

# *Optimizing* a U.S. Communications Strategy *through Structure and Design*

**by Sharon Engelmeier**

***Democracy refuses to think strategically unless and until compelled to do so for the purpose of defense.***

***—Sir Halford John Mackinder, British Strategist and Geographer<sup>1</sup>***

## **Background**

The endurance of Syria's Assad regime, Russia's defiant maneuvering in eastern Ukraine, and the Islamic State's encroachment on Iraqi territory stand as staunch reminders to those within U.S. government strategic communication fields that they remain deficient in comparison to their adversaries' savviness and enhanced influence capabilities. These entities display their abilities to harness and maximize information effects tactically and strategically through deliberate, agile, and focused information operation campaigns, while the U.S. struggles within its antiquated bureaucratic system. As the communication environment becomes more integral and complex, the need increases for an advisory council that is able to develop focused strategic communication plans and is empowered to synchronize the multitude of U.S. government communication entities.

This article discusses one possible organizational structure for optimizing the U.S. government's external counterterrorism (CT) communications. It is by no means the perfect solution; however, discussions must begin to improve the U.S. government's ability to promote and preserve its interests abroad by shaping and leading the discourse of local and regional narratives that comprise

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the mega-narrative. So often quoted as the war of ideas, the U.S. government's diminishing ability to project influence and confidence in its moral values and ideals has affected its ability to maintain its interests abroad. This article proposes that the government regain focus through the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC). However, as the article will illustrate, CSCC, housed within the Department of State, needs to be further empowered to allow it to develop and adjust integration of information plans and then disseminate to implementing partners to achieve strategic aims.

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## **Current Situation**

Strategic communications and information operations should be integrally linked in the growing effort to counter extremist ideology, narrative, and recruitment. In this arena, words must be tied to actions lest they remain empty and meaningless. This linkage requires planners that are extremely knowledgeable on specific, regional, historical biases and culture. Currently, the U.S. government does not have a coherent, regionally-focused, communications strategy nor deliberate mechanisms to coordinate and synchronize operational messaging to leverage and deconflict numerous communication specialists within the Department of State (State), Department of Defense (DoD), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the supporting United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Yet these departments and agencies operate in relative autonomy with minimal cross contact and cross-stimuli among experts.

At the strategic and operational levels, the U.S. government needs a systematic bridging mechanism across departments and agencies that forces departments to cross contact in order to strengthen messaging campaigns. The Strategic Communications Interagency Policy Committee (IPC) that feeds in to the National Security Council (NSC) lacks the direct feedback and insight necessary to understand how policy directly affects operational plans. Too often, provided strategic guidance falls short of achieving intended political aims because it is not informed by regional cultural and historical considerations. The NSC cannot make detailed CT communication plans without the experts who possess experience and knowledge of the Department resources necessary for extended creative planning. Approval time for State and DoD CT themes is too long. These messages could to be approved at lower levels if all departments and agencies were provided broad latitude and parameters within strategic communication aims.

The Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, Kenya in 2013 serves as an example of how the U.S. government missed an opportunity to discredit al Shabaab's narrative and contest its statement that a retaliatory attack was justified. Terrorist organizations' legitimacy thrives on public understanding based on perception, and their narrative promotes their actions as justifiable against an oppressive and overbearing adversarial government. However, with a lack of intimate knowledge of the regional conflict, dynamics, and biases, the young embassy public affairs officer and regional bureau desk representative at State were left to develop messages that failed to exploit the fact that Kenya had supported the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISON) only due to growing unrest created by al Shabaab. The public was then left to believe that this horrific attack might perhaps be justifiable, as al Shabab was only lashing out against the oppressive Kenyan

government. Another missed opportunity to counter extremist rhetoric occurred several months later following the prisoner exchange involving Sergeant Bergdahl. In that case, the U.S. government messaging was nonexistent toward Afghan and Muslim audiences, which subsequently allowed the Taliban to promulgate their messages uncontested. In either situation, the pro-U.S. government or counter extremist narratives would have benefited immensely from a CT communications council expert to craft and advise on the appropriate dissemination platforms and venues. Particularly in the Sergeant Bergdahl case, the NSC and White House Communications Office would have benefited by having a CT communications expert to highlight the need to address Muslim audiences pertaining to the prisoner swap. With uncontested messages, both the Taliban and al Shabaab were once again able to elevate their mega-narratives, further justifying their actions against what they voiced as Western infringement in the Muslim world.

