

THE ART OF CONVERSATION

REVISING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

GORDON ADAM AND EMRYS SCHOEMAKER

Strategic communications remains in vogue in the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan. But this is actually a misplaced focus. Crafted messages and one-way communication will likely fall on deaf, cynical ears. More useful is emphasising the creation of a free, open media sector that embraces moderation and dialogue. This model of crisis state communication could more effectively combat the extremist propaganda of the Taliban and Al-Qa'ida.



A resident of Gureshk district in Helmand receives an ISAF transmitter radio from an Afghan National Police officer. Photo courtesy of IASF/US Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Aramis X Ramirez.

General David Petraeus faces a daunting task in Afghanistan. His predecessor, General Stanley McChrystal, was widely praised for pulling together NATO's first coherent counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy and implementing it, despite the doubts of many of his own forces. He won their trust, as he won that of President Hamid Karzai in the face of increasingly frosty relations between the Afghan and American governments. Yet despite McChrystal's determination, the 'surge' of additional US forces and hints of progress, the signs are that the broader military strategy is in trouble. The former ISAF commander described the Marjah operation in Helmand as a 'bleeding ulcer', and the promised Kandahar offensive is being quietly postponed following a series of assassinations of pro-government Afghans in the city. The recent attack against an American aid organisation in Kunduz shows how the insurgency has spread to the north of the country. Casualties are mounting (over 300 British and 1,000 American dead), opposition to the war is rising at home, and 4,500 Dutch and Canadian forces are leaving within a year.

So General Petraeus's strategic options are narrowing fast. But the Afghan media represents one opportunity which could provide important support for a revitalised military and political strategy, and it is very much in tune with the counter-insurgency strategy that Petraeus rewrote for the US armed forces. David Kilcullen, the noted counter-insurgency scholar who helped draft the new COIN strategy, has written that insurgencies in places like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia will be won through 'the decisive battle ... for people's minds',¹ rather than by combat alone.

Up to a point, NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has recognised the need to adapt what is commonly referred to as 'strategic communications' or 'StratComs'. The American and British militaries have embraced greater media transparency, and recognise that access to information is a vital building block for lasting peace. There has also been increasing interest in the impact of independent journalism in reporting insurgencies to counter

influential militant propaganda. Recent contributions to the *RUSI Journal* have focused on the implications for the safety of journalists,² and on the importance of involving local as well as international reporters in efforts to provide more balanced information to the Afghan population.³

But will this be sufficient to convince an increasingly sceptical population to support an unpopular Afghan government and its foreign backers against a formidable Taliban propaganda machine? We argue below for a new approach to strategic communications that builds on existing media deregulation and the remarkable recent expansion in mobile phone ownership in crisis states such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia. In other words, moving from the current practice of strategic *messaging* to genuine strategic *communication*, allowing citizens to broaden their horizons, question those in power and re-evaluate their loyalties. We call it crisis state communication.

The Communications Challenge in Afghanistan

Strategic communications is a phrase that means different things to different people, but in military circles it usually means managing the message to persuade populations of the disseminator's point of view. It is not usually seen as a participatory process of facilitating information flows – promoting engagement between citizens, widening discourses and thereby undermining attempts by insurgent groups to gain social control over vulnerable populations. In Afghanistan, 12 million new mobile phone users complement a strong tradition of radio listening and an equally strong tradition of debate in the *jirga* council system. The potential exists to link up these technologies through phone-ins and other programmes, allowing the wider population to both be informed and contribute to the debate for the first time.

It has long been recognised that a healthy public sphere – the ancient Greek *agora* or marketplace for ideas – is a driver of participative (or democratic) change. Pippa Norris and Sina Odugbemi of the World Bank suggest that a

minimum requirement for strengthened governance is 'a constitutional and legal framework protecting civil liberties, widespread access to multiple pluralistic sources of information and communication, and equal opportunities for inclusive participation and voice within civil society'. On the other hand, 'lack of information and awareness about other communities, cultures and viewpoints can fuel social intolerance, erode trust and lead towards conflict'.⁴

The media has a critical role as government watchdog

This is the situation in many states whose governments have to a lesser or greater extent lost control.⁵ As Paul Collier points out, it is precisely in those states with no effective parliamentary opposition that there is an urgent need for the media to provide some semblance of a public sphere. Collier argues in his book, *The Bottom Billion*, that many governments take donor funds for granted, and accountability to their own citizens is not high on their agendas.⁶ He maintains that the media has a critical role as government watchdog, monitoring corruption and government services. In *Fixing Failed States*, Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart have cited Afghanistan in advocating that governments should enter into 'a double compact' with the donors who bankroll them and their citizens for providing services (common goods) including security.⁷ An independent media can play a key role in developing this agenda and holding different sides to account.

