

# Perspectives

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## Getting the Information Albatross off our Back: Notes toward an Information-Savvy National Security Community

by Dr. Amy Zalman

Water, water, everywhere,  
Nor any drop to drink

– Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of  
the Ancient Mariner*

### The Information Instrument of Power

It is a paradox of the United States' strategic situation that while the effects of the information revolution on national security deepen, the American ability to act powerfully in these new circumstances remains shallow.

Many people concerned about national security recognize this paradox. We are virtually drowning in information—the words, images, and sounds through which humans communicate meaning to each other via various technologies, from the human voice to remote sensors. Yet, the United States wields “the information instrument of national power”—as national security parlance would have it—poorly.<sup>1</sup>

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1 In his 2008 “The Trouble with Strategic Communication,” (Center for Strategic Leadership Issue Paper, Carlisle, PA: Army War College Center for Strategic Leadership, January 2008), Dennis Murphy observes the military community's sense of the “urgency of integrating effective strategic communication into military operations while recognizing that we don't quite understand how to do it ... or even what it is.” Three years later, in a 2011 Memorandum on the subject of “Strategic Communication and Information Operations in the DoD,” then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates acknowledged that “across the U.S. Government, all departments and agencies are struggling to adapt anachronistic programs and policies to acclimate to the evolving environment” produced by globalization and the information revolution (January 25, 2011). Moreover, as Christopher Paul wrote in a 2009 RAND Corporation report, “Whither Strategic Communication: A Survey of Current Proposals and

The effects of the information revolution on national security, lest we doubt them, are visible everywhere. Political leaders are challenged daily to chart a clear course through the information, misinformation and disinformation flooding global social media. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's efforts in March 2014 to control the information environment by shutting down Twitter and YouTube testify to both the importance of information in the current technology environment, and the helplessness of political leaders to control it. In a slightly different light, consider the communications challenges faced by the Malaysian government in its attempt to restrain sensitive information during the search for Flight MH370.

Information technologies benefit violent transnational criminal networks. NGOs and private firms use communications to impact international development and foreign aid, the former preserve of governments. IT advances have led to “networked warfare” and remotely operated weapons, such as drones and IEDs. These weapons not only demolish lives and property, but also live on as information in another form, as stories of destruction, trauma, and blame that reverberate in local and global media to impact unfolding conflicts.

All over the world, people demand access to the Internet as a civil right and call on governments to use IT and information transparently and responsibly. Diplomatic challenges abound in creating global norms regarding proper behavior, in peace and war, in cyberspace.

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Recommendations,” “Countless studies, articles, and opinion pieces have announced that U.S. strategic communication and public diplomacy are in crisis and are inadequate to meet current demand” (1).

Not least, civic life the world over is in flux as a result of the information revolution. Just as “industry” in the Industrial Age organized all aspects of society, so too does “information” in the Information Age organize not only global economic production, but geopolitics, dominant intellectual and cultural forms, and not least, social relations at every strata of our existence, from our societal institutions to our personal worlds of work, family, and love. These changes are so profound as to have chipped away at the bedrock of the international system, the sovereign state. Once considered inviolable, the autonomous boundaries of states are now transgressed daily by people, news, and ideas set in motion by new technologies.

Yet no such revolution has occurred concerning the United States’ priorities when it comes to using informational power. Both in normative documents, such as the National Security Strategy, and in actual practice, the United States appears to think little of informational power as a strategic instrument. For example, a leading textbook used to teach strategy to senior staff of the Armed Services, the State Department, the Intelligence Community, and other civilian agencies, relegates informational activities to three disciplines: public diplomacy, military information operations, and psychological operations.<sup>2</sup>

All three are marginalized, poorly funded activities at best. The position of Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs has become notorious for its low incumbency rate.<sup>3</sup> Military information operations, or “IO,” and psychological operations<sup>4</sup> (an array of capabilities that combine psychological and communications practices with technology to influence others) are as marginal. Many government officials consider IO an esoteric, and slightly creepy, military art compared to the straightforward and manifest force of kinetic warfare.