## Refuting Older Models

Currently approval of themes and messages are restricted or significantly delayed by higher echelons within the U.S. government. The bureaucratic system is often and rightfully perceived to lag behind in its ability to counter the extremist ideology, narrative, and violence that perpetuates itself on social media. This is perhaps why some academic scholars and current practitioners long for a simpler time in U.S. government policy and strategic planning. During the Cold War, the U.S. national grand strategy provided clear guidance that allowed all government agencies to plug-in and support. A prime and iconic example was the United States Information Agency (USIA), which was devoted to informing and influencing foreign publics in promoting the national interest through public diplomacy.<sup>2</sup> Its main mission was to promote America's

perspectives, while weakening the Soviet's. The USIA model proved itself extremely effective; nonetheless, the model of a sole proprietor able to streamline information no longer fits a manifold of competitors. Additionally, while USIA developed information programs, it did not develop communication efforts for the other agencies and departments to follow and execute because the multitude of factions and nation states requires a U.S. government response that harnesses and deconflicts information through an interagency collaborative approach.

The USIA model used a broad brush approach that would not be as effective in today's complex environment. In addition to nation state threats, globalization and technological advancements have enabled smaller networks and regionally-specific nodes to reach unprecedented audiences globally.

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A successful campaign in today's communication environment requires multifaceted communication advisors familiar with implementers and capabilities housed within the government's departments and agencies. Consequently, inclusion from all components of the interagency spectrum—State, DoD, USAID, Broadcasting Board of Governors, and, most certainly, the intelligence community—is required for successful and deliberate influence campaigns.

Today there is a conglomerate of agencies and organizations within the U.S. government, as well as on the periphery, that is integral in developing and promulgating pro-U.S. narratives and countering extremist ideology, narrative, and recruitment. In today's fast-paced

information operating environment, a multitude of organizations cannot continually wait to receive guidance from one centralized entity. Rather the information environment requires an advisory CT communication council that is able to provide input to strategic aims while providing CT guidance through themes and messages to departments and agencies. This synchronization would allow embassies and military theater commanders faster and more effective use of their resources to address a growing problem in the information realm.

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## Challenges

The overall effectiveness of U.S. government messaging has diminished over the past decade despite increased budgets and personnel. Without concrete strategic aims that are measurable through subset objectives, strategic planners and operators work tirelessly without clear goals. State and DoD have unique bureaucratic challenges and cultures that set them distinctly apart. Identifying and acknowledging both organizations' strengths and weaknesses allow for more deliberate, focused, and agile U.S. government counterterrorism messaging. State possesses more regional cultural expertise at the operational level but often lacks strategic planning capabilities. Concurrently, due to personnel changes and remoteness of geographic commands headquarters, DoD communication and information operation experts rarely possess the same cultural expertise but are well-educated in counterterrorism applications and strategic planning.

A successful interagency communication organization must utilize each departments' strengths to foster collaboration and harness agencies' resources. The players who are advising and messaging within State are U.S. embassies, regional bureaus, and the CSCC. DoD's assets available for specifically countering extremist narratives at the combatant commands and theater special operations commands are public affairs, military information operation teams, civil affairs, special advisors, and training and equipping teams. Both departments maintain liaisons from the other department, as well as a handful of other agencies, typically in advisory capacities. However, partnered and directed communications across each department are not expected to coordinate and inform others on multitudes of programs and projects despite the obvious benefits and opportunities to pool and maximize resources toward a desired strategic aim. The challenge is that broad and overarching counterterrorism themes that are not revisited or evaluated consequently become insufficient to long-term planning efforts. Due to daily tasks and mission requirements, cross-pollination, and collaboration between both departments is personality-driven, depending on planner and operator knowledge and expertise.