Here it is important to draw a distinction between the 'news media' which reacts to events, and pro-active media interventions which are tailored for specific conflict situations. A crisis state communications approach consists of two phases. It recognises the importance of a free and independent media as a long-term goal, but outlines an interim, stabilisation role for strategic communication to achieve specific short-term outcomes. This article is principally concerned with the latter. If the news media contributes to conflict through

perceptions of being partial to one side or the other, through basic inaccurate reporting or incitement to hatred, this risks undermining the credibility of the media channels and thus the impact of peace-building media interventions.

On the other hand, the BBC World Service's reputation for accuracy and impartiality has resulted in considerable trust amongst audiences, and BBC audience research shows regular peaks in listening when crises occur. It was BBC News's reputation that gave the BBC Afghan radio soap *New Home New Life* credibility and impact when it was first aired in 1994. The soap opera format allows educational themes to be returned to time and again, woven into new storylines in a way that is entertaining and not didactic. The impact of *New Home New Life* has been extensive. A United Nations report in 1999 showed an association between listenership and lower casualties from landmines, suggesting that regular listeners were only half as likely to be involved in a mine incident as non-listeners, because they acted on well-researched advice embedded in a number of long-running storylines.

Afghans are canny media consumers

Afghans are canny media consumers, and after thirty years of propaganda from authoritarian governments of various shades, they are quick to spot efforts to influence them in overt media campaigns. Research in 2008 in southern Afghanistan confirmed that people's trust in radio stations can be compromised by the intensive messaging from sources such as ISAF and the Afghan Ministries of Defence and Counter Narcotics.⁸

There will always be a place for military information operations – simple practical messages for civilians saves lives in war zones. But there are dangers. One example is the current practice of foreign donors and ISAF buying vast amounts of airtime for messaging: it hugely inflates television and radio airtime costs, provides no incentive for Afghan broadcasters to improve their own programmes, and can undermine

the credibility of the local media. What is needed instead is agreement on a strategy for developing the Afghan media so that it becomes a channel for informed debate between citizens on the future of the country, alongside a 'watchdog' role on government and ISAF accountability.

Counter-Insurgency Doctrine and the Media

In *The Accidental Guerrilla*, Kilcullen comes up with a seven-point strategy to combat the insurgency in Afghanistan, which he sees as an essentially political rather than military process. What is striking is the importance he gives to developing Afghan institutions – of central and local government, and the security forces – to enhance their legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people as much as their effectiveness in countering the Taliban. All of this is intended to draw local people away from the insurgents onto the side of the Afghan government, yet he largely overlooks the importance of developing the Afghan media as part of this process.

Publications such as the US Army's *Field Manual 3-07: Counterinsurgency* recognise that access to information is a vital building block for lasting peace.⁹ But they do not see the development of local media as an integral part of stability operations. The United States Institute for Peace commented on the Field Manual: 'There is a hole in the lack of discussion of the treatment of media as an instrument to provide an outlet for peaceful debate, inform the public, dispel rumours, condemn hate activities etc'.¹⁰

A similar problem exists with the most authoritative recent British publication on counter-insurgency, the Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40 *Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution*. The manual is in no doubt about strategic communications' importance in crisis states, quoting General McChrystal's exhortation: 'Think of [stabilisation] as an argument to earn the support of the people. It is a contest to influence the real and very practical calculations on the part of the people about which side to support'. This appears alongside Al-Zahawiri's guidance to the Al-Qa'ida faithful: 'I say to you: that we are in a battle, and that more

than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. And that we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma [Muslim community]'. There is comprehensive guidance on how to handle the public relations side of the campaign, as well as acknowledging the limitations of foreigners as 'influencers'. But the manual believes that a combination of greater transparency with the media – combined with more messaging – is the answer.

