Terrorism, Diplomacy, and State Communications

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In countering the communications of terrorist organisations, states face a number of distinct challenges. Blatant lying can be at the expense of a state's authority, credibility, and instrumental effectiveness. Effective state communications need to be integrated, multidimensional and persuasive. Often they are anything but. Messages can be poorly formulated, and can be understood in unexpected ways, not least because there may be multiple audiences for a particular message. Nonetheless, effective messaging can be of great psychological value, helping to trigger 'cascades' that can undermine even ruthless enemies. Except perhaps in the direst of existential crises, effective messaging should avoid lies; but it can be of value not to fixate on telling the whole truth.

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Counter-Terrorism - The Hague

Introduction

In August 1940, the former Chief Executive of the London Passenger Transport Board, Frank Pick, was appointed Director-General of the British Ministry of Information. With the Battle of Britain approaching its height, Prime Minister Churchill invited Pick to lunch. During the lunch, Pick reportedly stated that 'he would never countenance any form of propaganda which was not in accordance with the strict truth and his own conscience'. Churchill's reply was a masterpiece of ambiguity: 'I am indeed flattered and proud to find myself at luncheon with so exceptional a man'.[1] By December of 1940, Pick was gone. Nonetheless, his brief encounter with the heights of power exposed one of the challenges for government that can arise in mounting an effective communications strategy against a determined enemy, namely how important fidelity to truth might or might not be when one's ultimate goal is to win a war. As this paper will show, this challenge is just one of many that states face, and not necessarily the most difficult.

Of course, there is a very long history of militaries becoming involved in deception operations at the tactical or strategic levels,[2] with 'Operation Mincemeat' during the Second World War being perhaps the most creative and famous example.[3] Nonetheless, ingenious though such deception exercises may be, they are essentially directed at optimising the achievement of specific military objectives at particular points in a campaign (in Mincemeat's case, minimising Allied casualties during landings in Sicily by inducing Germany to move forces to other potential targets such as Sardinia and Greece). The greater challenge that now arises is how to use communications techniques to deny radical groups the support of populations to which they might be pitching their appeal. This, too, is not a novel idea, and was captured during the Malayan emergency in General Sir Gerald Templer's famous notion of 'winning hearts and minds'.[4] But that said, modern militaries and alliances now operate in a very different world from that which Templer contemplated – a world in which social media offer entirely new channels of communication, in which the sheer speed of communications dwarfs anything known historically,[5] and in which issues of communication across cultural lines figure prominently in the challenges that governments confront. States face real challenges in coming to terms with this kind of world, and some have struggled very palpably in the face of these challenges.

The paper is divided into six sections. The first section explores several key challenges associated with state communications. The second section examines various examples of state communication. The third section discusses problems of message formulation, and the fourth section addresses parallel and intersecting problems of message reception. The fifth section addresses the very specific difficulty of multiple audiences, which can compound problems of both message formulation and message reception, and the final section sets out some implications of the study.

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[1] Nigel Nicolson (ed.), *Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters 1939-45* (London: Collins, 1970) p.114.

[2] See Nicholas Rankin, *Churchill's Wizards: The British Genius for Deception 1914-1945* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008).

[3] See Ewen Montagu, *The Man Who Never Was* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953); Ben Macintyre, *Operation Mincemeat: How a Dead Man and a Bizarre Plan Fooled the Nazis and Assured an Allied Victory* (London: Crown, 2010); Denis Smyth, *Deathly Deception: The Real Story of Operation Mincemeat* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Ian Colvin, *The Unknown Courier: The True Story of Operation Mincemeat* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2016). A fictionalised account of the operation first appeared in Duff Cooper, *Operation Heartbreak* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1950).

[4] For an overview of Templer's approach, see Noel Barber, *The War of the Running Dogs: How Malaya Defeated the Communist Guerrillas 1948-1960* (London: Cassell, 2004). This approach in turn had antecedents in the 19th century, notably in that of the colonial administrator Sir Robert Groves Sandeman to the Afghan frontier: see Benjamin D. Hopkins and Magnus Marsden, 'Ten Years In, Afghan Myths Live On', *The New York Times*, 7 October 2011.

[5] See Nik Gowing, *'Skyful of Lies' and Black Swans: The new tyranny of shifting information power in crises* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford, 2009).

Problems of state communication

One of the reasons why Mr Pick's words, quoted earlier, rang jarringly in Britain in 1940 was that the country at that very moment was enmeshed in a declared war against an enemy of unprecedented ruthlessness. It faced an existential threat on an unparalleled scale. 1940 was not the moment for excessive purity in crafting information strategies. And telling a few lies, as a moral issue, paled into insignificance when compared to other possible war measures, such as the carpet-bombing of German cities.[6] Threats to their very existence, however, are not the challenges that most governments confront in the 21st century when thinking about terrorism, and as a result, a stronger case may need to be made before state communications depart from 'strict truth'. On occasion, terrorism can lead to very large casualties, as the September 2001 attacks in the United States showed. But that said, it is not an existential threat to western democracies of the kind that Nazism posed in 1940,[7] when France had already fallen and Britain and its empire were standing alone. For this reason, despite talk of a 'war on terror', it is hardly appropriate in the context of counterterrorism to resort to strategies of state communication that are premised on the view that we are living through another 1940. As a consequence, whether engaging with foreign governments, addressing mass publics, or seeking to counter the propaganda of terrorist groups, state actors face a number of specific limitations or constraints in communicating their messages.

