

# A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Model for Communication in the Global War of Ideas

## From Simplistic Influence to Pragmatic Complexity

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the global war of ideas, the United States finds itself facing a systems problem that cannot be solved by simply delivering the right message. The question is not “how can we construct a more persuasive message?” Rather it is “what kind of reality has this particular system [that we are trying to influence] constructed for itself?”

The present strategic communication efforts by the U.S. and its allies rest on an outdated, 20<sup>th</sup> century *message influence model* that is no longer effective in the complex global war of ideas. Relying on this model, our well-intentioned communication has become dysfunctional. Rather than drawing the world into a consensus on issues of terrorism, diplomacy, and international security, it instead unwittingly contributes to our diminished status among world opinion leaders and furthers the recruitment goals of violent extremists.

In this paper we explain why message influence strategies fail and what must be done to break the cycle of communication dysfunction. Changing communication systems requires, first, understanding the dynamics at work; and, second, using communication as a strategy to disrupt and perturb existing systems such that they can begin to organize around new meaning-making frameworks. After describing a new *pragmatic complexity model*, we offer four principles of effective communication in the global war of ideas based on this model: (1) Deemphasize control and embrace complexity, (2) replace repetition with variation, (3) consider disruptive moves, and (4) expect and plan for failure.

## INTRODUCTION

Communication is a vital tool of terrorist groups. Violent extremists use communication to spread their ideology, legitimize their actions, recruit new supporters, and intimidate enemies.<sup>1</sup> They do these things using overt messages sent via personal interaction, mass media, and internet postings, as well as through secondary coverage of their violent activities through similar channels.

The United States and its allies in the West have a strikingly similar set of communication goals. They seek to spread a counter-ideology of Western values like democracy, legitimize their actions, gain public support, and intimidate the terrorists and their supporters. Public communication is therefore of special strategic importance in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT).

In this paper we argue that the message strategy<sup>2</sup> used by the United States and its allies is based on a conventional 20<sup>th</sup> century *message influence* model of communication, which contributes significantly to recent poor performance in communication aspects of the GWOT. We propose that this outdated model be subsumed under a *pragmatic complexity* perspective that takes better account of 21<sup>st</sup> century realities.

## MESSAGE INFLUENCE MODEL

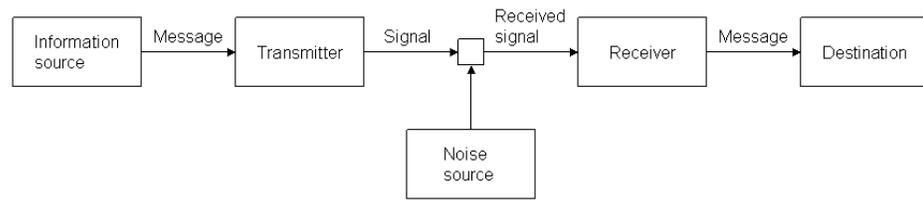
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*The 1950s model underlying current strategic communication is not equipped to deal with today's complex environment.*

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The communication model underlying current Western strategic communication practices dates back at least to the 1950s. In 1960, Berlo published a text<sup>3</sup> describing the perspective, which he developed to support a series of workshops conducted for the U.S. International Cooperation Administration.<sup>4</sup> It draws heavily on an analogy comparing human communication to transmission of messages over a telephone system. Shannon and Weaver<sup>5</sup> originated this idea, defining communication as a process in which one mind uses messages to affect another mind. Their model (Figure 1) assumes that there is an information source that has a message encoded by a transmitter. The transmitter converts the message into a signal which is sent through some channel, during which time it may be degraded to some extent by noise. The signal enters a receiver, which decodes it back into a message, which arrives at the destination.

**Figure 1. Shannon and Weaver's Model**



Berlo applies this model straightforwardly to human communication. He begins with a *source* that has “ideas, needs, intentions, information, and a purpose for communicating.” These things are formulated as a *message* which is translated into a systematic set of symbols by an *encoder* that employs the motor skills of the communicator. The encoded message is sent via some *channel* (a particular medium of communication) to the *receiver*, who uses a *decoder* to “retranslate” the symbols into a usable form.<sup>6</sup> We call this a *message influence model* because it conceptualizes messages as a vehicle for carrying information from a source to a receiver. The purpose of the message is to influence the receiver to understand the information in the same way as the source, if not persuade him or her to change attitudes or act in a particular way.

