

Strength in Communication: A Study of Defense Intelligence Agency's Application

by Allyson Rogers

Napoleon Bonaparte has been credited with saying that “the secret of war lies in communications.”¹ Day-to-day operations are equally, if not arguably, more important than wartime communication, as transparent information flow allows for buy-in from the public, policymakers, and stakeholders. While there has long been ambiguity in approaches to communicating, academia and industry have worked to standardize best practices and share them with the federal government. However, bureaucracy and long-standing traditions to conceal and protect information prevent some government agencies, particularly those within the Department of Defense (DoD), from freely communicating. The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) is one such organization. The DIA's efforts to effectively communicate internally and externally are inherently challenging because of the organizational structure, policy, and authorities of the communication office and the lack of understanding about the communications role in the strategic environment.

According to DoD policy, timely and accurate information should be made openly available so that the public, Congress, and media may better understand facts about national security and defense strategy. Joint Forces doctrine underscores communication as a core competency for leaders and a warfighting function (Command and Control), establishing that this skill requires more than just the transmission of information. Communication as a competency generates a shared understanding and builds mutual trust by providing timely, accurate, transparent, and authentic information—tenets that are fundamental among DoD and branch-specific doctrine, as well as academia and industry. More than just a foundational tenet, communication is a responsibility of every U.S. government office and DoD entity. One resource that is available throughout the DoD community to assist with the responsibility of disseminating information is the public affairs officer (PAO).

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The Role of Communicators

At the most fundamental level, PAOs are responsible for providing their leaders with the atmospherics and optics related to mission objectives, intent, and purpose, as well as the timely and truthful dissemination of information to a wide array of audiences, including but not limited to internal workforces, media, public and private entities, and Congress.² A communication professional must maintain situational awareness of historical, current, and potential cultural sensitivities, perspectives, and attitudes to appropriately advise principals on how to shape information and messages.³ To that end, the communicator serves as guiding counsel, which has the responsibility to not only inject considerations into decision-making conversations, but also to act as a sounding board when discussing options and opportunities to shape and enhance information.

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Professional communicators require well-developed emotional intelligence to understand the resonating effect and impact of shared information.⁴ They are also responsible for understanding the way information is received, interpreted, and used based on the medium of delivery, use of key phrases and buzzwords, tone, gestures, translation, and other culturally and generationally specific internal and external factors. Therefore, the act of sharing and receiving information creates a communication-based systems perspective process that collectively and simultaneously generates meaning, and that meaning creates shared understanding and affords proper conveyance of an intended message. When that

message is miscommunicated, misinterpreted, or incomplete, credibility and relationships deteriorate.⁵

As it pertains to credibility, completeness and consistency are industry principles and standards that have the ability to quickly tarnish reputations when not upheld. Professional communicators are responsible for conducting business in a way that, to the best of their ability, provides transparent and comprehensive information to maintain accurate context and content.

Controlling the Narrative

The PAO's role requires more than just telling a story about an organization or mission, they must also seek to control it through continuously nested and complementary messages. While common dictionaries define a narrative as a formulated account of connected events—or a story—the U.S. government and DoD entities consider it a powerful and conceptual sense-making tool. Moreover, the narrative is a critical component of a communications strategy that nests within each higher echelon to ensure synchronization and consistency.

“Every HQ is engaged in an ongoing ‘Battle of the Narrative’—a cognitive contest between competing nations, entities, and ideologies. They focus on diminishing and supplanting the appeal of the adversary’s narrative while explaining and increasing the legitimacy of our mission and actions.”⁶ A narrative serves as “an effective way to showcase a message” that is crafted to build enduring support and understanding among audiences.⁷

The means of controlling a narrative requires relationships, rapport, trust, and constant observation between and among leaders, PAOs, and the public. Effective narratives control “interpretive frames, vocabularies of motives, feelings and affective displays and actions,” which then serve as functional sustainment of an activity, objective, or mission.⁸ Well-formulated

narratives invite a sense of social conformity, such that audiences subscribe to the conveyed message and begin to identify with it, further strengthening the information. Controlling and fostering that dynamic requires a strategic plan reinforcing the narrative's relativeness and position in the past, present, and future.⁹ The goal of controlling narratives is not to distill or dilute truth, but rather provide the necessary framework by which facts are meant to be interpreted and understood. When used effectively and with integrity, narrative control further strengthens and promotes objective clarity; it is a continual act of revising and redefining based on feedback, understanding, and developing information about emotions, trends, and interactions.