Congress finds it easy to withhold support from informational activities in part because practitioners have

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2 Terry Deibel, *Foreign Affairs Strategy: Logic for American Statecraft* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2007).

3 Domani Spiro, “Obama Nominates Richard Stengel to the State Department Public Diplomacy Bureau,” *Diplo pundit* Blog, September 18, 2013. <http://diplo pundit.net/2013/09/18/obama-nominates-richard-stengel-to-the-state-departments-public-diplomacy-bureau>.

4 Psychological Operations are today known as Military Information Support Operations, or MISO, in American doctrine.

not been able to generate persuasive metrics of success to generate program support. This is not because information isn’t powerful—it is. It is rather because the national security community has fallen prey to a cognitive error in which the worth of an activity is gauged in terms of what is easiest to measure. Because it is difficult to quantify the damage (or benefit) of information in comparable terms, policymakers appear frequently to assume that it is not powerful at all. Conversely, it is possible to quantify the destructive damage of kinetic activities, such as bombs and armed drones, and this makes it easier to think such activities are powerful. To add insult to injury, the communicative effects of precisely those activities often surprise the policymaking mainstream because they failed to acknowledge the power of information. The feelings of rage and trauma that drones have caused in Waziristan is partly due to their concrete effects, but also to what they *mean*, what they communicate to people in the region about American intentions and their own sovereign rights.

The US organizes information activities on the basis of an outdated worldview set in the Cold War, ideologically, and the Industrial Age, technologically.

While public diplomats and IO practitioners deplore this situation, the mildness of their entreaties makes it all too easy for policymakers to ignore them. At a recent State Department forum, speakers called on public diplomats to listen better to foreign populations and remarked on the overly bureaucratic processes that make their jobs especially difficult. These aren’t trivial issues, but they are so far from the profound overhaul required that they may as well be.<sup>5</sup>

### **A Dramatic, Systemic Change of Mindset is Needed!**

Incremental reforms, no matter how worthy, won’t resolve the more basic problem: the US organizes information activities on the basis of an outdated worldview set in the Cold War, ideologically, and the Industrial

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5 Katherine Brown, “2013 Forum: The Future of Public Diplomacy,” *Public Diplomacy Council* blog, February 13, 2014. <http://www.publicdiplomacycouncil.org/commentaries/02-13-14/2013-forum-future-public-diplomacy>.

Age, technologically.

During the Cold War, it made good sense to think of the informational “instrument” of power as the capacity to inject American values into populations whose governments and/or technological advancement limited their access to outside ideas.

Public diplomacy, in that era, could count radio stations such as Voice of America and Radio Free Europe as great successes: they projected the American voice into spaces where it would otherwise not be heard. So too, with student exchanges and concert tours, which used American musical forms like jazz to communicate American ingenuity and its liberated sensibility. Dizzie Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, the Dave Brubeck Quartet were a very few of these wildly successful tours.

Military psychological operations shared the goal of exposing people—in this case adversaries engaged in armed conflict—to alternative information that would influence their behavior. In the conflicts in Vietnam, Korea and the Persian Gulf, the US Army waged campaigns specifically to encourage enemy desertions, for example.

It should be clear: lobbing American values at the people of other lands, hoping they will recognize the superiority of our ideological preferences, is a pretty lousy route to power in today's environment.

We are no longer in the Cold War, nor the Industrial Age. Soon, almost everyone in the world will be able to receive as well as disseminate informational content. There are few populations that are unknowingly isolated from others' media. The ideological landscape is variegated and complex, not bipolar. Ongoing competitive relationships, rather than clearly divided periods of war and peace, characterize international relations.

Moreover, national security challenges include transnational, multi-stakeholder risks such as climate change, resource scarcity, transborder crime, disease, and poverty. Solving these requires informational power, but not in a Cold War manifestation: not through efforts to

project American values into populations perceived as blank slates or hostile listeners, but through collaborative work and aligned interests.

