Strategic Communications in Conflict and Stabilisation Interventions

What Works Series

UK Stabilisation Unit

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Contents

Executive Summary

- **Strategic communications are communications with a purpose, conducted to achieve specified, agreed and measurable objectives and effects**, such as mobilising support for a particular policy or promoting a desired behavioural change. They encompass the strategic, operational and tactical levels of activity and are an indispensable component of any conflict and stabilisation intervention.

- **Strategic communications should be fully integrated into policy making from the earliest stages** – not bolted on as an afterthought – and regularly monitored and evaluated to ensure they are aligned with wider policy and are achieving the desired effects. Communicators should be fully engaged in decision-making at the most senior level.

- **When undertaken as part of stabilisation interventions, strategic communications need to be based on a thorough understanding of the local context, audience and the environment** in which they are taking place. Such an understanding can be gained through the recruitment of high-quality local staff, together with a research and analysis capability that makes use of a variety of investigative methods including target audience analysis.

- **There is a fundamental requirement for communicators to engage in a timely fashion and mobilise their audiences with attractive, plausible content.** Effective partnerships with local counterparts are critical to success. Communicators must seek to engage audiences, build trust and remain credible. They should be driven by energy, imagination and commitment. But communications take time to register the desired effects and should not be expected to achieve overnight success.

- **Modern communicators have a comprehensive 'toolbox' available to help them achieve their objectives.** These include: a communications strategy and core script or narrative; key messages; the latest research and analysis; local expertise; the HMG communications network; planning grids; news production and an extensive range of media products, from press statements to short films; social media; campaigns; external expertise, including private-sector providers; local capability and capacity-building projects; and monitoring and evaluation programmes.

I: The Broader Context

Introduction

The Stabilisation Unit (SU) is a cross-government unit supporting UK government efforts to tackle instability overseas.

It supports the coordination and integration of UK government activities in fragile and conflict-affected states by acting as a centre of expertise on conflict, stabilisation, security and justice.

The purpose of this What Works Series paper is to provide practical advice about strategic communications in conflict and stabilisation interventions.[1] It provides an introduction and general background to the field, along with analysis and tools, consistent with HMG's responses to conflict and the wider aspects of stabilisation work in challenging environments. This paper focuses on both the conceptual aspects of Strategic Communications and the practical, operational activities that flow from them. It has a deliberate focus on best practice and what works and is primarily designed for communications practitioners, programme staff in country offices, project implementers, deployed SU staff and Deployable Civilian Experts (DCEs). Case study evidence from Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Somalia is included in this report in order to illustrate the varied experiences of communicating in the most challenging environments in recent years and the lessons learned from those interventions.

For the purposes of this paper the following definition of Strategic Communications is employed:

"Strategic Communications refers to the way in which policies and actions are communicated to the public (local and international), in order to build up an alliance of people willing to support desired outcomes. Successful strategic communication is an integral and transformational part of delivery; a two-way process, and key to bringing about change in attitudes, beliefs and behaviours in the people upon whom stabilisation success depends."[2]

But such definitions abound and even within government they vary.[3] Although this may appear confusing to new practitioners, it is important not to get distracted by the quest for the 'ultimate' definition.

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[1] This paper was written by Justin Marozzi for the Stabilisation Unit. This paper is not a formal statement of HMG policy.

[2] For further reading, see http://sclr.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/top-10-reads/thematic/strategic-communications

[3] The Ministry of Defence for example has specific doctrine regarding Strategic Communications. See Joint Doctrine Note 1/12 'Strategic Communication: The Defence Contribution'.

While considerable energies are given to debates about precise definitions within the communications field, these have less relevance for practitioners in conflict and stabilisation interventions. Simon Davies, a former senior communicator with the UN in Somalia, argues that "there are more methodologies, approaches, good practices and the like out there than there are sensible, qualified and capable people to deliver them."[4]

In general terms good communications use straightforward language without complicated jargon. It is more of an art than a science, although different practitioners and different organisations naturally bring varied approaches, with diverse styles and emphases, to the discipline. Strategic communications should not be a highly complex and exclusive doctrine practised by specialists but an activity centred on people, governed by common sense and readily accessible to the generalist with appropriate training.

Strategic Communications in Conflict

The UK government practises strategic communications on a daily basis both at home and abroad. It is routine business across government, whether promoting certain policies or encouraging behavioural change.