One of the implications of this view is that failures are a matter of interference of one kind or another with the transmission of the message. Berlo describes this as the *fidelity* of the message,<sup>7</sup> which determines the message’s effect. One source of infidelity is noise occurring in the channel. It can usually be tolerated (for example we can successfully talk even on a noisy phone connection), or overcome through the repetition of the same message, or even avoided altogether by choosing a better channel. Outright distortion of messages occurs in the encoding or decoding stages. Distortion occurs because communicators lack sufficient skill to faithfully translate the information to or from symbols, or their culture or individual attitudes corrupt the translation process in some way.

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*The old model assumes that communication will automatically be successful unless there is a bad connection.*

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A key underlying assumption of the message influence model is that communication will be successful unless the factors just described interfere with the sender/receiver connection. Accordingly “best practices” can be employed by influence-seeking sources to promote fidelity in their transmissions. Simple, concise messages are superior to complicated ones because they are easier to encode and decode faithfully. Messages can be repeated to insure that unskilled receivers have multiple chances to get it right, making the transmission more reliable despite the presence of noise. The sender can also try to understand the attitudes and cultural context of the receiver, and then use his or her skill to encode messages that are least likely to be distorted by them. Table 1 summarizes characteristics of the message influence model.

**Table 1. Message Influence Model Summary**

Communication	Sending messages and “signals” to a well defined audience
Constraint	Communicator skill
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insure message fidelity</li> <li>• Influence attitudes/beliefs/behaviors</li> <li>• Avoiding misunderstanding</li> </ul>
Expectation	Success

The message influence model is not some obscure concept that occurred in one text published in 1960. It is a sign of the thinking of the times. The 1957 Vance Packard classic *The Hidden Persuaders* notes that only in that decade did social science methods start to influence the ideas of political communication. The then-chairman of the Republican Party believed that political communication works in the same way as successful advertising: “You sell your candidates and your programs the way a business sells its products.”<sup>8</sup> Other texts and scholarly works on communication expressed similar ideas, and (with some minor modifications) the message influence model continues to inform strategic communication practice to this day. For example in the contemporary *Public Relations Handbook*,<sup>9</sup> Fawkes describes a modification of the model

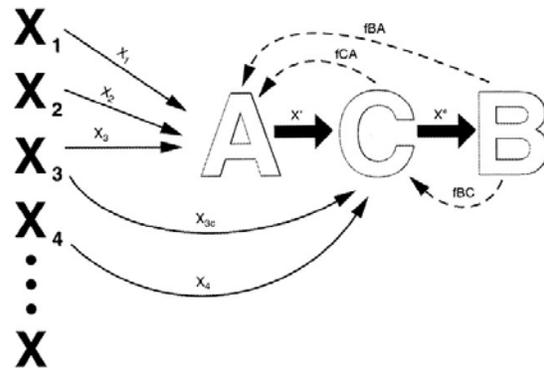
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*The old model continues to inform strategic communication practice to this day.*

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that has messages going not only from source to receiver but from receiver back to source, in a circular fashion. A further elaboration is the Westley-McLean model (Figure 2). Here communicator A gathers information from the environment (Xs) and formulates a message (X') that moves through the channel or gatekeeper (C) who may change it (X'') before it gets to the public (B) who provides feedback (f) to the various stages. Fawkes acknowledges that interpretive processes of the audience and characteristics of the media can have important effects. Yet it is clear that despite the addition of communicators, feedback paths, interpretive processes, and so on, the message influence model is alive and well in the public relations discipline and it still conceives communication in the same linear terms described above.

**Figure 2. The Westley-McLean Model**



The message influence model also pervades post-9/11 thinking about public diplomacy, public affairs, information operations, and media strategy in the United States government. In January of 2003 President Bush signed an Executive Order creating the White House Office of Global Communications.<sup>10</sup> Its stated mission is to “ensure consistency in messages that will promote the interests of the United States abroad, prevent misunderstanding, build support for and among coalition partners of the United States, and inform international audiences.” It would do this, in part, by establishing “information teams” that would “disseminate accurate and timely information about topics of interest to the on-site news media.”