The failure of the Cold War/Industrial Age model should be clear from the informational debacles of the ‘global war on terror.’ In the decade following the 9/11 attacks, just as in the Cold War, the United States sought to “tell its story” to Muslim publics that we imagined not only as isolated from information about the United States, but as geographically secluded in Muslim majority countries.

The effort backfired among not only satellite TV-saturated cosmopolitans in Arab and Western capitals, but also provincial Afghans who in some areas had not heard of the 9/11 attacks. In both cases, the mistake was the same: the United States failed to note that people everywhere already have their own narratives, their own histories, and their own ways of articulating even the values we universally share.

In Cold War fashion, the United States cast armed activities in Afghanistan, North Africa, and elsewhere as an ideological duel between two opposing poles: militant Islam and liberal democracy. This black-and-white staging set up the United States for later failures to understand reality's complex grays: figures such as Algerian Mokhtar bel Mokhtar, whose violent attacks represented a complicated tangle of national, regional, criminal and ideological designs. When the United States went looking for the binary model in Syria, it found a thorny mix of diversely motivated militants in ever-changing formations rather than a neat division of good, secular rebels, and bad, violent Islamists.

### **Achieving Information Power**

It should be clear: lobbing American values at the people of other lands, hoping they will recognize the superiority of our ideological preferences, is a pretty lousy route to power in today's environment.

We need a new conceptual framework that outlines informational power, and a new set of activities to mobilize that power.

### **First, we must retire the Cold War/Industrial Age information power model.**

It is typical in national security circles to talk about the informational “instrument” of power. The metaphor

of “instrument” is problematic, as it suggests a tool or implement within our control to manipulate. This is simply not an accurate description of reality. Information, once released into the environment, disperses, recombines, and shifts shapes in ways that no issuer can control. For the same reason, we must retire the premise that informational power can be had by sending “messages” to “target audiences.” This model too implies an unachievable level of control over information and its reception by others.

Yet, mainstream policy discourse reflects a widespread conviction that the United States has a singular level of control over the global information environment. Consider the commentary of a former US official in *The New York Times* this spring, in the wake of Russian President Putin’s Crimea annexation. The official writes:

Recent Kremlin moves to cut off citizens from independent information are disturbing, but the communications revolution ensures that Russians today will not be as isolated as their grandparents. Greater exposure to the world gives Russians a comparative analysis to judge their situation at home. This is a powerful tool, which needs to be nurtured through educational exchanges, peer-to-peer dialogues and increased connectivity between the real Russian private sector and its international partners.<sup>6</sup>

As the author points out, Russians are not isolated from the global flow of information. But this fact is emphatically *not* a tool in the hands of the United States. It is a description of the global information environment and the reality that Russians have access to different sources of information from different places. Yet, in blatantly Cold War/Industrial Age terms, the author insinuates that the United States is in a unique position to “nurture” Russians’ worldview in a way that will best serve the United States.

Moreover, although the author uses the language of “exchanges” and “dialogues” between Russians and Americans, mutual influence is not what he is proposing. In the proposed scenario, American ideas will influence Russians, but not the other way around. Yes, many Russians appear clearly to want a more transparent, permissive, democratic government. No, this

doesn’t mean they want the model the United States offers.

## **Second, we must instill a new framework of information power.**

To be powerful in the Information Age takes different skills than in the Cold War. Using information powerfully today requires the ability to:

- Act in accordance with the fact that actions, as well as intended communications, relay meaning to others.
- Use different kinds of communicative media to distribute and collect information.
- Develop and sustain networks required to tackle multi-disciplinary issues.
- Engage other stakeholders by aligning goals and interests on an issue-by-issue basis.
- Navigate the symbolic territory of adversaries, friends, and key stakeholders. By ‘symbolic territory,’ I mean that landscape of historical memory, stories, images, figures of speech, and metaphors through which people understand and relate their experiences.