## The Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication

Arguably by sheer purpose, the CSCC, housed within State, was designed and given the mandate to fuse the different elements within government to best counter extremist ideology and narrative in the interests of America. The genesis of CSCC, under the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, occurred under Executive Order 13854 to fill national security goals to proactively shape the narrative, counter violent extremist voices, discredit, and delegitimize al Qaeda by empowering credible voices.<sup>3</sup> Inadvertently CSCC stands as a case study on bridging the

gap between counterterrorism communicators, the intelligence community, and academia. This is accomplished through an interagency office comprised of foreign service officers, foreign service contractors, military officers, and members of the intelligence community. CSCC's organizational structure has several features that enable it to collaborate; however, an optimal strategic communication advisory council must be able to synchronize national assets.

### **Components of a Successful Hybrid Communications Organization**

CSCC already maintains some key structural and organizational components that have allowed it as a fledgling office to succeed within the past three years. However, if the overall goal is to have an entity capable of developing and synchronizing the implementation of a communication strategy, challenges to facilitate synchronization across the spectrum of key communicators within the current system are pervasive.

Currently housed within State, CSCC lacks the leverage and mechanisms to provide guidance and synchronize counterterrorism strategies across a multitude of government departments and agencies. The office needs a direct feed from NSC subcommittee meetings to discuss collaboration and integration of actions and words that together resound to create strategic effects that protect U.S. interests.

Key structural and design components of a successful interagency communication organization focused on multiple regions should be able to synchronize, de-conflict, and leverage assets to counter extremist ideology, narrative, and recruitment. The following characteristics build upon the innovative Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) structural and organizational principles required for a forward-leaning, cross-agency, and cross-disciplinary office within government.<sup>4</sup>

- **Remain small, flexible, and flat.** A two-level system allows for maximum collaboration while avoiding military hierarchy. The clearance process within State fosters more collaboration among agencies and bureaus but should remain more as an informative function rather than impede rapid dissemination. The size of the organization certainly allows for more timely responses and mitigates stove-piping ideas that are cross functionally relevant.
- **Relative autonomy and freedom from bureaucratic impediments.** Empowerment of strategic planners and practitioners is critical in dealing with current threats to national security interests. Meeting similar challenges, the Army has implemented the concept of mission command to enable disciplined initiative to empower agile and adaptive operations that will allow the exploitation of initiatives and create favorable conditions. The natural instinct within all levels of government is to maintain control of the information dissemination by waiting for higher authority concurrence for release. In many cases the higher authority is unaware of the capabilities that the subordinate commands possess. Consequently, stagnation plagues planners as they wait for approval for dissemination of minor products from higher authority who are often preoccupied by other events. Due to its leadership, CSCC is generally more empowered than other State or DoD offices but not to the extent necessary to quickly and effectively counter extremist messages. Additionally, due to its location within State, CSCC is unable to effectively synchronize with other departments to deconflict and maximize efforts.
- **Hiring continuity and change while maintaining mix of connected collaborators.** Rotation of fresh thinkers

and perspectives is necessary at all levels every two to three years due to the evolving environment. Incoming personnel are experienced experts with strong navigational skills within DoD, State, and academia. Due to its interagency composition, CSCC members must be integrally tied in with their parent headquarters to allow more rapid clearing, collaboration, and synchronization. Conversely, governmental departments and agencies must recognize the integral network and resources that CSCC provides within State. Currently CSCC's perceived value is rising amid non-DoD agencies. Surprisingly however, DoD stands to gain the most by investing key personnel and maintaining stronger ties with State through CSCC, as it remains a gateway for geographic combatant commanders and special operation commanders to collaborate and potentially synchronize efforts with regional bureaus and embassies.

