge to governments to explain themselves more clearly and convincingly in order to gain and maintain public support for policy and in order to ensure that messages and actions do not conflict with one another and undermine the competence and reputation of government.

As Chapter 4 shows, when strategic communications are managed effectively and imaginatively they can make a significant and perhaps even decisive contribution to policy-making and to the delivery of national strategic effect. Yet for all that, in both London and Washington inter-agency ‘turf battles’ have hitherto prevented a formal pan-governmental approach to strategic communications. In the United States the National Security Council is the natural locus for such an effort, being close the highest executive authority. In the United Kingdom, however, the more recently established National Security Council

at present lacks the political and bureaucratic weight to perform such a leadership role, even if chaired by the Prime Minister. The UK National Strategic Communications Strategy, promised in October 2010, has yet to see the light of day and there are whispered doubts in Whitehall as to its scope and ambition, if and when it does emerge. There is a persuasive argument that this tentativeness should cease, not simply in order to ensure more effective strategic communications, but for the sake of national strategy itself. That said, cross-departmental cohesion will always be constrained by the ‘departmentalized’ structure of government in the UK.

The report does not conclude that strategic communications would be best achieved through a fixed, central structure. Rather, what is needed is a shared strategic communications mindset or culture, integral to every department of state and at every level of national policy and strategy. It is the fostering of a strategic communications culture, rather than the design of more formal structures, that will promote the necessary changes in current practice. Critical therefore, will be a self-sustaining and iterative system of information and exchange involving leaders, communicators, agents and stakeholders to foster a dynamic, versatile and responsive approach to policy. Furthermore, the precise locus of strategic communications will depend on the nature and focus of a crisis or strategy, the audience(s) of concern and the means available to influence or bring about change.

If strategic communications are to be truly national, they must reflect not only government policy and an executive message but a national narrative that is understood, owned and endorsed across society. Strategic communications must be seen to reach out from central government to operational environments (both military and non-military) and to the local domestic constituency. Equally, they must be perceived to be relevant, credible and authoritative at all levels of the governmental process,

from the highest policy level to the practical levels where engagement takes place. Finally, to be effective they should be both a ‘centre of government’ concern (i.e. an organic part of the policy-making and strategic process at the highest levels) and a ‘whole-of-government’ unifier (i.e. a common feature of all activity at all levels of government).

Strategic communications can make a very significant contribution to national strategy. Indeed, that contribution could in time be more significant, instrumental and decisive than this report has allowed. The first step towards realizing the potential of strategic communications must be to ensure that they are properly understood as a component of national strategy and are made integral to the national strategic process. If this minimal, or perhaps ‘stripped down’ version of strategic communications can be fully implemented there will be national strategic benefits, as this report has argued. It might then be that a still more elaborate and ambitious approach could be developed and implemented. Rather than communicating and improving national strategy, it could be found that strategic communications can in their own right help to create the conditions or the broad environment in which national strategy can more effectively and productively be pursued. More than an important *component* of national strategy, in other words, strategic communications could be an *enabler* of it. It might then be, finally, that they could emerge as a discrete lever of national strategy, alongside the traditional elements of national power – diplomatic persuasion, economic pressure and military coercion – as well as so-called ‘soft power’ methods such as cultural attraction and influence. Strategy is largely about achieving (or indeed preventing) political, economic and social change using all methods and resources available, and it may be that strategic communications have thus far been underestimated as a national strategic resource. In other words, it is conceivable that they could prove to be far more decisive and instrumental than has been considered so far.

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# Appendix: Interview and Information Sources

This Appendix provides a key to the non-attributable interviews with opinion-formers undertaken during the research which are referred to in the references as 'Interview [A]' etc. The general affiliations of the interviewees are listed below.

- A UK Ministry of Defence #1
- B UK Ministry of Defence #2
- C UK Ministry of Defence #3
- D UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office
- E UK Cabinet Office #1
- F UK Cabinet Office #2
- G Private Sector #1
- H Private Sector #2
- I UK Department for International Development
- J Media #1
- K UK Government
- L Media #2
- M Anonymous Conference Notes
- N UK Ministry of Defence #4
- O Media #3
- P US Defense Department
- Q UK Ministry of Defence #5
- R Media #4

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