The effective deployment of 'influence' would cost fewer lives and less money

A recent paper by two senior British military officers takes up the discussion. Major General Andrew Mackay, a former British brigade commander in Helmand, and Commander Steve Tatham, an information specialist with the Royal Navy, state bluntly that 'the UK armed forces have no professional information operations practitioners, no media operators or professional psychological specialists'.¹¹

They are particularly critical of the top-down messaging approach favoured by the Whitehall-based Directorate of Targeting and Information Operations, which takes little account of local grievances or conditions on the ground. Mackay and Tatham, echoing Kilcullen, recognise the importance of local populations, who they say 'are the ultimate determinants of who wins or who loses in a counterinsurgency campaign'. They conclude that the effective deployment of 'influence' would cost fewer lives and less money.

The Kilcullen thesis is that local people should be seen to lead all counter-insurgency activities. The British government's Stabilisation Unit – set up by DFID, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence – agrees that this principle should apply to its version of strategic communications: 'Local voices will almost always have more impact than foreign ones'.¹²

What is striking is that despite much of the COIN analysis pointing in the right direction, ISAF does not appear to have grasped the nettle of a participatory approach – opening the airwaves and new media to discussion and debate – as a means of countering the violent extremists’ destabilising efforts at social control. Yet there is evidence from the media’s role in development that this approach is the one most likely to lead to sustained social change.

The Lessons from Development

In crisis states, populations contemplating changing behaviour or allegiance need to have the appropriate means to discuss and consider alternatives before deciding what to do. Media projects tackling the spread of HIV/AIDS face a similar challenge in terms of tackling deep-rooted social norms and attitudes (in this case towards sexual behaviours), finding the right incentives to influence people to change their sexual practices, and generating wider support for these changes.

A participatory communications approach works best

At the centre of the behaviour-change debate is the question of whether an approach that puts people as targets of change (strategic messaging) is more or less likely to succeed than one in which the media assists people to make their own choices, to be agents of their own change. The results from the HIV/AIDS communication experience are unequivocal: a participatory communications approach works best.

For instance, research in Uganda found that media debate and coverage can promote dialogue and interpersonal discussion better than messages.¹³ They found that the media may not be effective at influencing *what* people think, but is good at influencing *what they talk about*. The research found that Ugandans are hungry for news, and want more medical and scientific stories in particular – they want ‘facts, debates and news’. By comparison, the

research found that the kind of public service announcements and messages (strategic messaging) often put out by health ministries and non-governmental organisations may lead people to switch off, since ‘people are instinctively distrustful of any message purveyed with earnest consensus’. A review by UNAIDS supports this thesis.

The lesson for crisis states is that the approach to communication should be to develop a dialogue with the local population and provide a range of information to help people make free choices, rather than telling them what to do in a strategic messaging approach. As Thomas Tufte, an authority on development communication, puts it, ‘Successful communication articulates trust, promotes feelings of security and belonging, and leads to reflection and action.’¹⁴ In other words, communication for sustained change is about much more than messaging. It invests as much effort in ensuring the ‘audience’ is capable of engaging with the messenger and is strong and resilient enough to enact change, as it does in making sure that the messages and channels for communications are clear. This is the most likely way in which target populations will re-evaluate loyalties and behaviour. And now there are more communication tools available to tackle this challenge.

Crisis States and the ‘New Media’ Revolution

Global media is changing rapidly, and this presents both threats and opportunities in stabilising crisis states. In the last decade, the mobile phone and the Internet have prompted a revolution in how people interact. Studies show that in many crisis states such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia, there is mass ownership of mobile phones and use of texting, even if they have little formal education. In Pakistan, an estimated five to six million people are connected to the Internet, and the number is expanding quickly.¹⁵ The media and telecommunications industries are booming in the country despite the serious insurrection that is taking place along the border.¹⁶ And in most crisis states, the airwaves have

been deregulated allowing people access to diverse views, and ensuring that the government is not in sole control of broadcasting.