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In its assessment published the next year, the 9/11 Commission concluded that failure to adhere to the message influence model was part of the problem: “The U.S. Government must define what its message is, what it stands for” and it “must do more to communicate its message.”<sup>11</sup> For this purpose it suggested new initiatives in television and radio broadcasting in strategically important areas. Shortly thereafter, a GAO investigation complained of a lack of interagency communication strategy, concluding that “the absence of such a strategy complicates the task of conveying consistent messages to overseas audiences.”<sup>12</sup>

Those who advise the government focus on message influence too. For example, Newton Minnow complained in a 2003 memorandum that “we have failed to use the power of ideas” and we should be “explaining and advocating our values to the world.” We could do this by broadcasting messages that “make our ideas clear not just to leaders in the Muslim world, but to those people in the street.” Our superior skill at delivering messages would insure success: “We have the smartest, most talented, and most creative people in the world in our communications industries” who “will volunteer eagerly to help get our message across.”<sup>13</sup> A Rand paper in 2004 also concluded that success in public diplomacy is a matter of delivering the right message:

As important as it is to communicate America’s history of support and defense of Muslim populations, it is equally important to communicate the rationale motivating these policies. In these instances, U.S. policies reflected and furthered the values of democracy, tolerance, the rule of law, and pluralism. The overarching message public diplomacy should convey is that the United States tries, although it does not always succeed, to further these values regardless of the religion, ethnicity, or other characteristics of the individuals and groups involved. Highlighting the instances in which the United States has benefited Muslim populations by acting on these values may make this point more salient.<sup>14</sup>

## WHY MESSAGE INFLUENCE FAILS

Despite its pervasiveness and “taken-for-granted” appeal, the message influence model has failed to deliver success. This is not for lack of well-intended efforts by government spokespersons to enhance the U.S. global image. Instead, the message influence model—used by our diplomats, government officials, and key communicators—is flawed because it fails to respond to the complexities of communication as a *meaning-making* process.

The message influence model assumes, incorrectly, that communication is the transfer of “meanings from person to person”<sup>15</sup> and that the message sent is the one that counts. The problem is that *a meaning cannot simply be transferred*, like a letter mailed from point A to point B. Instead, listeners create meanings from messages based on factors like autobiography, history, local context, culture, language/symbol systems, power relations, and immediate personal needs. We should assume that meanings listeners create in their minds will probably not be identical to those intended by the receiver. As several decades of communication research has shown, the message *received* is the one that really counts.<sup>16</sup>

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These shortcomings of the message influence model were evident when Karen Hughes embarked on her “listening tour” of the Middle East in 2005. She hoped to begin the process of improving the damaged image of the U.S. by inspiring audiences with a vision of American democracy. Pursuing President Bush’s strategy of delivering a clear and consistent message, Ms. Hughes said to a group of 500 Saudi women:

I feel, as an American woman, that my ability to drive is an important part of my freedom. It has allowed me to work during my career. It has allowed me to go to the grocery store and shop for my family. It allows me to go to the doctor.<sup>17</sup>

The intent of this message was to highlight the freedoms that accrue to American women, particularly in comparison to the audience’s government, which (among other restrictions) bans women from driving. Yet, the message fell flat. Not only did Hughes fail to persuade the Saudi women, she inadvertently offended her audience. In response to Hughes, the Egyptian daily Al-Jumhuriya responded, “We in Egypt, and everywhere else, don’t need America’s public relations campaign.”<sup>18</sup> Clearly, in this case just delivering a clear message, or repeating it from country to country, was not enough.

Another problem with traditional thinking about communication is that messages are always interpreted within a larger, ongoing communication system. In the language of communication science, communication is the medium through which individuals and groups construct their social realities. Once a system—a social reality—is created, it has a tendency to sustain itself even in the face of contradictory

information and persuasive campaigns. Members of the system, routinely and often unconsciously, work to preserve the existing framework of meaning. To accomplish this they interpret messages in ways that “fit” the existing scheme, rather than in ways that senders may intend. There is no “magic bullet”—no single message, however well-crafted—that can be delivered within the existing system that is likely to change it.