Employing Communicators

In his remarks at the 2019 Public Affairs Forum, then-Secretary of the Army Mark Esper proclaimed that commanders should use communications professionals as integral leaders on their command staff.¹⁰ Some commanders and agency leaders may not implement that recommendation, particularly because PAOs have a wide scope of responsibility that often is not well understood. However, if they heed Esper's guidance, they must also provide an information flow to support communication activities.

Effectively intertwining communicators into planning and operations briefs requires an organizational culture that understands and embraces transparency. When commanders are reluctant to integrate PAOs into their process it is often because it is unfamiliar, but it is becoming increasingly more necessary as a way to achieve desirable information effects. Retired Admiral Michael Mullen, former U.S. chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, identified the two have a mutually beneficial relationship. In 2009, he wrote, "... the lines between strategic, operational, and tactical are blurred beyond distinction. This is particularly true in the world

of communication, where videos and images plastered on the Web—or even the idea of their being so posted—can and often do drive national security decision-making."¹¹ Now, more than a decade later, those words have never been truer, especially with the role of disinformation and misinformation in the current environment. Tactical conditions are being impacted by the strategic level communications that are targeted at ill-advising and misguiding viewers to believe a false narrative and behave in a specific manner—not only does this have effects on the ground, but reverberations can be felt through the operational decision-making process.

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The way agencies and organizations influence public opinion is through the written and spoken word. As discussed above, the role of PAOs is to understand how to properly shape that interaction with the public, and properly articulate information in a way that will be understood by audiences and achieve desired effects. According to Clausewitz the will and passion of people "constitute(s) the spirit that permeates war as a whole, and at an early stage they establish a close affinity with the will that moves and leads the whole mass of force."¹² Whether in war or in peace time, retired Colonel Steve Boylan wrote, "the court of domestic public opinion, driven by modern communications, can have a dramatic impact on military decisions, generally at the strategic and operational level, but also down to the tactical level."¹³ Publicly shared information has the capacity to sway the general populace to support or obstruct governmental and non-governmental actions; thus, public opinion and their situational

awareness about current and enduring events wield incredible power. It is not dissimilar to a shaping operation, wherein commanders use kinetic and non-kinetic battlefield tactics to influence the opposition to react and respond in a specific manner. Consequently, commanders must view strategic communication and the role of a PAO as equally important to an operation's success as the fires or logistician roles.¹⁴

Overall PAOs contribute to mission success because they have the expertise to “engage key audiences in order to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable to advance national interests and objectives through the use of coordinated information, themes, plans, programs, and actions synchronized with other elements of national power.”¹⁵

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The DIA Way of Communicating

Within DIA, there's one directive that establishes the executive office that manages communications efforts—the Office of Corporate Communications (OCC). The DIA Directive (DIAD) 5400.400 identifies OCC as the agency authority and principal advisor for corporate communications, which is defined as “a set of activities and efforts that combines DIA's mission and vision into cohesive messages delivered to internal and external audiences such as overseas, partners, media, the general public, and other stakeholders.”¹⁶ The definition goes on to explain that OCC integrates the agency brand, identity, programs, and initiative information into a cohesive, coherent, and consistent message to build an understanding about DIA's mission, enhance credibility, and promote transparency.

However, the directive itself stops short of mandating timely and effective use of OCC in everyday agency activities, only identifying the need to coordinate with OCC prior to the release of information.

The directive does not outline the services that OCC provides the agency, nor does it supply a reasonable expectation for using the office in a timely fashion. Many interactions between agency program offices and directorates to OCC come in the form of a last-minute request for review. This reactive standard operating procedure does not afford OCC the necessary time to review products, ask questions, and release a thorough and brand-consistent message. While that is not always the case, there has been less accountability within the agency to adhere to the DIAD.