One is that states are distinctive for being sites of *authority*, and authority is not an asset to be squandered. This is hardly a novel observation: the erosion of authority has for decades concerned scholars on both the Left and Right of the political spectrum in western democracies,[8] and may help to explain why dubious claims made through social media can succeed in gaining traction; authoritative voices to counter them are weaker than once was the case. One way of dissipating authority is to act in such a way as to suggest that one is no better than those to whom one is opposed. This is one reason why it is in the interests of states to adhere strictly to the requirements of international humanitarian law even if one is dealing with enemies who routinely commit war crimes against civilians, mistreat prisoners of war, and otherwise act with indifference to the norms that have emerged in relations between states. In the course of an existential struggle, it is no war crime to trick or mislead the enemy. The following story which appeared in a 1990 study of rescuers of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe makes this clear: 'We also noted that during the war our rescuers deviated wildly from the standards they claimed to have been given by their role models. "Always tell the truth, that's my motto!" Peter told us. "But, Peter," we protested, "you just told us you lied like crazy during the war." Peter laughed. "Oh, well, that was different"'.[9] 'Peter' appreciated that in certain circumstances, lying is not necessarily dishonourable or even dishonest. But democratic states that lie – that is, make intentionally false statements[10] – when they do not face

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[6] See Keith Lowe, *Inferno: The Fiery Destruction of Hamburg 1943* (New York: Scribner, 2007) pp.303-320.

[7] See Daniel Byman, 'Trump and Counterterrorism', *The National Interest*, no.147, January-February 2017, pp.66-73 at p.67; also Robin Prior, *When Britain Saved the West: The Story of 1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

[8] See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975); Robert Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority* (London: Heinemann, 1976).

[9] Kristen R. Monroe, Michael C. Barton and Ute Klingemann (1990) 'Altruism and the Theory of Rational Action: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe', *Ethics*, vol.101, no.1, October 1990, 103-122 at p.111.

[10] For a detailed discussion of definitions of lying, see J.A. Barnes, *A Pack of Lies: Towards a Sociology of Lying* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) pp.10-19; for a semantic analysis, see Anna Wierzbicka, *Semantics: Primes and Universals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) pp.152-153. Lying is distinct from 'not telling the whole truth'. What 'the whole truth' comprises can be highly contestable, and to extend the concept of lying to embrace 'not telling the whole truth' runs the risk of conceptual stretching where 'gains in extensional coverage tend to be matched by losses in connotative precision': Giovanni Sartori, 'Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics', *American Political Science Review*, vol.64, no.4, December 1970, pp.1033-1053 at p.1035.

any existential crisis risk finding that they suffer in terms of both reputation and authority. This becomes significant into two other respects. The first relates to *credibility*. A democratic state that loses its reputation for honesty will most likely find it difficult to recover it. Rather like a clock that chimes thirteen times at midnight, a state that is caught out in an attempt to lie when the threat does not justify it is unlikely to be believed when it speaks thereafter. This in turn leads to the issue of *instrumental effectiveness*. If words are to function as effective tools in countering the messaging of terrorists, they must ultimately be believable; and a democratic state that has blown its credibility to pieces by being caught out in silly lies is unlikely to have the reservoir of credibility from which instrumental effectiveness then flows. This helps explain why lying in interstate relations is far rarer than is often thought.[11] Even autocracies, where lying can be the order of the day, may find it costly to lie too blatantly in the international arena.

Examples of state communications

State communications come in a number of different forms, and the following listing is not exhaustive. It does, however, capture some of the principal forms of state communication that might be used in confronting the challenge of terrorism. One of the most basic forms of communication is *diplomatic messaging and interstate negotiation.* A central element of diplomacy for centuries, it underpins a great deal of the interstate cooperation directed at thwarting terrorist attacks and undermining terrorist agendas. The classic tool of diplomatic communication was the written text known as the *note verbale,* but in an era of modern technologies, a range of other forms of communication can be found, enhancing the degree to which officials can cooperate in something close to real-time. Effective networking of officials across national boundaries has sometimes been labeled 'global governance', or even the precursor of a 'new world order'.[12]