> **The Power of Communications**
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> *"The idea of traditional firepower is so 20th century and all sensible strategic debates are now couched in the language of effects. The means of creating effects include traditional firepower, money, beliefs and communications. In the wars we fight now these means are co-equal and any effective strategy will include not only a mix of effects but also a mechanism to make that happen. Boil this down to its essentials: communications is an integral and indispensable element of strategy, co-equal with all other dimensions of national power and its place in HMG policy should reflect that. Islamic State understands this better than we do."*
>
> Lieutenant General Sir Rob Fry

During recent years communications have evolved into an integral component of UK conflict and stabilisation interventions. In some areas, particularly the ongoing fight against Daesh and countering violent extremism (CVE) more broadly, communications are central to the overall approach. It is frequently observed that our adversaries have at times understood this better than Western policy makers. In 2005, Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri stated that "More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle, a race for the hearts and minds of our Ummah."

While the same principles of communications apply in stable and unstable environments – such as the need to understand one's audience, define one's objectives and strategy, promote change, conduct research and analysis and communicate clearly and consistently

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[4] Interview, 1 March 2016.

with compelling stories – conflict and stabilisation interventions also bring additional and sometimes inherently different challenges to policymakers and communicators alike.

In recent years the UK has often operated in countries where the local political culture has, for instance, been diametrically opposed to that prevailing in liberal western democracies. Social, political and economic turbulence and instability has been the norm during various interventions. Communicators in such contexts are likely to be faced with unscrupulous, technologically adept adversaries and spoilers skilled in the latest communications techniques and willing to spread damaging lies and propaganda. Freedom of expression and a free media may be noticeable only by their absence, frequently necessitating additional work on media reform, regulation and development. Journalists can be targeted for assassination, as they have been in recent years in Iraq, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Somalia, Syria, Yemen and Libya. During or after a conflict, the rise of 'free' media aligned to political, religious and armed groups may bring dangerous issues such as hate-speech and incitement to violence to the fore, as witnessed in Libya in 2016. In certain countries, particularly in remote areas, there is a radically different 'information ecology' where people inform themselves through traditional channels and networks, rather than employing digital means of communication. All these factors and more besides will have a direct bearing on communicating in conflict and stabilisation environments.

Among the most important consequences arising from these particular conditions is the need to remain flexible on one the one hand and make use of local expertise on the other. A foreigner's understanding of the local environment will necessarily be more incomplete than that of the indigenous population and valuable local knowledge, ground truth and perspectives may be gained from working alongside local partners. Conversely, communicators may find they are working with local partners – such as a government department or a military organisation – in which there is an acute lack of communications capacity, experience and professionalism. In such circumstances diplomatic and team-building skills, together with the ability to initiate local capability and capacity-building programmes, may be just as important to achieving success as formal communications expertise. Communicators should focus as much on supporting their partners as on the HMG department they represent and work to align the respective narratives of HMG and its partners as part of a shared endeavour (see below).

2: Principles for Engagement

The following broad principles should guide the initial stages of any planned engagement in strategic communications activity.

Setting your Communications Strategy and Objectives

Strategic communications are so called because they should be linked to, and part of, a wider strategy. Without a strategy behind them, communications are not strategic. Of course good communications depend on good policy. A 2016 NATO report on the alliance's strategic communications effort in Afghanistan from 2003-2014 observed that "improved strategic communications did not, and does not, temper the effects of bad policy and poor operational execution".[5]

Communications objectives necessarily vary from intervention to intervention and in different environments but broadly they will coalesce around supporting UK policy around conflict and stabilisation operations, combating adversarial narratives and promoting and discouraging certain actions, beliefs and behaviour. At times, very specific policies will require promotion through strategic communications initiatives. These might include, for example, encouraging enemy defections, discouraging female genital mutilation, fighting piracy and countering violent extremism. There is a substantial body of research on the links between communications and behavioural change, including studies on the role of the media in tackling fragility and conflict and the use of counter-narratives in combating extremism.[6] In conflict and stabilisation operations, the experience of recent interventions suggests it is especially important to set realistic, achievable objectives given the scale and severity of the challenges encountered. There is no one-size-fits-all template for communications, but understanding HMG's objectives and the toolbox available to help achieve them (see Section 5 below) will enable practitioners to tailor their communications to the specific environment in which they are operating.