This dynamic is illustrated by the efforts of the United States to promote democracy in the Middle East, which has been a staple of U.S. foreign policy under the Bush administration. In a November 2003 speech, the President said:

The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution. Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe -- because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to our country and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo. Therefore, the United States has adopted a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East.<sup>19</sup>

While it is hard for anyone in the West to imagine disagreeing with goals of freedom and democracy, Salafi extremists interpreted this message as yet another attempt by the Western Crusaders to impose their foreign values on Muslims. It was met with a fatwa from Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the “key contemporary ideologue in the Jihadi intellectual universe,”<sup>20</sup> declaring democracy a “religion” that is at odds with Islamic principles of monotheism. As a result, the more the United States promotes its goal of democracy for Muslims, the more evidence the extremists have to reproduce their Crusader analogy.<sup>21</sup>

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*Repetition of a message can amplify meaning-making problems and damage the sender’s credibility.*

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This self-preservation property of communication systems means that strategies highlighting the repetition of a seemingly clear and straightforward message can instead amplify meaning-making problems and damage the sender’s credibility. In Western cultures, we rely on “talking cures” to creatively solve our problems in mutually beneficial ways. But if both parties are not in interpretive alignment, this technique can breed more problems than it solves.

Gregory Bateson describes a “mutually aggravating spiral by which each person’s response to the other’s behavior provokes more exaggerated forms of the divergent behavior.”<sup>22</sup> The pattern commonly appears in relationships between husbands and wives. A woman asks her husband to call if he is going to be late from work. He interprets this as controlling his behavior, so he pulls away. Not only does he not call, but he tells her that he “needs some space,” and perhaps plans to spend a weekend with his friends. This makes her fear that their relationship is in trouble, which encourages her to ask for even more connection, and so on.

This spiraling pattern is common in families, between adults and children, and in interactions between people of different cultures.

The very same pattern is at work on the global landscape. The ongoing “veil affair” in France is an example. The French government has banned “ostentatious” religious symbols (including the head coverings worn by some Muslim women). Though it was officially intended to preserve religious tolerance and the spirit of a secular state (laïcité), the ban was interpreted by many Muslims as discriminatory, an affront to religious freedom, and evidence of French racism toward Muslims. Muslim women who resisted the ban by wearing veils in public were interpreted, at best, as defiant and, at worst, as an affront to French cultural values. The dynamics of this conflict are more complex than we can chart here, but it seems clear that both parties have adopted a failed message influence approach to change.

In the global war of ideas, the United States finds itself facing a systems problem too, one that cannot be solved by simply delivering the “right message.” The question is not “how can we construct a more persuasive message?” Rather it is “what kind of reality has this particular system [that we are trying to influence] constructed for itself?”<sup>23</sup> Breaking dysfunctional communication systems requires, first, understanding the system dynamics at work; and, second, using communication as a strategy to disrupt and perturb existing systems such that they can begin to organize around new meaning-making frameworks. Next we propose a new communication strategy for achieving this important goal.

## PRAGMATIC COMPLEXITY MODEL

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*Communication is a complex process of interpreting one-another’s actions and making attributions about thoughts, motivations, and intentions.*

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The shortcomings of the message influence model just described make it clear that we need an updated way of thinking about strategic communication. This is not to say that we can go without messages, or that it would be good to have unclear, inconsistent messages sent by unskilled communicators. Instead we call for an updated view of the *process* surrounding the communication of messages that avoids simplistic view of the old message influence model, provides more realistic expectations about their impact, offers a new set of communication strategies, and in the long run leads to more strategic success.

The new model we propose, pragmatic complexity (PCOM), draws ideas from the so-called “new systems” perspectives, especially the communication theory of Niklas Luhmann.<sup>24</sup> For him, communication is not an act of one mind transmitting a message to another mind. It is a property of a complex system in which participants interpret one-another’s actions and make attributions about the thoughts, motivations, intentions,

etc., behind them. The issuing of a message by one party and its receipt by another may initiate this process, but that is far from the end of the story.