Diplomatic messaging can be seen as a subset of signaling. A distinctive feature of signaling is that it can come in the form of deeds as well as words. One of the most eminent students of signaling, the late Coral Bell, defined a signal as a 'threat or offer communicated to the other party or parties', and added that 'Such signals are not necessarily verbal messages. Some of the sharpest and most effective of them are movements of military resources of various kinds'.[13] Thus, during the crisis over the secession of East Pakistan at the end of 1971, the United States sent a clear signal by deploying the USS Enterprise, one of the largest US aircraft carriers of its time, into the Bay of Bengal. By doing so, it conveyed to the parties that the United States had interests at play in the evolving crisis, and naval and military assets which potentially could be used to defend those interests. Signaling may be particularly important in the context of diplomatic crises. Crises can be defined in various ways, but typically involve a high risk of serious conflict, military or political, as well as acute time pressure, and a rocketing of decision-making to the apex of the political system.[14] In a serious crisis, action may seem

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[11] See John J. Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth about Lying in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[12] See Christer Jönsson and Martin Hall, *Essence of Diplomacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Andrew F. Cooper, Brian Hocking and William Maley (eds), *Global Governance and Diplomacy: Worlds Apart?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in a Networked World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

[13] Coral Bell, *The Conventions of Crisis: A Study in Diplomatic Management* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971) p.73.

[14] For varying perspectives, see Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); James L. Richardson, *Crisis Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Michele Acuto, 'Diplomats in Crisis', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, vol.22, no.3, September 2011, pp.521-539.

likely to speak more loudly than mere words.

At a more abstract level, state communications may be directed at framing an issue in a particular way. 'Framing', Chong and Druckman argue, 'refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue'.[15] It can be matched by counterframing.[16] The crucial point to note is that states can play a role in promoting a particular conceptualisation of an issue, as can the opponents of states. The extent to which they succeed in doing so is likely to depend upon the wider context of their efforts. Thus, in the era of aircraft hijacking and attacks on *kibbutzim* by groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, it proved relatively easy for Israel and its supporters to frame the struggles of Palestinians as terrorist in character. This became more difficult, however, as memories faded of these kinds of activities, and as a counter-narrative emerged that framed the Palestinian struggle as one related to self-determination for the populations of occupied territories. Israel's post-1967 role as an occupier made such re-framing possible; as former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban put it, 'we have not won any degree of international legitimacy for the present territorial and administrative structure'.[17]

Framing can be one part of the wider swathe of activities now increasingly known as 'public diplomacy'. While states have long sought through agents such as press attachés to present their views to a wider audience than just policymakers, public diplomacy, a term coined in the mid-1960s by Edmund Gullion, captures the attempt to do so in a systematic way,[18] albeit without violating the prohibition in the 1961 *Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations* on interfering in the internal affairs of a host state.[19] To undertake public diplomacy in an effective way is no easy task, since it crucially depends on a high level of credibility on the part of the advocate.[20] During the Cold War, it most obviously took the form of shortwave radio broadcasts, with Radio Moscow battling over the airwaves with US-funded outlets such as the Munich-based Radio Free Europe.[21] Even transboundary television played a role.[22] In the 21st century, it is increasingly dominated by social media, and for effectiveness requires a high commitment to interactive engagement, which many states are not well positioned to make.

To many observers, the battles of the Cold War era were exercises in the competitive use of propaganda. Propaganda has a long history and has been understood in different ways,[23] but its core dimension is the intention to reshape people's thinking, very often by misleading them. Alongside lying, secrecy and overload, it is a form of manipulation.[24] That said, however, the insidious character of propaganda often flows from its containing some grain of truth, giving it at least a degree of plausibility that may be

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[15]Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, 'Framing Theory', *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol.10, 2007, pp.103-126 at p.107.

[16]See Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, 'Counterframing Effects', *The Journal of Politics*, vol.75, no.1, January 2013, pp.1-16.

[17]Abba Eban, *Personal Witness: Israel Through My Eyes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993) p.651.

[18]For further discussion, see Peter van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2010) pp.114-135; Craig Hayden, *The Rhetoric of Soft Power: Public Diplomacy in Global Contexts* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012) pp.9-11; Philip Seib, *The Future of Diplo*macy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016) pp.41-69.

[19]See Paul Behrens, *Diplomatic Interference and the Law* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2016) especially pp.171-191.

[20]For a detailed discussion, see Ben D. Mor, 'Credibility talk in public diplomacy', *Review of International Studies*, vol.38, no.2, April 2012, pp.393-422.

[21]For varying perspectives, see George R. Urban, *Radio Free Europe and the Pursuit of Democracy: My War Within the Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); J.F. Brown, *Radio Free Europe: An Insider's View* (Washington DC: New Academia Publishing, 2013).

[22]See George H. Quester, 'Transboundary Television', *Problems of Communism*, vol.33, no.5, September-October 1984, pp.76-87.

[23] See Haroro J. Ingram, *A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict: Lessons for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications* (The Hague: Research Paper, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, June 2016).