Promoting the UK and……

Good communications are about getting the right balance. When it comes to communicating in a stabilisation operation, a considerable proportion of the work may consist of promoting the UK's role positively to local and UK audiences in order to generate support for the intervention. Although each intervention will possess its own character and context, the UK's role will frequently centre on its core values overseas, such as supporting human rights, democratic governance, transparency and the rule of law, a free media and

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[6] See, for example, "Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies: A review of the evidence", accessed at http://www.paccsresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Countering-Violent-Extremism-Through-Media-and-Communication-Strategies-.pdf. See also studies by BBC Media Action http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources.

freedom of expression. But plausibility is key. Care should be taken not to exaggerate or overdo the promotion of the UK role, which risks undermining the credibility of the message. Journalists understandably respond badly to inflated claims of success. During critical periods in a particular conflict the targeted support and promotion of local actors – such as the Somali, Iraqi or Afghan national army, police force or government – can be an effective alternative and supplement to using British voices to emphasise the positive UK role. In short, UK communicators should bear in mind that communications in a conflict and stabilisation environments should not be all about HMG and its objectives and achievements but must be just as much about local partners and the demonstration of broader progress and normalisation.

......Developing Local Communications Capacity and Capability

Building the capacity and capability of local partners is a central tenet of the UK approach to stabilisation interventions, and is often an important component of a strategic communications programmes and initiatives, especially because local voices frequently tend to carry greater weight with local audiences.[7] This may apply particularly in challenging environments which involve the deployment of foreign armed forces. Programmes to develop indigenous communications

> **Capacity-building in Somalia 2013-2016**
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> As part of the UK's bilateral support to Somalia, the FCO initiated a long-term capacity-building project deploying senior British communications advisors to be embedded in the Offices of the President & Prime Minister in Mogadishu. The advisors were engaged in all aspects of communications: training and mentoring; developing strategy and structures, policy and personnel; event planning and the grid; messaging; drafting speeches, statements and editorial; campaigning; digital media; countering violent extremism; media handling and media training. Significant progress has been recorded, from supporting the 2013 London Somalia Conference and undermining Al Shabaab in the information space to demonstrating to Somalis the return of government for the first time in decades and constructing a more positive national narrative.

capacity and capability can benefit both sides and reinforce shared objectives. It is essential that local voices used are credible and resonate positively with local audiences. During a UN audit of communications projects in Afghanistan in 2009, several key problems were identified, including how communicators had mostly used foreign rather than Afghan voices in their output.[8] Communications practitioners can benefit from professional partnerships or working relationships with local people and civil society organisations that are in a position to amplify their messages. Embedding trusted communications advisors with local partners is also a tried and tested model and works best when there is continuity of support.

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[7] See 'The UK Approach to Stabilisation'. 2014. http://sclr.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/publications/stabilisation-series
[8] Simon Haselock, 'Make It Theirs: The Imperative of Local Ownership in Communications and Media Initiatives', USIP Report, 2010, p. 15.

An added benefit of this approach is that it allows and encourages the sharing of best practice (see box above).

Integrating and Coordinating Communications

Effective Strategic Communications should be a central part of the UK policy making process, not inserted later as an afterthought. In today's networked world strategic communications are an integral component of policy making, allowing policymakers to generate support for a particular intervention or initiative or understand likely local responses to different policies. Communications personnel must therefore be engaged at the most senior level from the earliest stages of policy planning and throughout the engagement that follows.

> **Integrating & Coordinating Communications**
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> *"Communications need to be integrated and really hooked into the policy or military lead, whatever the structure is. You have to fight for space at the table sometimes but one of the primary tasks of the stratcom is to make sure that your communications activity is strategically aligned with the policy goals. You need a stratcom team that can take a new issue and work with a policy team and have a cross-Whitehall conversation. The FCO naturally plays a coordinating role in the overseas space".*
>
> Jeff Wilson, Head of Strategic Communications, FCO

When communicating in conflict and stabilisation operations, deployed communication teams should be in regular contact with country, regional and cross-Whitehall counterparts to ensure that in-country communications remain aligned at all times with HMG policy. It is just as important in more remote environments where telecommunications and internet access may be more challenging. To ensure consistency and credibility of communications, coordination is key. Communicators should find that there are existing HMG coordination mechanisms in place to facilitate this.