**The dynamics of regularly exchanging ideas, lessons learned, and future opportunities for integration are a challenge for any organization with a multitude of interests and partners.**

- **Orientation to innovative trends and breakthroughs through a connected approach.** In CSCC, strategic planners and intelligence analysts are encouraged to seek multidisciplinary knowledge by attending symposiums and forums. This opportunity allows planners to combine scholastic insights on current trends and possible future investments with the realities of diplomatic and military organizations. Additionally, CSCC maintains its own Seminar series

for its community of interest that invites leading international scholars and thinkers.

- **Situational awareness.** An advisory council must have purview to current and future plans and policies. Aware that actions beyond those managed by communication professionals have value and impact, the two spheres of policy that direct actions and CT strategic communications need to overlap more than current practices.

## Recommendations

Enable CSCC as lead advisory office to disseminate and synchronize strategic communication plans as envisioned by Executive Order 13854. It is hard to imagine that the current "Think Again Turn Away" social media campaign run by CSCC was what former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta envisioned when they approached the President to create the counterterrorism office. One of the setbacks, of course, is that adjacent departments and agencies must be willing to plug-in to the overall operational guidance reflective of their own capabilities to reach strategic aims, similar to the military's overall operational command. This can be accomplished by either taking CSCC out of State and assigning it under the NSC or, perhaps more feasible, granting CSCC a permanent seat at the Strategic Communications Interagency Policy Committee (IPC). The Strategic Communications IPC is currently the main forum for deliberations and coordination relating to communication issues. Without CSCC presence at the IPC, the policy planners are not systematically aware of rising issues and lack the expertise of the CT communication planners and practitioners. Without CSCC's presence, there is no mechanism for the communications community of interest to timely address key concerns prior to issuance of new policy.

Secondly, maintain career planners and analysts from DoD, State, and the intelligence community to retain institutional knowledge from these organizations. As strategic planners and not merely liaison officers, these representatives have a clear understanding of their own organizations' actions. They can facilitate synchronization and deconfliction and bring their own CT communication expertise as contributing members. Additionally the development and synchronization of operational plans would benefit by the inclusion of a strategic planner from the USAID at CSCC. This would pay dividends in supporting USAID's CT relevance, as the agency is responsible for developing foreign nations' communication platforms. USAID inclusion would assist in ensuring wider dissemination of proposed CT communication programs and ensuring USAID is part of the CT communications plan.

While the structure and organization of CSCC has facilitated and allowed the organization to overcome typical problems that hamper interagency organizations, there are a few challenges that are not as easily overcome. Bridging these gaps will allow future communication organizations to operate at peak performance.

First it is a distinct challenge for a small organization such as CSCC to foster and thrive. Due to its composition—foreign service officers, State contractors, DoD, and intelligence community augmentees, by its nature, CSCC is integrated at the basic level. Naturally due to CSCC's existence within State, planners have developed relationships with U.S. embassies and coordinated with existing communicators within the Beltway on a regular basis. This network, however, needs to continue to expand, and CSCC must then provide CT strategic communication to these organizations. The dynamics of regularly exchanging ideas, lessons learned, and future opportunities for integration are a challenge for any organization with a multitude of interests and partners. Unlike typical DoD organizations, CSCC planners are more inclined to nurture and cultivate relationships, DoD's culture is to collaborate for specific missions, not merely to exchange ideas. Despite having strategic planners within CSCC, DoD organizations typically have not fully realized and capitalized on the strategic benefits of cultivating and maintaining stronger ties with CSCC. This sporadic collaboration needs to improve to allow for the optimization of U.S. government CT communications through resource sharing. **IAJ**

## NOTES

1 Sir Halford John Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, National Defense University (NDU) Press, Defense Classic Edition, 1996.

2 William P Kiehl., *America's Dialogue with the World*, Public Diplomacy Council, Washington, DC, 2006, p. 7.

3 Executive Order 13584, "Developing an Integrated Strategic Counterterrorism Communications Initiative," <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/09/executive-order-13584-developing-integrated-strategic-counterterrorism-c>>, accessed on October 1, 2014.

4 Francis Fukuyama, *Blindside: How to Anticipate Forcing Events and Wild Cards in Global Politics*, Brookings Institute Press, Baltimore, 2007, p. 65.