The system is complex because of a *double contingency* that involves the participants. In the simplest case of a communication system with two participants A and B, we can describe this constraint as follows:

- The success of A's behavior depends not only on external conditions, but on what B does and thinks.
- What B does and thinks is influenced by A's behavior as well as B's expectations, interpretations, and attributions with respect to A.

So there is no independent B sitting “out there” waiting to be impacted by A's message, as the old model would have it. Instead A and B are locked in a *relationship of simultaneous, mutual interdependence*.

Jervis illustrates the “interpretive traps” that can result from this double contingency, using the example of a leader issuing a statement about confidence in his or her abilities. Receivers of such a message know the leader is concerned about what inferences they might draw,

[b]ut the very fact that everyone knows that these impressions are so important increases the chances that they will not be drawn in a straightforward way, thereby complicating matters for both actors and observers. Thus the latter may believe that acts which at first glance show confidence are likely to be taken only when the situation is desperate. ... On the other hand, if audiences expect such a statement to be forthcoming, they may be even more alarmed by its absence. Furthermore, the notion of confidence itself is at least partly interactive in that the faith that one person can have in a leader is in part a function of his estimate of the confidence that others have.<sup>25</sup>

Another important aspect of complexity is that systems have emergent properties—the whole is more than the sum of its parts. It is impossible to reduce the success of a well-functioning work group, sports team or military unit to the skills or actions of any one member. Likewise, in our complex system the communication process is not completely under the control of either A or B. What they do matters, of course. But so does the action of the system *as a whole*, and it is in an important sense independent of the actions of the individual participants. The system is not necessarily under anyone's control.

One implication is that the system has effects of its own that can thwart the best intentions of its members. Even if a message is clearly sent and correctly decoded and received, it might still not create the desired interpretations and attributions. This is partly due to the effects of the double contingency. But as we explained in the previous section, when an interpretive system is in place it tends to assimilate new messages and reproduce itself. In this situation, the attempts to manage and control the message prescribed by the old message influence model are dysfunctional because repetition only serves to make the existing system

stronger, and control is itself an action that is likely to be interpreted negatively.

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*The purpose of communication is to perturb the system and overcome its tendency to interpret and attribute in standard ways.*

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A second implication is that the purpose of communication is not to cause acceptance and persuade the receiver to think in a particular way, as in the old model. In the PCOM framework the purpose of communication is to perturb the communication system and overcome its tendency to interpret and attribute in standard ways. This is especially true in conflict situations, where there are standard “recipes,” “scripts,” and “templates” for understanding the other party. As in the examples from the previous section, *any* conventional diplomatic message from the United States received by Muslims is likely to be interpreted as evidence that it does not understand them and is trying to impose its secular Western values. Only behavior that undermines the existing framework is likely to bring about a different response.

**Table 2. Pragmatic Complexity Model Summary**

Communication	Interpretation and attribution of the actions of system members
Constraint	Double contingency
Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Control is impossible and dysfunctional</li> <li>• Less is more</li> <li>• Perturb stable system structures</li> </ul>
Expectation	Failure

Unfortunately it is not a simple task to envision a game-changing move because of the complexities of double contingency. This leads to our third implication, that *failure is the norm*. The message influence model assumes that unless there are debilitating levels of noise, or encoding/decoding processes distort the message, it will successfully travel from the source and implant itself in the mind of the receiver. But given PCOM assumptions, we can understand just how unlikely this scenario is. Interpretation by a receiver is influenced by an array of factors that are outside the control of—and may even be unknown to—the sender. Not the least of these is a system that is trying to preserve itself by resisting change.

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*Strategic communication is best viewed as an unpredictable and risky tool, and should be used accordingly.*

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A final implication is that when it comes to strategic communication, *less is more*. The effects of messages are often unpredictable and may have delayed and indirect effects.<sup>26</sup> Thus there is risk in having too many messages in play before their impact is fully understood. Furthermore, messages potentiate both identification with, and division from, the intentions of the sender, leading to perverse effects: A message might increase understanding, but it might also create misunderstanding. Strategic communication is best viewed as an

unpredictable and somewhat risky tool, and it should be used accordingly. The pragmatic complexity model is summarized in Table 2.

