

# Perspectives

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## A Vision for Strategic Communication

by Dr. Christopher Paul

A broad consensus prevails on two issues within the arena of strategic communication and public diplomacy. First, the manner in which we engage with foreign audiences and the perceptions we impart matter for foreign policy outcomes. Second, we need to improve our implementation of strategic communication. Beyond these two points, there is a dearth of consensus among key actors on how to effectively employ and improve strategic communication.

While agreeing that we need to improve, there are literally dozens of reports, white papers, and studies which highlight slightly different challenges and suggest different ways forward. Common themes are shared by a variety of proponents, but they advocate significantly different approaches, and remain divided when it comes to details.

There certainly is not consensus on the lexicon. There is no government-wide definition of strategic communication. The Department of Defense has an official definition, but it is so vague that almost anyone who uses it offers a clarification of what they really mean, which becomes, in effect, a new definition. Similarly, industry and academia overflow with competing definitions.

While the definition of public diplomacy is less contested, the relationship between public diplomacy and strategic communication is described quite differently across the field. Some hold that public diplomacy and strategic communication are exactly the same and use the terms interchangeably. Others view them as largely analogous with the difference lying in the agency that implements them, i.e. the Department of State conducts public diplomacy and strategic communication belongs within the realm of the Department of Defense. Still others view the terms as nested within each other, viewing strategic communication as superordinate to public diplomacy, while some would reverse that relationship, making public diplomacy the broader concept.

I am tempted to offer my own definition of strategic communication, but I will abstain. It does not really matter to me how exactly these terms are defined, what their precise relationships are, or whether they are defined at all, as long as the underlying concept is preserved. I believe that any definition of strategic communication should respect four conceptual tenets: First, that informing, influencing, and persuading is important; second, that effectively informing, influencing, and persuading requires clear objectives; third, that coordination and deconfliction are necessary to avoid information fratricide; fourth, that actions communicate. If a definition of strategic communication deviates from any of those tenets, I would

argue it is a definition of something else.

I have a vision for successful government-wide strategic communication and public diplomacy. In this vision, the United States has clearly stated national objectives, which contain nested subordinate 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 achieved through influence or persuasion, and which can be supported through such means. In pursuit of these objectives, appropriate priority is given to influence. Not that influence always has precedence in pursuing policy, but rather that it remains a consideration in planning policy or operations, and becomes the top priority when it should be.

In this vision, policy-makers, commanders and other decision-makers have a “communication mindedness” and are cognizant of the messages and signals their actions, utterances, or planned policies send. Failing that (or as that is developing) these same leaders have access to (and respect for) communication advocates/proponents/advisors who

bring communication implications to their attention.

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In this vision everyone in government speaks not with one voice like some kind of parrot or robot, 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 appropriate themes and plans of action are developed in consultation with both experts in communication and influence, and those with relevant cultural and contextual knowledge. Communication is not just one-way broadcast, but rather two-way communication, where engagement and dialogue prevail. In my vision this leads to policies shaped with our own interests, as well as the interests and

preferences of others, in mind. This is my vision.

How do we get there? It is an arduous path which will demand time and effort, but I have several suggestions that will get us moving in that direction.

### **Build strategic communication as a crawl, walk, run enterprise**

As we try to get better at strategic communication, we need to remember that Rome wasn't built in a day. There are many gaps between what we currently do well in this arena and all the things we would like to do well. It follows from this insight that there should be a logical progression toward closing gaps and building capabilities. To propose such a progression, I borrow from a military training metaphor: the crawl, walk, run progression. Before you can walk, crawl; before you can run, walk. When we consider all of the things that could go into strategic communication, rather than getting into an argument about which ones are most important, I propose instead that we ask: Which ones are easiest and which ones are foundational for, or logically prior to, the others? Which do we need to develop to progress to the crawl level of strategic communication? And which should be considered part of the higher walk level, or the highest run level?

I strongly suggest that first we focus on being intentional and deconflicted in our own messaging and signaling. Then, we should incorporate consideration of other participants in the information environment, consider cultural contexts, listen, and conduct true engagement. Finally, we should move to full integration of messages and signals, realize complex influence models, and seize the initiative from adversaries.

### **Nest strategies and goals**

My vision of strategic communication includes purposiveness and intentionality in communication at all levels. Communicating in the national interest is easiest when the national interests are specified and include clear goals at every level. What is missing is a subordinate set of goals to connect from national strategic guidance (which is often vague) to operating organizations. In the presence of clearly articulated national objectives and intermediate or supporting subordinate goals, the talented men and women of our government and our armed forces will surprise us with how diligently and effectively they inform, influence, and persuade in support of those goals.

### **Build strategic communication from the top down as well as from the bottom up**

Many of the calls for reform in this area emphasize guidance, leadership, coordination, and strategic direction coming from the top. I, of course, advocate top-down progress in this area, but when I speak about strategic communication to embassy staffers or company and field grade officers, I emphasize the prospects for bottom-up progress in this area as well. Even in the absence of clearly articulated higher level goals and subordinate objectives, improvement can be made in nesting goals. It starts with you. I encourage personnel at all levels to embrace strategic communication and to write clear goals for their inform, influence, and persuade activities. Personnel at all levels should seek to connect their goals to the goals one level up. If goals are not clearly articulated at that higher level, request that clear objectives be developed,

but do not wait for that to happen. Instead, I encourage subordinates to articulate their own goals and make them point toward what they think the goals should be at the higher level. If higher levels do not agree, that can only further incentivize them to actually state their objectives. If the community of practice begins to build nesting goals from the bottom up (or from the inside out), eventually the authorities at the top of relevant organizations will harness those connections with guidance in the form of clearly articulated goals of their own.

The same sorts of things can be done with coordination, with intermediate organizational levels reaching out to adjacent layers or formations try to coordinate and deconflict. This can start as one-way coordination, finding ways to share themes, messages, and intended signals and actions with others. Over time and with good partners, it can evolve into positive coordination and synchronization, where planned messages and signals are shared laterally back and forth across multiple organizations or layers, or maybe even discussed jointly. It does not have to be formal, and it can be completely voluntary; it can be made to happen and made to work at any level.

### **Whatever you want to call strategic communication, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater!**

Many have expressed dissatisfaction with strategic communication, either because of implementation failures, ambiguity in the definition, or because of conflicted structures or offices that have been established for its execution. I am not married to the term "strategic communication" and you need not be either. I do, however, have a strong commitment to the notion that the United States should be thoughtful, purposive, and coordinated in efforts to inform, influence, and persuade foreign populations in pursuit of national policy objectives. If strategic communication as a term is too vague, too contested, or becomes politically untenable, abandon it. Just do not allow the underlying effort to plan and coordinate government impact on the information environment to be lost too.



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