[24]See Robert E. Goodin, *Manipulatory Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) pp.37-64.

denied to patent and obvious lies. Propaganda tends to be marked by exaggeration, by selectivity of information supplied, or by interpretations designed to create impressions known to be false. In confronting an evil opponent, there may be a good case for resorting to some use of propaganda, although the risks in doing so need also to be recognised. Much riskier is the resort to *dezinformatsiia*, a Russian term most commonly translated as 'disinformation', and used during the Cold War to refer to the fabrication of 'news' stories by agencies in the Soviet bloc to discredit anti-Soviet forces.[25] Very little evidence surfaced to suggest that this kind of activity did much at all to advance Soviet interests, and the demolition of such stories opened the door to withering counterattacks on the Soviet system more broadly.[26]

States can also engage in the propagation of strategic narratives with respect to particular issues. Sir Lawrence Freedman has defined strategic narratives as 'compelling story lines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn'.[27] The importance of such narratives cannot be overestimated. One of the turning points of the Second World War was the replacement of Neville Chamberlain as British Prime Minister by Winston Churchill. Churchill was a rhetorician of the highest order,[28] and an almost immediate consequence of his accession was the emergence of a coherent and compelling strategic narrative, articulated by Churchill, which served to focus the efforts of the British public on firmly supporting the government's war aims. By contrast, Chamberlain's pedestrian narrative in the months before he lost the premiership entirely lacked the capacity either to inspire, or to instill a sense of purpose. This experience is as pertinent to contemporary action against terrorism as it was to the struggle against Nazism in 1940. But once a clear strategic narrative has been developed, it is necessary to disseminate it in a sophisticated fashion. Effective state communications need to be *integrated, multidimensional,* and *persuasive*. Often they are anything but. The following sections set out some reasons why this is the case, in the process shedding light on problems that need to be addressed in crafting effective communications to deal with the threat posed by organised terrorist groups. To simplify the discussion, the following sections examine in turn issues of message formulation, message receipt and multiple audiences; but in practice these issues often shade into each other, and calculating exactly which problem may have played the greatest role in thwarting an exercise in communication may be quite difficult.

Some problems of message formulation

A wide range of factors can contribute to poor formulation of communications, and the following paragraphs can only scratch the surface of what is a very complex problem. Nonetheless, they offer a starting point for a discussion which can be augmented with specific information about different countries and the challenges that they face.

Modern states are typically administered by a multiplicity of hierarchical bureaucratic agencies, the activities of which may need to be coordinated.[29] In interstate wars in the

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[25] See Richard H. Shultz and Roy Godson, *Dezinformatsiia: Active Measures in Soviet Strategy* (Washington DC: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1984).

[26] See, for example, Leszek Kolakowski, 'Totalitarianism and the Virtue of the Lie', in Irving Howe (ed.), *1984 Revisited: Totalitarianism in Our Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) pp.122-136.

[27] Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs* (London: Adelphi Paper no.379, Routledge, 2006) p.22.

[28] For examples of the diverse rhetorical devices Churchill was capable of deploying, see Ben Schott, *Schott's Original Miscellany* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002) pp.98-99.

[29] On the evolution of the modern state, see Gianfranco Poggi, *The Development of the Modern State: A Sociological Introduction* (London: Hutchinson, 1978); Martin van Creveld, *The Rise and Decline of the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Graeme Gill, *The Nature and Development of the Modern State* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

past, the challenges of coordination may have been less acute than in the 21st century: wartime censorship could be used to ensure coherent messaging, and defence ministries and military commands were likely to dominate the devising of messages. The story is rather different when the 'enemy' is a transnational terrorist group, when censorship is not available, and when responses to terrorism have a 'whole of government' character involving armies, police forces, security agencies, border control instrumentalities, and potentially other agencies of the state as well. Here, the benefits of having specialised agencies need to be balanced against the costs of the fragmentation of state functions. The simplistic solution to this problem is to fuse agencies in some kind of super ministry, but since the agencies to be fused may well have distinct priorities and organisational cultures, this may not prove an effective form of coordination. Furthermore, even within a single agency, it may be difficult to regulate and control the messages that emanate from within it. For example, at one point in the history of the US-funded Radio Liberty, it became clear that broadcasters with agendas of their own were disseminating messages in Russian that were 'antidemocratic, anti-Western, anti-Polish, anti-Catholic, and even anti-Semitic',[30] in a way that was emphatically not in keeping with the internal guidelines governing Radio Liberty broadcasts.