## LIVING WITH PRAGMATIC COMPLEXITY

The model just discussed may seem discouraging, especially to those who have always believed in the validity of the message influence model. But to reiterate, we do not dismiss that model entirely. Communication still involves sending messages, and that is naturally done with the intent of influencing others. Doing this skillfully is still an admirable goal. But communicators should undertake their task with an updated, 21<sup>st</sup> century realism about what is actually happening in the process. That, we believe, is accurately described by the PCOM model. The model carries several principles for more effective communication, a few of which we outline now.

### 1. Deemphasize control and embrace complexity.

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*You can't control  
the message. Get  
over it.*

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A clear implication of the PCOM model of communication is: You can't control the message; get over it. The more we try to treat communication as a simple, straightforward task with outcomes we can control, the less we are likely to succeed. Communication takes place in a complex system of double contingency that can be partially influenced but not controlled by the participants. Communicators should accept this reality and try to work with it, just as Wall Street traders accept the chaos of the market and try to "go with the flow." Once we let go of the idea of a well-ordered system that is under our control, we can start to think of what *is possible* in situations of uncertainty.

For example, strategic communicators reading this paper have probably been thinking primarily about how the PCOM model constrains them and complicates their ability to operate effectively. Yet in the GWOT it is not just the West that is trying to have influence. The "bad guys" are trying to have their influence as well, and there is evidence that they too are applying an outdated strategy based on simple, repeated messages.<sup>27</sup> This exposes them just as surely to the pitfalls of PCOM. If the West embraces complexity and they do not, this creates an asymmetry in its favor (for once). Among other things, it could use this asymmetry to seek ways to increase *its opponents'* exposure to negative consequences of unacknowledged complexity.

### 2. Replace repetition with variation.

Unwavering use of a few simple messages is no more likely to work in a complex communication system than is a plan to always buy

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*Take an evolutionary approach involving variation, selection, and retention.*

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(and only buy) the same stock on Wall Street. What is needed in both cases is strategic experimentation. We advocate an evolutionary approach to sensemaking in the complex system, involving steps of variation, selection, and retention.<sup>28</sup> This approach is in the tradition of American pragmatists, like John Dewey,<sup>29</sup> who believed that democracy requires continual experimentation to discover the conditions under which social systems thrive.

Rather than a grand overall strategy, communicators should rely on variations on a message theme. These are backed by small (rather than large) commitments, and are followed up with careful observation of results. Communicators temporarily sustain things that “work” and perhaps add resources to them. They might also attempt further variations along the same lines. However they are agile, remaining ready to abandon existing messages at the first sign that they have lost their positive effects, switching to new variations.

For instance, rather than always promoting the virtues of democracy, the United States might try messages that discuss its problems and invite comparison of these faults to the problems of other forms of government. This could steer a conversation toward Churchill’s famous conclusion that “democracy is the worst form of government, except all the others that have been tried.” Doing this would reproduce Western values of freedom of thought and expression and show that we are not afraid of criticism. Another variation might be to argue that America “is the most Islamic country in the world” based on comparison between its values and those expressed in the Quran.<sup>30</sup> Again, unflattering comparisons to Muslim countries could be pointed out. These messages might work and they might not, but they are worth trying if backed by small, temporary commitments and careful observation of effects.

### **3. Consider disruptive moves.**

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*Transformative change only occurs as a result of a major disruption in the normal operations of a system.*

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While variation can contribute to system change in an evolutionary sense, large scale, transformative change typically only occurs only as a result of some major disruption in the normal operations of a system. There is no better recent example of this than the 9/11 attacks on the United States. Some critics argue that the United States over-reacted to the attacks.<sup>31</sup> But these arguments notwithstanding, it was clearly a game-changing event. International sympathy poured out for the United States.<sup>32</sup> More than 30% of the country changed its support in favor of President Bush.<sup>33</sup> The 9/11 Commission report speaks of a transformations in national priorities, government programs, and military strategies.<sup>34</sup> The attacks dramatically disrupted the structure of the existing system.