The recently established J. Christopher Stevens Virtual Exchange Initiative, named for the American ambassador to Libya who was killed in September 2012, offers a positive example of this new way of approaching informational power. The initiative, which is funded by multiple government and private donors, is grounded in evidence that sustained, virtual educational exchanges have statistically significant positive effects on participants’ attitudes toward each other. The program will guide students in different countries through joint long-term projects; students will meet virtually, using new communications technologies. Los Angeles high school students might, for example, work with students in a Cairo classroom to study how to reduce urban traffic congestion. Each group would gather evidence in their own city, then work together to generate the best possible solutions.

This concept takes advantage of the opportunities afforded by new communications technologies. The exchanges are truly two-way: all participants’ input is valuable, and through their interactions, participants will gain insight into their counterparts’ worldviews; the programs do not model an America seeking an implausible ideological conversion, but rather align goals

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<sup>6</sup> Michael McFaul, “Confronting Putin’s Russia,” *The New York Times*, March 24, 2014, p A21. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/24/opinion/confronting-putins-russia.html>.

and interests to solve real problems.<sup>7</sup>

**Third, the education of professional senior leaders should reflect and promote a new framework of thinking.**

Influential educational institutions such as the National Defense University and the various service schools recognize the power of information. The Defense Analysis Department at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, for example, offers a sophisticated curriculum on how social networks—governments, communities, bad actors, and other—use information as a form of power. The National Defense University's iCollege (previously known as the Information Resources Management College) provides robust instruction in cybpower.

Yet, in a world in which roaming content can trigger riots, senior leaders need to understand the mechanics of influence: how does information impact people and institutions in powerful ways, if not through sending “messages”?

At the National War College, where I teach, the introduction of cognitive psychology (via behavioral economist Daniel Kahneman) is a good start. Kahneman and other psychologists have developed strong models to explain how humans make information meaningful to themselves.

There are other fields from which future leaders could gain further insight. They include cultural studies, theories about artistic reception, semiotics, communica-

tion and media studies, public relations and marketing, complexity science, and network theory. Used in an applied context, these disciplines could help strategic leaders understand how technologies, institutions (such as the professional media), and individuals generate and consume meaning.

Policy think tanks and civilian universities can join in taking a proactive educational role, especially if the government extends a helping hand, to develop the study of these fields as they apply to national security and foreign policy.

**Fourth, the US Government should organize informational activities to generate informational power.**

During the Cold War/Industrial Age, it served the United States to have a government agency (the United States Information Agency) dedicated to projecting the American story into isolated areas. Today, we need a new model that reflects the fact that all government actions and activities are potentially communicative, and that this situation poses both risks and opportunities. Every agency should house an office of informational power to develop proactive communications risk strategies, to exploit opportunities for mutual engagement—whether military exercises or agricultural exchanges—and to coordinate with other USG agencies.<sup>8</sup>

Let's not be the Ancient Mariner of the Information Age, forced to recirculate our sad story perpetually. Let's start over and start right to cultivate the next generation of the world's most info-savvy strategists.

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7 See Ahmed Charai, “The Right Way to Remember Chris Stevens,” *The National Interest*, January 24, 2014. <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-right-way-remember-chris-stevens-9763>, and Sheldon Himmelfarb, “The Real eHarmony: How Young People Meeting on the Internet might Help Build Peace in Some of the World's Most Volatile Regions,” *Foreign Policy.com*, February 1, 2014. Many thanks to Jennifer Butte-Dahl for bringing the program and these articles to my attention.

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8 “It is critical to realize, as several studies have pointed out in recent years, that the Department of State is not the only important actor in public diplomacy or strategic information in the U.S. Government...” William Kiehl, “Seduced and Abandoned: Strategic Information and the National Security Council Process,” *Affairs of State* December (2008): 364.



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