Structuring and Supporting Communications

Strategic communicators need access and proximity to command-level decision makers. NATO's Chief StratCom at SHAPE argues that, "The real problem is that leaderships too often regard Strategic Communications as an afterthought and as a result usually fail to give their communicators a place at the top table. Secondly the instinct is to regard Strategic Communications as just 'broadcast' rather than interaction."[9] These challenges indicate the desirability of coupling strategic communicators directly with the chain of command and ensuring that the lead communicator is of sufficient stature to join the decision-making process.

Effective communications in challenging environments can be resource and labour-intensive, especially as much of the activity gravitates towards the digital sphere (film-

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[9] Interview, 9 April 2016.

making, for instance, is an increasingly popular – but expensive – tool used by communicators to tell their own stories). Resourcing will vary according to the nature of the mission but given that communications can require very substantial funding, it is common for large-scale programmes to be resourced by multiple donors and partners. This was the case, for instance with the UN-funded communications operation of the African Union Mission in Somalia, contracted out to a private-sector consortium (see box below).

Somalia: The AU/UN Information Support Team 2010-2014

The AU/UN Information Support Team (IST) represented a benchmark model for a large-scale communications operation in a conflict and stabilisation environment. It provided a dedicated, majority African team of communicators working alongside AMISOM's senior leadership. Support provided included communications strategy and messaging development; press office operations; news production; media statements; journalist embeds; photographers and news cameramen; media monitoring; expert research and analysis; opinion polling; media development and regulation; Somali outreach; events and conferences; local and international media engagement; the establishment of a new radio station. The IST helped undermine local opposition to AMISOM during the liberation of Mogadishu. AMISOM's Indirect Fire policy was alienating Mogadishu inhabitants, who were effectively being punished for Al Shabaab operations in their areas. The IST contracted a retired UK general to advise on a new policy that dramatically reduced civilian casualties, improved support for AMISOM and galvanised opposition to the jihadists. This activity supported CVE work undermining Al Shabaab as a foreign-led, counter-cultural, Al Qaeda-aligned organisation that offered nothing to ordinary Somalis. The IST's sustained engagement advanced the Somalia narrative from "Mission Impossible" to "Mission Possible" and helped inspire hope in and for one of the most challenging countries on earth.

Managing Risks

Communicating in a conflict and stabilisation contexts carries inherent risk. As noted above, care should be taken not to put an unrealistic gloss on public messaging or fall into the trap of only using HMG voices to communicate. This only serves to undermine the credibility of the message. Using local voices, communicators should emphasise the general direction of travel rather than the final destination and not make extravagant claims of success. In addition, constructive engagement with journalists and the wider media 'community' is vital: journalists are not passive recipients of and conduits for messages aimed at your target audience. A failure to develop good working relationships will prove counterproductive in the long run. Hold background briefings for journalists, communicate regularly with them and make sure your media distribution list is regularly updated. Beware the pitfalls of "off the record" conversations while understanding that there may be a time and a place for them.

The increasingly fast paced and reactive nature of modern communications also brings risks when operating in conflict affected states: social media postings can quickly gain traction

and adversely affect the situation on the ground. It is often preferable to communicate publicly in a timely way, even if the situation remains unclear and the information inadequate. Remaining silent allow others (including adversaries) to shape the narrative. That said, there is a risk that communicators can be drawn into unwinnable and potentially damaging exchanges with adversarial communicators: in responding a balance must be found.

Finally, communicators operating in difficult and challenging communication environments have to accept the reality that the challenges of often immense and the likelihood that aspects of their engagement will not deliver as much as was hoped for. Strategic patience is vital.

3: Understanding Audiences

Unless you know whom you are trying to reach, it is difficult to communicate effectively and achieve your objective. A huge amount of work has gone into the process of 'understanding audiences' (what is often called 'target audience analysis'). As with all areas of strategic communications, try to keep it as simple as possible. Do not get bogged down in unnecessary detail. During UK interventions, the audiences are primarily local and UK-based (although with multilateral operations this can expand to include international audiences). These can be broken down into sub-categories by age, gender, political affiliation, religion, attitudes towards UK and multilateral partners and numerous other groupings as desired in order to generate a more granular and nuanced understanding of the respective audiences, with key leaders, influencers, enablers and spoilers. This allows communicators to identify and target the key demographics that relate to their particular policy objectives. Different audiences may require, and respond positively (or negatively) to different messages: it is therefore important to carefully calibrate messages, so as to address specific concerns and desires.