The DIA's Office of Corporate Communication comprises three divisions—congressional communication, strategic communications, and strategic outreach—and several branches, which include protocol, mission engagements, history, and multimedia. In total, OCC has more than 85 employees that include senior executives to junior officers and contractors. With the administrative support staff and senior leaders removed from action officer operations, there are approximately five to 10 people per branch who are responsible to a strategic-level agency of 16,500 employees. The DIA has five directorates, five regional centers, three integration centers, numerous field offices, and geographically dispersed officers at combatant commands. The OCC's ability to maintain operational awareness is challenged by the lack of its visibility and authority, which is merely recommended by the current DIAD.

An additional complication is that DIA's Office of Facilities and Services owns the print department and a design team, and there are several program-specific communication specialists dispersed throughout the agency's program offices, none of which have any

responsibility or accountability to OCC. At times, there have been conflicting directorate-driven tasks that have been ill-aligned to the greater agency brand and are adrift from the agency message. Furthermore, the Prepublication and Security Review Program, which by DIA policy has the authority to review and approve content for public dissemination, falls under the Information Management and Compliance Office. The current OCC-related DIAD does not articulate any responsibility for oversight of these agency assets, nor is there any mandate for coordination.

What Right Looks Like: One Way, Not the Way

Management theories and models would suggest that a hierarchical structure that mandates an upward flow of information for approval may breed a micromanagement dynamic that is time-intensive. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) has demonstrated that the inclusion of the communication team can expedite the process and better prepare key stakeholders for potential pitfalls, proactively preparing the organization to answer questions.

"When our office was created, an email was sent from the then-assistant administrator to the agency's national leadership that explained the role of the office of communications and its duties to anticipate issues and manage the strategic communications for the agency writ large," said Kate Naughten, Communications Director for NOAA Fisheries. She explained that the administrator's memo established the communications office in 2010 as a direct report to the deputy assistant administrator for operations. The new office also had support from the agency's chief of staff, which has consistently been the key to the office's success. Since the memo, Naughten and her team established the type of services that her office

would offer, including proactive planning and message development, crisis communications, video, podcast, website design and architecture, article writing, product consultations, editing, communications training, and coaching.

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"We're an office built to serve the agency. We are a team of technical (subject matter experts) in strategic communication. Our leadership and the agency as a whole needed that," said Naughten.

That original memo created a common understanding that the agency's national communications office would be the trip-wire for any controversial communications issue before it bubbled up to leadership. We develop and vet what the agency's position and plan will be when it comes to communicating complex, controversial issues. Oftentimes we're the conduit to leadership. So, if (staff) want to message decisions, issues or milestones externally, and they want leadership – being the assistant administrator and the deputy assistants and chief scientist – sign-off, then they have to work with us.

Naughten explained that while the agency does not have a specific policy that dictates the standard operating procedure of funneling actions and ongoing activities through the NOAA Fisheries Office of Communications, the shared understanding established by the memo and the continued endorsement from the chief of staff's office help keep things running smoothly. She explained that operations are efficient when her team is read in from the beginning, not at the last minute. It is a success when leadership expresses their appreciation for the efforts to properly

prepare and then execute the communications plans they are sent.

“We live in the middle ground between the subject matter experts who are involved in the issue and are trying to develop the messages and the leaders who have the final say on our agency’s position or approach,” she said, adding that their standard operating procedures, including developing communications plans for high visibility announcements, “usually guarantee success” because it is approached as a whole-of-agency, team effort.

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NOAA Fisheries, similar to DIA, has three divisions—regulatory programs, scientific programs, and operations—five regional offices, six science centers, and six headquarters program offices, alongside policy, legal, and administrative and technical support offices. NOAA Fisheries employs 4,200 people and the communications team is comprised of approximately 14 people at headquarters. The NOAA Fisheries communications efforts are augmented by local teams from regional offices. Some locations have one or two full-time dedicated communications specialists, while other locations have additional assets in the form of contractors.

Naughten explained that, when forming the national communications office, some of the technical experts that were dispersed throughout headquarters offices were brought together to build the new national team. However, without a wire-and-block organizational chart that incorporated all communicators under the then-newly established office, some programs

maintained their lead communications specialist. Thus, when NOAA Fisheries Communications was established, so too were weekly meetings among the communications office staff and the program-specific communications staff, which eventually developed into a NOAA Fisheries Headquarters Communications team. From there, coordination efforts were expanded to include the regional and science center communications leads. That led to the formation of the Regional Communications Council, which has biweekly meetings, as well as a one-week-long annual in-session meeting. NOAA Fisheries leadership usually participates in the Regional Communications Council’s annual meetings.