Coordination problems arise in part because of the obvious reality that different bureaucratic organisations can have different priorities, and even if they agree on broad objectives, they may differ as to the means by which those objectives should best be pursued.[31] This can fuel quite fierce interagency conflict and rivalry. It can also it can also lead to freelancing of a kind that can be ruinous for public diplomacy or an effective communication strategy. Two egregious Australian examples merit discussion. In January 2001, the Australian Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Philip Ruddock, embarked on a tour of the Middle East, focused on dissuading potential refugees from seeking to approach Australia by boat. One document issued in the Minister's name stated that 'your children will abandon your traditional way of life in favour of modern "western" ways. You will lose control of your children, who will rebel and question your authority and your religious beliefs'. The notion that this kind of argument would deter refugees fleeing regimes such as that of Saddam Hussein in Iraq or the Taliban in Afghanistan was risible. More seriously, a glossy brochure with a coloured photo on the cover was prepared for distribution in Arabic and Persian, but those who assembled it were apparently unaware that the scripts in these languages move in the opposite direction to English, as a result of which the entire booklet was printed backwards. This clumsy endeavour attracted very adverse press comment, and the minister was forced to withdraw the material.[32] It also caused outrage in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which had not been consulted about the proposed information campaign, and almost certainly would have identified the problems with the campaign had it been consulted More recently, the Immigration Department produced a cartoon booklet to try to dissuade Afghan Hazara refugees from approaching Australia.[33] It concluded with an image of an Hazara man distressed at missing a dance depicted in a 'thought bubble' above his head. Unfortunately, the dancers in the 'bubble' were, by costume and dance style, quite obviously ethnic *Pushtuns*, that is, members of an ethnic group whom a significant number of Hazaras are

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[30] James Critchlow, *Radio Hole-in-the-Head/Radio Liberty: An Insider's Story of Cold War Broadcasting* (Lanham: The American University Press, 1995) p.174,

[31] See William A. Niskanen, *Bureaucracy and Representative Government* (Chicago: Aldine Atherton, 1971) pp.36-42.

[32] See Benjamin Haslem, 'Outrage at Kit to Deter Illegal Immigrants', *The Australian*, 10 January 2001; Benjamin Haslem, 'Ruddock Withdraws Scare Sheet', *The Australian*, 11 January 2001.

[33] See http://www.news.com.au/national/the-federal-government-uses-a-comic-book-to-stop-the-boats/story-fncynjr2-1226824447746 (accessed 11 October 2017).

inclined to view as potential oppressors.[34] Again, input from other agencies might well have led to this being corrected before the booklet was disseminated. Cases such as these demonstrate the extreme importance of having the right agencies vet material from the perspective of the cultures into which they are to be injected.

A further complication that can arise is a product of the alliance entanglements which may limit how far a state can go in crafting messages of its own. A junior partner in an asymmetric alliance may find itself hostage to the dexterity (or lack of dexterity) in communications displayed by the senior partner. This might be tersely summarised as the 'Trump Twitter Problem'. Twitter, a tool that has been in use since 2006 with some 500 million 'tweets' of no more than 140 characters being written every day,[35] has proved extremely popular with the US President, but his ventures into Twitter have often proved extraordinarily maladroit, with the potential to embarrass alliance partners obliged to treat him as if he were no different from any other occupant of the Oval Office.[36] Yet this pales in comparison to the problems that can arise in the context of a multi-state alliance such as NATO. Here, all the member states have their own domestic politics, and leaders with incentives to craft messages of their own that serve their domestic political interests.[37] Under such circumstances, producing coherent communications on the part of such an alliance as a whole may seem an almost insuperable task. At the very least, it demands a high level of maturity and discipline on the part of *all* the participating actors, as well as institutional structures that facilitate efforts to coordinate messaging, and ultimately a recognition that effective communications are important. Not one of these is especially easy to procure.

One further point to note is so obvious that it is easy to overlook, namely that it is not possible to convey a coherent message unless one has a coherent message to convey. One of the greatest challenges that NATO faced in communications in Afghanistan was that at least until the NATO Summit in Bucharest in 2008, there was simply not a well-articulated mission objective that could underpin a coherent strategic narrative.[38] On the contrary, a range of member states had articulated a range of objectives with respect to the mission that suggested high-level confusion about what was to be achieved, and left both the Afghan government and the people of Afghanistan somewhat mystified. The contrast with Britain in 1940 could hardly have been greater. Within a month of assuming the prime ministership, Churchill had disposed of any disposition within his cabinet to negotiate some kind of 'peace' with Hitler,[39] and set the scene for an exceptionally clear strategic narrative that guided Britain's approach to Germany until the end of the Third Reich in 1945.

Problem of message receipt

Just as problems can arise in the formulation of messages, so too can problems arise in their receipt. Some problems in the receipt of messages flow directly from challenges of translation from one language to another. It is by now well-established that translations

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[34]For a discussion of the position of Hazaras in Afghanistan, see Niamatullah Ibrahimi, *The Hazaras and the Afghan State: Rebellion, Exclusion and the Struggle for Recognition* (London: Hurst & Co., 2017).

[35]See Seib, *The Future of Diplomacy*, p.16.

[36]That this is not the case emerges clearly from Michael Wolff, *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House* (New York: Henry Holt, 2018) pp.304-305.

[37]The Afghanistan case provides a powerful example of how domestic factors can shape individual states' approaches to a wider NATO mission: see David P. Auerswald and Stephen M. Saideman, *NATO in Afghanistan: Fighting Together, Fighting Alone* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[38]See William Maley, *Transitioning from Military Interventions to Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy: The Case of Afghanistan (2001-2016)* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism; Leiden: Universiteit Leiden, 2016) p.37.