While a disruption of this magnitude is a rare occurrence, its lesson is worth applying to strategic communication efforts. Since the structure

of the communication system is not currently favorable to the West, we should consider disruptions that can change the game. The Mother of All Disruptions would be a breakthrough in the Israel-Palestine conflict. It goes without saying that U.S. support for Israel in this conflict complicates its relations with Arab countries. It also provides Al-Qaeda with ideological resources. In the most recent example, perceived U.S. foot-dragging regarding a cease-fire in the recent Israel-Hezbollah conflict provided the extremists with a rhetorical bonanza.<sup>35</sup> More generally,

Al-Qaeda capitalizes on scenes of Israeli-Palestinian fighting which are widely disseminated through the Arab media on satellite channels like al-Manar and al-Jazeera. So even if Israeli policy is used instrumentally by al-Qaeda's leaders, the effectiveness of the tactics and the wider sympathy it generates depends on the state of relations between Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>36</sup>

A resolution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict would be a game-changer that would deny Al-Qaeda an important ideological tool, and open up new possibilities for relations between Arab states and the West.

Though not as dramatic, another disruption that is sure to occur in the next two years is a change in the U.S. presidency. Some see rapid turnover in the Executive Branch caused by term limits as a liability. Be that as it may, it provides a regular possibility for disruption of international relationships and the rhetorical structure of strategic communication systems. The foreign policy of the current administration has attracted a good deal of international criticism, whether deserved or not, so the coming disruption has the potential for a significant impact. Planning should begin as soon as possible to capitalize on this opportunity.

#### **4. Expect and plan for failure.**

The communication systems described by the PCOM model are complex. They contain multiple double contingencies, making it difficult to predict exactly what effects will result from particular messages. This means that, especially in terms of the "big picture," it is difficult to be strategic in the sense of setting a desired future state of affairs and mapping a set of logical steps that are likely to bring it about. Given our point above that well intentioned efforts can have unanticipated perverse effects, it is perhaps just as likely that goals will be undermined as it is that they will be accomplished.

With this in mind, strategic communicators should think less in terms of grand strategy and more in terms of contingency planning. Rather than assuming a message will be understood as it is intended, they should think of the ways things could go wrong, what the consequences of those outcomes will be, and the steps that might be undertaken in response. Then, if the message has the intended effects it is all to the good, and if it does not, options are immediately available for further variation as described above.

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*Think less in terms of grand strategy and more in terms of contingency planning.*

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## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Current strategic communication practice in the United States and Western countries is based on an outdated message influence model from the 1950s that views communication as a process of transmission from a source to a receiver using simple, consistent, repeated messages. This model fails because it does not recognize communication as a meaning-making process. In reality, messages are interpreted within a large, complex system with emergent properties and self-preserving dynamics. The old model should be replaced with a 21st century view of communication as interpretation and attribution of actions in an uncertain environment. Communicators are locked in simultaneous, mutual interdependence that reduces the value of grand strategy and makes failure the most likely outcome.

To succeed in this environment communicators should deemphasize control and embrace complexity, replace repetition of messages with experimental variation, consider moves that will disrupt the existing system, and make contingency plans for failure. Making these changes will create an asymmetry in the favor of the West, which it can exploit to great advantage in strategic communication aspects of the GWOT.