It is the violent extremists who have seized the initiative

The implication of these trends is that control of the media has passed from the hands of a select few to the masses. But in Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is the violent extremists who have seized the initiative in making effective use of new media. Muslim extremist literature is well established in Pakistan: even twenty years ago, there were 150 extremist publications. One pro-Taliban madrassa offers a Master’s degree in Islamic Journalism. Six extremist Muslim organisations currently publish periodicals aimed at children, which are cheap and colourfully produced. Researchers believe that extremists have infiltrated television stations and national newspapers, in order that stories reflecting their views are regularly carried. Dissenting journalists are targeted – twenty-eight were killed between 2004 and 2009. Insurgent organisations in Pakistan now have regularly updated websites, illegal radio stations, DVD production houses, and well-trained journalists who can easily be reached at any time. These militant groups are also very adept at circulating videos via mobile phones. They show Taliban forces attacking ISAF soldiers in Afghanistan, suicide missions, punishment killings or contain Muslim extremist songs and poetry. It is also believed that around 160 illegal FM radio stations have operated in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and North West Frontier Province. They propagate extreme, violent and sectarian opinions.¹⁷

As has been widely acknowledged, the suicide attacks of Muslim militants are staged primarily for public relations purposes: to embarrass the authorities and demonstrate to public opinion in the West that they are still a force to be reckoned with. In Kilcullen’s words, ‘the information side of

[Al-Qa'ida's] operation is primary; the physical is merely the tool to achieve a propaganda result'.¹⁸ In the face of this formidable threat, a comprehensive crisis state communication response is required.

A New Approach

There is no template for media and communications responses to all insurgencies, or indeed all crisis states. A key lesson from the development experience is that communications responses have to be tailored to specific situations. But there are often some common challenges which hinder communication such as: weak government that is unable to exert control over people or protect them; the inability of government to deliver services, including security, in conflict areas; and the lack of public legitimacy of governmental and/or military institutions. Other challenges include a small or absent public sphere, which impedes the formation of a consensual approach to tackling problems, including governance and peace-building; and a lack of public information that is accurate or impartial. Finally, governments and militaries are often nervous of opening up spaces for dialogue and debate for fear of providing an alternative platform for criticism or organised opposition.

Strengthen viable communication ideas that have been developed locally

A crisis state communication response would aim to help build 'popular consent' for accountable governance and/or peace processes. In addition to steps already being taken by ISAF as part of new COIN doctrine, several other initiatives are needed.

First: strengthen viable communication ideas that have been developed locally rather than introduce new and possibly alien concepts, unless rigorous initial research has been conducted.

Second: ensure projects are locally run and fronted, keeping international

capacity-building efforts in the background.

Third: identify ways of engaging audiences through opportunities for interaction: one practical solution is inviting listeners to use mobile phone calls or text messages to take part in discussions hosted by local radio stations. This is widely used in other situations, and where it has been tried in crisis states it has almost always been popular.

Fourth: involve the authorities, central and local government, military, and civil society organisations on a regular basis, providing them with a platform for explaining policy and answering criticism. Maintain strict impartiality of the radio/television station between the audience and the authorities. The broadcasting organisation needs to be perceived as independent of protagonists such as the government, insurgents or other vested interests.

Fifth: introduce the concept of local media reporting news in a 'conflict sensitive' manner. Prior to the Ethiopian armed intervention in 2007, a good example of this approach in Somalia was HornAfrik Media, a Mogadishu-based independent media group consisting of two radio stations and a television station. The media group had very specific, peace-orientated policies. Employees were from different clans and included women; and at that time the group sent reporters to places where even aid workers no longer ventured. They countered unfounded rumour by reporting all sides of an issue, promoted dialogue in the coverage and avoided de-humanising 'the enemy'. They also made efforts to cover the success stories that existed, highlighting small peace-building efforts. When warlords turned in their weapons, they consciously avoided a triumphalist approach, and the tone of their interviews encouraged other warlords to follow suit.

Will it Work?

So will this crisis state communication approach work in Afghanistan? The Voice of America's Radio Deewa, broadcasting since 2008 to the Afghan-Pakistan frontier, mounts a daily phone-in programme and notes that the number of pro-Taliban calls has tailed off perceptibly as their views have been frequently

challenged successfully on air. Research has shown that many Islamic militants have a sketchy knowledge of their religion and their views often do not stand up to serious scrutiny.

Radio is reassuringly anonymous and opens the way to frank debate that is often not possible face to face. Moreover, using the Internet, Twitter, and simple new software such as Frontline SMS, it is possible to track the continuing conversation over weeks virtually and safely.