[39]See John Lukacs, *Five Days in London: May 1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

are more complex exercises than one might think, not least because natural languages are not only constituted by rules of grammar and collections of vocabulary, but reflect 'cultural scripts' that may surface in metaphors that defy literal translation, or in patterns of expression that are idiosyncratic rather than universal. Indeed, some words simply defy efforts to translate them in any simple way into other natural languages, although there are tools available to linguists to try to overcome this problem.[40] A notorious example was an October 2005 speech delivered by the then president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Quoting the leader of the 1979 Iranian revolution, he remarked that 'our dear Imam proclaimed that the occupier-regime of Jerusalem should be effaced from the page of time' (*Imam-e aziz-e ma farmudand keh in rezhim-e ashghalgar-e Quds baid az safheh-i ruzgar mahv shavad*). This figurative formulation, most likely intended merely as a reiteration of Supreme Leader Ali Khamanei's argument for 'the defeat of Zionist ideology and dissolution of Israel through a "popular referendum"',[41] was translated as a direct threat to wipe Israel 'off the map', and led to a storm of international protest.[42]

Some communication problems flow from cultural insensitivity rather than difficulties of translation, illustrating the complex interplay, noted earlier, that can arise between message receipt and message formulation. A rather spectacular example occurred in September 2017 when US forces distributed in Parwan province in Afghanistan a cartoon which depicted NATO forces as a lion chasing a Taliban dog. The only problem was that the cartoonist chose to put on the side of the dog the Muslim profession of faith (*shahada*).[43] Since many in Afghanistan regard dogs as unclean, this was an astounding lapse, virtually guaranteeing that some who saw the cartoon would see it as attacking Islam rather than the Taliban. US military leaders rapidly issued a heartfelt apology, and to some degree the damage was contained, not least because the area of Afghanistan in which the image was distributed was one where quite a substantial component of the population is hostile to the Taliban and sympathetic to efforts directed against. Nonetheless, the question remains how such a mistake could have been made in the first place. Two obvious answers suggest themselves – poor training of staff as to how messages might be received, and poor mechanisms for vetting material before its dissemination – but others may surface as the episode is investigated in greater detail.

Mistakes of this kind are dangerous because they may be simply the trigger for the spread of damaging rumours about the objectives of forces engaged in efforts to counter terrorist groups. The extreme potency of rumours should never be underestimated,[44] especially in societies where oral communication has long been a preferred form of messaging. Rumours have historically been recognised as a danger even in entrenched democracies: the World War Two expression 'loose lips sink ships' comes to mind. In

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[40] See William Maley, 'Minimal English and Diplomacy', in Cliff Goddard (ed.), *Minimal English for a Global World: Improved Communication Using Fewer Words* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) pp.71-93. On complexities of cross-cultural communication from a linguistic perspective, see Wierzbicka, *Semantics: Primes and Universals*; Anna Wierzbicka, *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: The Semantics of Human Interaction* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2003); Cliff Goddard (ed.), *Ethnopragmatics: Understanding Discourse in Cultural Context* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2006); Cliff Goddard, *Semantic Analysis: A Practical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2011); Anna Wierzbicka, *Imprisoned in English: The Hazards of English as a Default Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka, *Words and Meanings: Lexical Semantics across Domains, Languages and Cultures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[41] Karim Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008) p.20.

[42] See Farzad Sharifian, 'Figurative language in international political discourse: The case of Iran', *Journal of Language and Politics*, vol.8, no.3, 2009, pp.416-432 at pp.420-421.

[43] See Shashank Bengali and Sultan Faizy, 'U.S. military apologizes for "highly offensive" leaflets it distributed in Afghanistan', *The Los Angeles Times*, 6 September 2017; Sune Engel Rasmussen, 'Taliban claim Afghan suicide attack as retaliation for US leaflet insult', *The Guardian*, 7 September 2017; Mujib Mashal, Fahim Abed and Fatima Faizi, 'Afghan Anger Simmers Over U.S. Leaflets Seen as Insulting Islam', *The New York Times*, 8 September 2017.

[44] Cass R. Sunstein, *On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, and What Can Be Done* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

countries where the tradition of oral communication is strong, rumours may end up underpinning elaborate conspiracy theories, of a kind that have proved ubiquitous in the Middle East. [45] Furthermore, the party game variously called 'Russian whispers' or 'Chinese whispers' serves as a reminder that the content of rumours may change either subtly or dramatically as they move from one messenger to the next, not necessarily as a result of malevolence, but simply because people's recollections of exactly what they have been told can be imperfect. There is no easy solution to this problem, other than avoiding the triggering of rumours in the first place.