> **Target Audience Analysis**
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> *"At the heart of TAA is the ability to empirically diagnose the exact groupings that exist within target populations. Knowing these groupings allows them to be ranked and the ranking depends upon the degree of influence they may have in either promoting or mitigating constructive behaviour. The methodology involves the comprehensive study of a social group of people. It examines this group of people across a host of psycho-social research parameters, and it does so in order to determine how best to change that group's behaviour."*
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> *Steve Tatham, "Target Audience Analysis", Joint Warfare Centre, NATO*

How do you Understand your Local Audience?

Research, research, research. It is essential to study and analyse the history and culture of the local population, its interests, prejudices and motivations. Various methods exist for

doing this. A straightforward PESTLE analysis, for example, can elucidate the Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental aspects of the target audience. It is typical though in stabilisation contexts for a more sophisticated conflict analysis to be undertaken, such as a Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability. Such expert-led conflict analysis will help communicators understand what the local population believes and why, touching on, for example, sectarian or ethnic divisions, political grievances and economic marginalization. The analysis should reveal how the local population receives and consumes its information, what sort of approaches might work best and what is less likely to succeed.

Foreign values, perspectives and approaches to communications may clash powerfully with local culture. Messages crafted in ignorance of local values and traditions may be counter-productive and even dangerous. Working closely with local partners is indispensable to understanding the local audience and what works best in terms of narrative and messaging. There is a wide body of work available from HMG and other sources to support communicators on conducting analysis in stabilisation contexts.[10] But to achieve the best results communicators need to utilise both in-house and external research, including data collection, monitoring and analysis, polling and focus groups, to analyse audiences, test the effectiveness of communications and provide the hard evidence required to adjust them accordingly so that they have the desired effect.

Understanding the Information Ecology

Having analysed and zeroed in on intended audiences, communicators then need to establish how to reach them. Different audiences require very different channels, which may change according to geography, demography, culture, age, and gender. In much of the Middle East, for instance, Facebook is vastly more popular than Twitter. In remote communities, such as Darfur in northern Sudan, the primary means of getting news is through oral transmission. Communicators need to understand how people get their information and how this information flows (see box below). Understanding the local media landscape and sector is also critical. It can serve both as an enabler and an impediment to effective strategic communications campaigning. During NATO's Operation Unified Protector in Libya in 2011, the lack of ground truth and information available to the alliance posed severe challenges. Without boots on the ground, NATO did not have the benefit of a local communications network and was unable to produce local stories and conduct outreach campaigns inside Libya. There was no polling available to increase understanding of local Libyan audience and there was significant confusion within the Libyan population regarding NATO's objectives. In a number of stabilisation contexts, especially in countries in which press freedom and freedom of expression have been severely restricted, promoting and supporting media sector reform, using credible partners such as BBC Media Action,

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[10] See "Analysis for Conflict and Stabilisation Interventions". Stabilisation Unit website.
http://sclr.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/publications/what-works-series

Internews or commercial specialists, can reinforce broader strategic communications objectives.

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Horses for Courses: The Challenges of Reaching Your Audience. Darfur 2008

In an attempt to bring together hostile communities scattered across remote regions of Darfur in the interests of peace, DFID supported the 2008 Al Da'en Equestrian & Arts Festival to promote the Darfur Peace Agreement in a challenging, non-permissive environment. A festival was an innovative way to communicate with large numbers of people in a region where most of the population had no internet access, newspapers, television or radio. Apart from music and horse-racing, a number of formal and informal sessions were held with tribal leaders to discuss security, land ownership and law, reconciliation and identity, and to allow the UN-African Union mission to explain its mandate. The peaceful festival was successfully delivered to tens of thousands of Darfuris and gained extensive local, regional and international media coverage.

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4: Best Practice

Communications is, above all, about people. Although experience is inherently valuable, there is nothing to stop the generalist becoming an effective communicator with the appropriate training: "communications in the conflict and stabilisation arena is as much about political understanding and savvy as it is about arcane techniques and the latest behavioural change theory."[11]

With a good team in place, communicators have a number of approaches, tools and techniques available to them to guide and inform their communications. Building on the principles set out above, below are some of the options and 'tools' communicators have at their disposal (see Annex A for a schematic setting out these steps).