In Afghanistan, radio phone-in shows are popular, and 300,000 people voted in the 2008 reality TV show *Afghan Star* using text messaging. But the media rarely tackles contentious issues for fear of the consequences. Intimidation – by both violent extremists and the Afghan government – is a genuine deterrent to the crisis state communication approach. Mobile phone companies say the number of transmitter towers being destroyed by insurgents has risen sharply this year, and radio stations perceived as hostile could be targeted just as easily. These risks can be mitigated by scrupulously fair reporting (inherent in the 'conflict-sensitive journalism' approach), and by convincing the Afghan government that it stands to gain legitimacy from being seen and heard to regularly respond to citizens' concerns.

A further consideration is that this is not a quick fix. It takes time and money to change media culture, although the Afghan government information service has become increasingly media friendly with some eighty ministerial press conferences held in the last year. Communication cannot bring security or win wars, but it can strengthen the environment in which people make choices. The American Embassy recently took a significant step forward by inviting Afghan-based organisations to bid for projects to 'expand media engagement' with Afghans, build ties between people (and with the US), and to counter extremist voices, under its well-funded Public Diplomacy Program. Close editorial supervision of these programmes will be needed to ensure they do not lapse into the strategic messaging paradigm. And in a donor culture of quick wins, it is important to stress that communication

initiatives take time – years rather than months – to make an impact.

Evidence from development interventions suggest the media can assist in creating broader identities amongst populations in crisis states and reinforce community resilience in these areas. The risks of trying are manageable, the costs affordable and the potential benefits could shorten wars and help

create better government. The media and telecommunications sector is one of Afghanistan's few recent success stories. With thoughtful support, it could now play a key role in building peace in the country. ■

Gordon Adam is Managing Director of Media Support Solutions and a former head of the BBC Pashto Service.

Emrys Schoemaker is a founder of iMedia Associates and has worked on strategic communications for the UN, British and American governments and non-governmental organisations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Sudan.

Notes

- The authors acknowledge valued assistance from Nick Fielding of iMedia Associates in writing this article.
- 1 David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
 - 2 Kenneth Payne, 'The Media at War: Ideology, Insurgency and Journalists in the Firing Line', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 151, No. 1, February 2008).
 - 3 Dominic Medley, 'The Growing Media Landscape in Afghanistan', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 155, No. 1, February/March 2010).
 - 4 Pippa Norris (ed.), *Public Sentinel: News Media and Governance Reform* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2009), pp. 8–9.
 - 5 These categories follow the definitions of the Crisis States Research Centre of the London School of Economics, <<http://www.crisisstates.com/>>.
 - 6 Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
 - 7 Ashraf Ghani and Claire Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
 - 8 Department for International Development, 'Media Support Solutions: Communications for Stabilisation in Southern Afghanistan', 2008, annex 1. Available at <<http://www.mediasupport.org/papers,-reports-and-articles-g.asp>>.
 - 9 Sheldon Himelfarb, 'Media and Peacebuilding: The New Army Stability Doctrine and Media Development', United States Institute of Peace, 2009.
 - 10 *Ibid.*
 - 11 Andrew Mackay and Steve Tatham, 'Behavioural Conflict: From General to Strategic Corporal: Complexity, Adaptation and Influence', Shrivenham Paper No. 9, Shrivenham Defence Academy, 2009.
 - 12 Stabilisation Unit, 'The UK Approach to Stabilisation: Stabilisation Unit Guidance Notes', 2008.
 - 13 Taken from Dr Robin Vinvent, 'Health Journalists: Mistrusted and Sensationalist, or Important Allies for Researchers? Examining the Barriers to Effective Health Journalism', *Global Forum for Health Research* (No. 11, 2007).
 - 14 See <<http://www.comminit.com/>>.
 - 15 The International Communications Union estimates that 10 per cent of Pakistan's population has access to the Internet.
 - 16 Media Support Solutions, 'Building the evidence base for the role of strategic communications in addressing violent extremism in Pakistan', unpublished report for DfID, 2009.
 - 17 *Ibid.*
 - 18 Kilcullen, *op. cit.*

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Preparing for Peace: Britain's Contribution and Capabilities

By Richard Teuten and Daniel Korski

To mark the forthcoming publication of RUSI's latest *Whitehall Paper*, the authors will discuss the main findings and recommendations at a lunchtime seminar on **24 September 2010** at 13.00 at RUSI, Whitehall.

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