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## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Corman, S.R. and Schiffelbein, J.S. (2006). [\*Communication and media strategy in the jihadi war of ideas\*](#). Report #0601, Consortium for Strategic Communication, Arizona State University.
- <sup>2</sup> The design of messages is not the only aspect of this war of words. For example, the means used to communicate messages and the socio-cultural conditions that surround them are important too. But the messages themselves are nonetheless crucial, and the thinking behind message formulation matters a lot in the eventual success of communication efforts.
- <sup>3</sup> Berlo, D.K. (1960). *The Process of Communication: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- <sup>4</sup> See Berlo, page vi. The ICAO was later absorbed into the U.S. Agency for International Development. According to the [Guide to Federal Records](#) it coordinated foreign aid but was also responsible for all non-military security programs.
- <sup>5</sup> Shannon, C. and Weaver, W. (1949). *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- <sup>6</sup> See Berlo, previously cited, pages 30-32.
- <sup>7</sup> See Berlo, previously cited, Chapter 3.
- <sup>8</sup> Packard, V. (1957). *The Hidden Persuaders*. New York: David McKay Co.
- <sup>9</sup> Fawkes, J. (2001). Public relations and communications. In A. Theaker (Ed.), *The Public Relations Handbook* (Chapter 2). London: Routledge.
- <sup>10</sup> The White House (2003, January 24). Establishing the Office of Global Communications. [Executive order 13282](#), Office of Policy Coordination and International Relations.
- <sup>11</sup> Kean, T.H., et al. (2004). [The 9/11 Commission Report](#), pp. 376-377.
- <sup>12</sup> Ford, J.T. (2004, August 23). [State Department and Broadcasting Board of Governors expand post-9/11 efforts but challenges remain](#). Testimony before the Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations, House Committee on Government Reform, p. 9.
- <sup>13</sup> Minow, N.M. (2003). [The whisper of America](#). Foundation for Defense of Democracies, pp. 7-10.
- <sup>14</sup> Wolf, C.R. and Rosen, B. (2004). [Public diplomacy: How to think about it and improve it](#). Occasional paper, Rand Corporation, p. 8.
- <sup>15</sup> Axley, S.R. (1984). Managerial and organizational communication in terms of the conduit metaphor. *Academy of Management Review*, 9, p. 431

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<sup>16</sup> See Goodall, Jr., H.L. (2006). Why we must win the war on terror: Communication, narrative and the future of national security. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(1), 30-59 and Goodall, Jr., H.L., Trethewey, A., & McDonald, K. (2006). [\*Strategic ambiguity, communication, and public diplomacy in an uncertain world\*](#). Report #0604, Consortium for Strategic Communication, Arizona State University.

<sup>17</sup> For a fuller account of Ms. Hughes's listening tour," see The New Republic (2005, October 15). [Diplomatic toast](#).

<sup>18</sup> The New Republic (2005, October 15). [Diplomatic toast](#).

<sup>19</sup> [Remarks by the President](#) at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy. United States Chamber of Commerce, November 6, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Combating Terrorism Center (2006). [Militant Ideology Atlas](#). United States Military Academy at West Point.

<sup>21</sup> Corman, S.R. (in press). Weapons of mass persuasion: Communicating against terrorist ideology. *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Tannen, D. (1990). *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation*. New York: Ballentine Books, p. 282.

<sup>23</sup> Watzlawick, P. (1992). The construction of clinical 'realities.' In J. Zeig (Ed.). *The evolution of psychotherapy: The second conference*. Brunner/Mazel, New York: Pearl, p. 64.

<sup>24</sup> For the English translations see Luhmann, N. (1995). *Social Systems*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA. (Originally published 1984). For an easier to read introduction, see Chapter 16 of Münch, R. (1994). *Sociological theory: From the 1850s to present*. London: Burnham, Inc.

<sup>25</sup> Jervis, R. (1997). *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, p. 256. This book makes excellent further reading for the issues of complexity discussed in this paper.

<sup>26</sup> See Jervis, previously cited, Chapter 2.

<sup>27</sup> See Corman and Schieffelin (2006), previously cited.

<sup>28</sup> Weick, K.E. (1979). *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley; Weick, K.E. (2006). Faith, evidence, and action: Better guesses in an unknowable world. *Organization Studies*, 27(11), 1723-1736.

<sup>29</sup> Dewey, J. (1938). *Art as experience*. New York: Perigree.

<sup>30</sup> For this argument we are indebted to Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat of the Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation, personal communication, November 1, 2006.

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<sup>31</sup> For example, see Mueller, J. (2006). *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them*. New York: Free Press.

<sup>32</sup> See the [September 11 News Page](#).

<sup>33</sup> USA Today (2001, September 16). "[Poll finds a united nation](#)."

<sup>34</sup> See the 9/11 Commission Report, Chapter 12.

<sup>35</sup> See Corman (in press), previously cited.

<sup>36</sup> Pressman, J. (2003). The primary role of the United States in Israeli-Palestinian relations. *International Studies Perspectives*, 4 (2), 191–194.