Strategic Communications 'Toolbox'

In the first instance, when determining the approach, communicators should draw on and develop:

- **Research and Analysis**. Understand your environment and audience by using PESTLE and SWOT analysis, Target Audience Analysis, Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability (JACS) and other methodologies as appropriate. Depending on available resources, consider paid-for services, which can provide extensive statistical data underpinned by explanatory narratives. Media monitoring is an essential tool for communicators to retain situational awareness and ranges in sophistication from the free-of-charge Google Alert service, Twitter and Tweetdeck to paid-for subscriptions from specialist providers

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[11] Expert interview, 24 February 2016.

or 'scrapers'. Polling and focus groups are useful tools, allowing communicators to zero in on certain audiences and issues while charting the progress of their communications. Research and analysis, used in conjunction with monitoring and evaluation (see below), allows communicators to track the effectiveness of their communications and adjust them accordingly.

- **Communications Strategy**. The foundation of all your communications. What is your organisation's mission, what is the situation you are faced with, what are you seeking to achieve, who are you trying to reach, how are you going to reach them and how do you know you are succeeding? The strategy must pose and answer all these questions. All strategies must also include a monitoring and evaluation component. Writing the communications strategy is not enough. In order to succeed, it needs to be promoted and understood across the organisation and regularly reviewed and revisited. Communications go far beyond the Strategic Communications team. Every person within the organisation, be it soldier, diplomat, official or consultant, is a communicator.

- **Core Script or Narrative**. The narrative is a shorter document, an evolving story drawn up by communicators and regularly updated through events, press and social media activity, imagery, contributions by think-tanks and academic research, NGOs, lobbyists, campaign groups and international institutions. "Narratives are vital to create the political trajectory and hence the art of the possible within which to set political goals."[12] A successful narrative, respectful of local culture and history, should draw on Aristotle's three elements of persuasion: logos (reason), pathos (emotion) and ethos (moral authority). Crucially, so as to achieve greatest effect, the UK narrative should be as closely aligned as possible with the appropriate emerging local narrative about the conflict or particular intervention. In practice this means UK communicators forging close partnerships with their local counterparts.

> **Your Narrative is Your Strategy**
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> *"To draw a sharp distinction between strategy and strategic narrative is misguided: as the explanation of actions strategic narrative is simply strategy expressed in narrative form."*
>
> Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-first Century Combat as Politics*

- **Key Messages**. An essential part of the communications toolbox, messages need to be used carefully and tested and refined on an ongoing basis. Are they culturally appropriate for the audience/s you are trying to reach? Are they resonating, being picked up and repeated by the audience/s and are they having the desired effect? Do they need to be changed, and if so how? The sine qua non of good communication is that it is *not* a one-way process. "We've come to believe that messages are something we can launch downrange like a rocket, something we can fire for effect. They are not.

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[12] Expert interview, 6 March 2016.

Good communication runs both ways. It's not about telling our story. We must also be better listeners."[13] This can hardly be overstated. The days of transmit-receive are gone. Communicators also need to be acutely aware of the dangers and implications of sending out mixed messages: in Afghanistan, many commentators have argued that seemingly contradictory narratives on for example, the degree to which the international community publicly supported reconciliation with the Taliban, had a negative effect on the longer term prospects for a peace process.

With their analysis, strategy and core messages in place, communicators should consider how best to utilise their resources, which can include:

- **Existing HMG Resources.** Be aware and make use of existing resources and networks. There are strategic communications experts across government, in the FCO, MOD, DFID, SU, Home Office, RICU and elsewhere, who can provide relevant direct and indirect support. Get to grips with the relevant HMG communications strategy and core scripts or narratives for the country in which you are operating. There are also useful written resources, such as SU 'What Works' papers on Analysis, Planning, and Monitoring and Evaluation, together with related material on strategic communications that will aid any intervention.

- **Local 'Voices' and Expertise**. It is usually essential in a conflict or stabilisation context to supplement communicators' experience and expertise with local knowledge. Good, properly vetted local staff or partners can provide a highly effective filter or reality check, enabling communicators to target, recalibrate and refine their communications on an ongoing basis. Make sure to use a range of local voices and partners that are credible and legitimate.