There are also several sobering points to note relating to the broad receptiveness to messages of an audience. A target audience may be unreceptive to communications that seem to emanate from an official source. The fact that states do from time to time make use of propaganda gives rise to the risk that all or most of their efforts at communications in the realm of counterterrorism may be seen in a similar light. Outlets such as Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe during the Cold War were often described as propaganda sources by the USSR and its defenders,[46] but they benefited from two advantages. One was that the media output of the Soviet Union and its Eastern Bloc satellites was so blatantly and unsubtly propagandistic that any lapses on the part of RL and RFE paled by comparison. [47] The other was that in producing their programs, these radio stations genuinely sought precision in their content, even to the point of eschewing any references to the Soviet Army as the 'Red Army' (*Krasnaia armiia*) when referring to the period after the discontinuation of that designation in 1946. [48] These very specific advantages, however, may not be available when communications to counter terrorism are being crafted. To give a contemporary example of this problem, there is some evidence in Afghanistan that civilian casualties inflicted by the Taliban do not produce as adverse a reaction as civilian casualties at the hands of the United States and its allies[49] – even though more than two-thirds of civilian deaths since 2007 have been at the hands of anti-government elements.[50]

Some audiences, of course, may prove *totally* unreceptive to the content of even the most carefully-crafted messages. Hard-core ideologues are unlikely to shift their positions to any appreciable degree, and where messianic sanctions reinforce the disposition to engage in terrorist activities, those who are thus motivated may have minds entirely closed to alternative messaging.[51] Fortunately, this is not the whole story. Even if not *all* supporters of a group can be shifted by effective communications, there may still be considerable advantages in shifting at least *some*. In particular, it is important not to forget that very often those who are seen as 'fundamentalists' are under the sway of charismatic leaders,[52] and that the elimination or discrediting of such leaders may lead to a repositioning by at least some of their followers.

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[45] See Matthew Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World: Sources and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2010).

[46] On Soviet reactions, see Simo Mikkonen, 'Stealing the Monopoly of Knowledge? Soviet Reactions to U.S. Cold War Broadcasting', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, vol.11, no.4, Fall 2010, pp.771-805. Soviet sources routinely used the term 'bourgeois falsifier' (*burzhuaznyi fal'sifikator*) to describe critics of the Soviet system.

[47] For some discussion, see Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, The Third Reich, Fascist Italy, and the People's Republic of China* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2011)

[48] Interview with Keith Bush, Research Director, Radio Liberty, Munich, 21 January 1986.

[49] See Jason Lyall, Graeme Blair and Kosuke Imai, 'Explaining Support for Combatants during Wartime: A Survey Experiment in Afghanistan', *American Political Science Review*, vol.107, no.4, November 2013, pp.679-705.

[50] See William Maley, *Transition in Afghanistan: Hope, Despair and the Limits of Statebuilding* (London: Routledge, 2018) pp.169-185.

[51] See David C. Rapoport, 'Messianic Sanctions for Terror', *Comparative Politics*, vol.20, no.2, January 1988, pp.195-213; Angel Gomez, Lucia Lopez-Rodriguez, Hammad Sheikhm Jeremy Ginges, Lydia Wilson, Hoshang Waziri, Alexandra Vasquez, Richard David and Scott Atran, 'The devoted actor's will to fight and the spiritual dimension of human conflict', *Nature Human Behaviour*, vol.1, September 2017, pp.673-679.

[52] On charisma, see Haroro J. Ingram, *The Charismatic Leadership Phenomenon in Radical and Militant Islamism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013).

Challenges of multiple audiences

In addition to the challenges just noted, which can arise in respect of communications with a single and homogeneous target group, there are particular challenges associated with the likelihood that particular communications may reach multiple audiences. Diplomats have long been alert to this issue, sometimes described as involving 'two-level games' in which both domestic and foreign constituencies may hear and respond to messages or signals.[53] This was an issue for US President John F. Kennedy on 22 October 1962 when he used a television broadcast to notify the American public and the wider world that the US had obtained evidence of the development of a missile-launch capability on Cuba that would allow Soviet-supplied missiles to strike targets in the United States with very little warning.[54] With US mid-term elections scheduled for 6 November 1962, Kennedy was hardly in a position to ignore a domestic audience. But at the same time, he had to be extremely cognisant of the danger that any ill-chosen language could aggravate what was already an extremely dangerous situation. On the whole, Kennedy received an excellent assessment from historians for his handling of the crisis,[55] not least because his messaging proved to be notably dexterous. By contrast, President George W. Bush's decision to formulate his administration's response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks as a 'war on terror', while doubtless popular with his domestic audience, had the effect of framing al-Qaeda and its associates not as vicious murderers but as participants in a cosmic struggle, a status they were doubtless happy to adopt since it resonated with the very way in which they had sought to project themselves to their putative followers, as in Osama Bin Laden's February 1998 'Declaration of Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders'.[56]

Multiple audiences can also be found within single states, and an information campaign designed to undermine the operations of a terrorist group such as ISIS needs to be assembled with this reality firmly in mind. The populations of states with a serious terrorism problem are often segmented in complex ways, with (*inter alia*) sectarian identifications, ethnic or tribal backgrounds, physical location, political values, ideological orientations and calculations of interest dividing people into clusters, albeit with fluid or flexible boundaries. In states such as Iraq and Syria, the mere fact that ISIS is overwhelmingly comprised of Sunni Muslims does not mean that all Sunni groups are a problem;[57] but this risks being lost if an information campaign is mainly focused on mobilising Shiite Muslims as a distinct force. In some circumstances, a largely local activity such as the scattering of leaflets from the air, the challenges may not be particularly acute unless there is something in the leaflet that is likely to provoke adverse attention from a wider audience. The situation is rather different, however, when radio broadcasts, television transmissions, or social media are being employed as dominant tools for communication. Here, the audiences that are reached by such media may be quite diverse, with a capacity to respond in varying ways to particular messages.

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[53]See Robert D. Putnam, 'Diplomacy and domestic politics: The logic of two-level games', *International Organization*, vol.42, no.3, Summer 1988, pp.427-460.
[54]For details of the crisis and its handling, see Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008); Sheldon M. Stern, *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).
[55]For some dissent on this point, see Richard M. Pious, 'The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Limits of Crisis Management', *Political Science Quarterly*, vol.116, no.1, Spring 2001, pp.81-105.
[56]See 'Nas Bayan al-Jabhah al-Islamiyah al-Alamiyah li-Jihad al-Yahud wa al-Salibiyin', *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (London), 23 February 1998, p.3.
[57]For detailed discussion of ISIS, see Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Some implications

The challenges detailed above suggest that crafting effective communications to confront the threat posed by terrorist groups is no easy undertaking. Once one becomes entangled in the minutiae of argument, a great deal of skill may be required in order to mount an effective riposte to the kinds of propaganda claims that terrorists can increasingly disseminate through modern media, especially social media. But that said, it is worth noting that the psychology of a situation may be turned around not so much by a point-by-point refutation of specific propaganda claims, but rather by an approach that credibly conveys the message that terrorists are likely to prove to be losers. This is not an area where those opposing terrorists can afford to vacate the field: groups such as the Taliban have arguably done better in 'wars of ideas' than anyone might have expected, building a reputation which gives them political and battlefield advantages despite a lack of strong normative or prudential support.[58]

This is hardly a novel claim. Thomas Hobbes in 1651 offered the penetrating insight that 'Reputation of power, is Power'.[59] Even if terrorist groups have had considerable success in securing a degree of normative support, this does not mean that they cannot be undermined by prudential factors. Many people prefer to be on winning rather than losing sides; as André Malraux once remarked in another context, 'I shall be on your side only when you will be on top'.[60] This reality gives rise to the possibility in the information sphere of what social scientists have called 'cascades': an 'informational cascade' occurs 'when people start attaching credibility to a proposition *P* … merely because other people seem to accept *P*'.[61] In other words, an effective communications campaign does not need to persuade *everyone* of the points that it sets out to make; it may be sufficient if it can persuade enough of those people on whose apparent judgments others are likely to rely. This, interestingly, was a reality understood during the Second World War by both Churchill *and* Hitler. The latter's utter refusal to countenance the possibility of defeat seems to have been grounded, at least in part, in the realisation that once the tide had turned against the Third Reich, any concession that the war was lost could only precipitate an immediate internal collapse, something which Hitler managed to forestall for a quite remarkable period of time, although the distinctive power structure of Nazi Germany was also a major contributing factor.[62]

Communications directed at triggering a cascade of this kind may therefore be useful components of a counterterrorism strategy. But to return to an issue with which we began, it is vital to recognise that the credibility of such communications is crucial to their effectiveness. Telling outright lies is a very dangerous approach. As Sissela Bok puts it, 'trust and integrity are precious resources, easily squandered, hard to regain. They can thrive only on a foundation of respect for veracity'.[63] Yet Mr Pick's demand for 'strict truth' may set too exacting a standard. Sir Isaiah Berlin, after delivering a moving eulogy to a famously-difficult Oxford colleague, remarked that his strategy had been to tell the

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58 See Thomas H. Johnson, *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghan Conflict* (London: Hurst & Co., 2017).
59 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p.62.
60 Quoted in Simon Leys, *The Burning Forest: Essays on Culture and Politics in Contemporary China* (London: Paladin, 1988) p.126.
61 Timur Kuran and Cass R. Sunstein, 'Availability Cascades and Risk Regulation', *Stanford Law Review*, vol.51, no.4, April 1999, pp.683-768 at p.721. This is the very phenomenon that Hans Andersen famously captured in his story 'The Emperor's New Clothes': see Hans Christian Andersen, *Stories and Tales* (London: Routledge, 2002) pp.81-85.
62 See Ian Kershaw, *The End: Hitler's Germany 1944-45* (London: Allen Lane, 2011) pp.386-400.
63 Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (London: Quartet Books, 1980) p.249.

truth, and nothing but the truth, but not the whole truth.[64] This is the routine approach of skilled professional diplomats. It is also not a bad strategy for those who are seeking to influence the information environment within which efforts to counter terrorist groups are being pursued, or to precipitate cascades against them.

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[64]See Leslie Mitchell, *Maurice Bowra: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) p.308.

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