- **External Expertise**. Communicators in challenging environments may wish to enlist external expertise to further communications objectives, bringing to bear specific communications, campaigning, advertising, polling, audience research, event planning or any other relevant experience. Alternatively, communicators may be able to form effective partnerships with trusted research and media organisations, not-for-profit charities and foundations with relevant subject matter expertise. These include, for example, BBC Media Action, Internews, Irex, D W Akademie, Freedom House, Fondation Hirondelle and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting.[14]

With their strategy in place and an understanding of the resources available, communicators can utilise the tools, methods and products available to implement their approach. These include:

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[13] Mike Mullen, *Strategic Communication: Getting Back to Basics*. 2009.
[14] The Center for International Media Assistance is a valuable resource on media development organisations. See http://www.cima.ned.org/resources/media-development-organizations/

- **The Grid**. Good communications can be carefully planned and sequenced by using a grid, a simple one-page table of weekly activities, signed off at a senior level and designed to maximise positive media coverage while deconflicting multiple activities within the organisation. The idea is to fill the grid and create media stories aligned with your objectives. In populating the grid, devise a compelling programme of events and activities that help communicators achieve their objectives. The range of activities should be comprehensive and appealing. Create a buzz, generate momentum and demonstrate progress and provide the media with activities they will want to cover.

- **Campaigns**. Communications campaigns are used frequently to mobilise audiences in order to persuade, deter or encourage other desired behavioural change within a concentrated period. They can be useful to accelerate momentum in high-intensity environments. Many campaigns in conflict and stabilisation contexts may centre on security – for instance public service announcements on terrorism, encouraging local audience to report suspicious activity and so on. Campaigns can also be successful, for example, in encouraging voter registration, promoting elections or bringing about change over a longer period, such as HMG's efforts to reduce the prevalence of FGM.

- **News Production and Media Products**. Modern communicators have an arsenal of products which should be deployed consistently and at a high tempo to demonstrate progress, professionalism and momentum. Press statements, press conferences, news stories, media visits, photographs, infographics, short film clips, short documentaries, blog posts, social media updates, campaigns, opinion polls and outreach activity are among the principal tools available.

> ### Iraq Case Study: Information Operations Task Force 2005-2011
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> *"The IOTF was a research-led, strategy-driven, product-focused and effects-based operation, enabled by wartime budgets that eventually topped $100m a year – of which 80% went to media buying on TV; 10% to research; and 10% to strategy and campaign management. Each month the team produced four television and radio commercials, 30 video news releases, longer-form documentaries, radio soaps, chat shows and other influence products, as well as two nationwide polls and 30 focus groups. It was an intense, concentrated barrage of unattributed product, strongly rooted in Iraqi cultural idiom and driven by a constant loop of research, analysis, strategic revision, product development, campaign assessment and feedback.*
>
> Paul Bell, formerly CEO Bell Pottinger Group and Head of Iraq Operations

- **Social Media**. Social media need not be baffling. It is best understood and treated as just another communications platform, something to use adeptly to serve communicators' purposes, to monitor news, message from and engage and experiment with. There are a host of platforms, of which the most popular as of 2016 include Facebook, Twitter,

YouTube, Pinterest, Tumblr, Instagram, Flickr and Vine. As with other communications platforms, one of the most important considerations is to use engaging and original content. The same principles apply. Tell good stories, reinforced with imagery and film.

Do not impose cumbersome approval processes and hierarchies. These discourage agile responses and swift communications, which should be the twenty-first-century professional communicator's modus operandi.

> **Social Media Campaigns**
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> Social media campaigns work best when they capture people's imagination by focusing on compelling human stories. Notable campaigns of recent years include **Kony 2012** against indicted war criminal Joseph Kony and **#BringBackOurGirls**, calling for the return of kidnapped schoolgirls in Nigeria in 2014. Note that a 'successful' social media campaign that goes viral can still fail to achieve its objectives. Three top tips: prioritise people over policy; provide original content: use attention-grabbing pictures & films.

5: Measuring Impact

Monitoring and Evaluation

We communicate strategically to achieve objectives. In order to assess whether those objectives have been reached, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is essential.

M&E is a specialist activity with its own expert practitioners.[15] If good communication is an art, M&E is closer to a science, using measurement and metrics and a variety of methodologies to demonstrate impact, ensure conflict sensitivity and prevent negative unintended consequences. As the accountability component within a communications project, M&E can also be key to maintaining support and funding for programmes. In designing your M&E process and approach, the following should be considered:

- **Planning**. Determine what desired changes will be monitored, using which indicators (pieces of information) at which levels (lower-level outputs, more substantial outcomes), and how often this data should be collected and analysed. How will this be done, who will do it and over what period of time? What resources will be required?

- **Key questions and indicators.** Options include:

  o How clearly do our messages connect to our wider strategy?
  o What audiences are we reaching? With what media? What messages are they receiving / not receiving? If not, why not?

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[15] Communicators planning the M&E component within their strategic communications programme should refer in the first instance to the SU's paper on "Monitoring and Evaluation of Conflict and Stabilisation Interventions". This contains invaluable practical advice on all aspects of M&E, from Theory of Change, realtime indicators and data gathering to impact evaluations, logframe analysis and outcome mapping. http://sclr.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/publications/what-works-series

- Have we learnt anything about our audiences that should change our messages and / or how they are delivered?
- How are audiences responding to our messages? Positively / negatively? Is there any evidence that it is contributing to changing attitudes and / or behaviours in any way? If not, why not?
- Is there any evidence that our communications are contributing to achieving our wider strategic objectives?
- Where we are working with partners, how effective is the coordination of messages and their delivery?
- Where we are aiming to build our partners' capacity, what evidence do we have that this has been achieved? Are our partners better at targeting / analysing / influencing audiences? Are they better at doing their own M&E?

- **Reviewing and Adjusting**. Assess progress on an ongoing basis and recalibrate communications based on the M&E's most recent findings.

Measurement and Monitoring Tools

Some of the most commonly used measurement tools include:

- **Media Monitoring and Analysis** allows you to determine how often your key messages are being picked up and used in the media, and trend of press coverage.
- **Opinion polling** can be conducted at regular intervals. Baseline research can be used to establish an attitudinal baseline from which to measure progress and change.
- **Focus groups** are a powerful tool that opens a window onto the local audience's thinking, perceptions and priorities.
- **Crowd-sourced verification** can be a helpful tool within social media reporting during conflict and stabilisation interventions but must also be used with care due to the potential for manipulation by adversaries.
- **Impact Evaluation** investigates factual and counter-factual results of intervention and explores alternative explanations for the results achieved.
- **Anecdotal reporting** is a basic but important technique. Speak to the local community as much as possible. What are people saying? What do they think? Is your message getting through and being used and repeated locally?

> **M&E Challenges**
>
> *"Too often the measurement feedback loops are too slow. You need to get a read on things in as close to real time as you can. In social media this is often easier to do and can be done remotely in real time. But when using other channels you need to have high-quality partnerships in place to give a read on the degree to which things are playing out and why. You then need the experience and adaptable approaches to be able to correct course accordingly."*
>
> Marcus Peffers, MC Saatchi

Conclusion

The most effective communications stem from good policy and are those that engage audiences, build trust and remain credible. If communications adhere to these principles they stand the best chance of mobilising support and, where necessary, achieving the desired behavioural change. Modern communications should be a genuine, two-way conversation, a combination of transmitting and receiving, listening and learning, rather than one-way messaging. Forming effective partnerships with local counterparts is often key to success.

Communicators need to be engaged at the earliest stages of an intervention and at the most senior level. In the modern information age, with multiple and often conflicting news sources, professional and timely communication is essential. In order to facilitate this, communicators need to be empowered through delegated responsibility, together with flat hierarchies and a sensible approval process. Communications are most likely to achieve the desired effects when they are driven by energy, imagination and commitment.

Annex A - Strategic Communications: a best practice schematic

Commission and consistently update research and analysis: critical to understanding your environment and audience

⬍

Establish Communications Strategy: a constantly revisited outline of what you are seeking to achieve, who are you trying to reach, how are you going to reach them and how you will know whether or not you are succeeding

⬍

Develop core script, narrative and key messages: drawing on your strategy, outline the actual messages and 'story' you want to get across to your audience(s)

Establishing the Approach

HMG resources: ensure you dock in to and make use of existing resources and expertise across government

⬍

Local 'Voices' and Expertise: it is essential to supplement UK or international communicators' experience and expertise with local knowledge and 'voices'

⬍

External Expertise: communicators in challenging environments may wish to engage non-government experts, who can bring specific expertise in communications, campaigning, advertising, polling and audience research to bear

Engaging with available resources

The Grid: communications should be carefully planned and sequenced using the grid method, a simple one-page table of weekly activities

⬍

Campaigns: campaigns are used frequently to mobilise audiences in order to persuade, deter or encourage other desired behavioural change within a concentrated period.

⬍

News and Media Products: communicators can use a wider range of means to get their message across, including: press statements, news conferences, media visits, photographs, infographics, short films, documentaries, blog posts and social media

Exploit available resources

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