“We had to work really hard to establish relationships,” said Naughten, adding that it took nearly four years to get operations to where they are today, running smoothly, not only within the agency but also with audiences. She said that just as much work went into obtaining agency buy-in as did establishing a way to communicate transparent, informative messages to the public, media, and stakeholders. “When new leadership or communications staff come on board, there’s an education process to help them get up to speed and understand how we plan for, coordinate, and conduct communications. We have a collegial, collaborative culture and that’s worked well. It’s a two-way street. There’s a lot of trust among the agency leadership and the communications team.”

“For most communications, our office is the conduit to and from leadership; we help facilitate getting information to the front office and we try and shape communications projects or products before they get too far down the pipeline for clearance,” she said. “Usually, staff call to discuss an upcoming issue, announcement, event, or whatever with us. For the high visibility issues, I try and get initial feedback from the chief of staff. Armed with those insights, our office then works on preparing and executing a communications plan for whatever the issue

is. Our goal is to add value, be of service, and facilitate a successful outcome. Our success is the agency's success."

While Naughten and NOAA Fisheries have developed a culture of inter-cooperation and collaboration, she said that, for continuity's sake, it would help to have established policies and authorities. The concern is that as employees retire or move on, those who have seen what "right" looks like and how fluid information can flow from developer to leaders to dissemination, there's nothing that formalizes the process or authorities.

Adopting the NOAA Model

In a Joint Force Quarterly article, Admiral Mullen wrote, "I would argue that most strategic communication problems are not communication problems at all. They are policy and execution problems."¹⁷ While the organizational structure, policy, and authorities are not officially documented for NOAA Fisheries Communications Office, the way in which they conduct business is a model proven effective for disseminating information and protecting the agency by providing accurate, timely, and transparent communication to stakeholders. Using the concept for operations established by NOAA Fisheries, it is recommended to more fully actualize its potential by codifying standards and protocols into policy and authorities bequeathed to a communications office.

As previously identified, DIA's communication office is currently supported by DIAD 5400.400, which stipulates the existence of the office, but stops short of supplying legitimate authorities or permanency among staffing actions for leaders and decision-makers. DIA policy does not require communication efforts (from anywhere within the agency) to be coordinated with or through the DIA Office of Corporate Communications.

As Naughten explained, with agency-wide buy-in for coordination through the national

communications office, endorsed by the deputy assistant administrator for operations, the chief of staff, and other key leaders, NOAA Fisheries—as an agency—is better prepared for communicating high-level decisions and ready for blowback, media queries, congressional requests, etc. Thus, program offices providing the communications office with better situational awareness of activities has worked well for the agency. While the communications office is not solely responsible for mitigating and handling blowback, by having visibility on issues, messages, products, and program happenings, NOAA Fisheries Communications is able to anticipate what audiences might say, or do; readily positioning the agency to respond.

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Naughten explained that her office is not the authority to say what is a "go or no-go." But she said her office "can ask probing questions and provide feedback to start a conversation about potential communications issues that may not have been considered," explaining that action officers and subject matter experts are solely focused on their project usually, not the how or why of strategic communications. "We help expand the discussion to take into account other key factors like messaging, tactics, and timing," she said. The NOAA Fisheries Communications Office aligns information released with a most suitable timeline and broadens the spectrum of release to the advantage of the agency, thereby pacing agency messages—harnessing timely interest of—and spacing it out so there is a steady stream, while also connecting key influences or affected parties to ensure no one is blindsided.

Like the DIA's director, NOAA Fisheries' Assistant Administrator is a political appointee, which means the agency leader changes every few years. "With new leadership comes different levels of access and interest for the communications office," she said. However, the continuity positions in the NOAA Fisheries' front office provide enough institutional knowledge to support the intent of the 2010 memo and solidifies the role of the communicators. Additionally, there is a NOAA policy that dedicates a position on the agency's leadership council to the director of communications, which assists in maintaining top-level access to decision-making conversations.

Pertaining to DIA, it would be advantageous to adopt the NOAA Fisheries model and, taking it a step further, formalize policies and authorities for the betterment of the OCC's efforts that, in turn, support the whole agency. Among the recommendations for changes include a policy to include OCC on traffic from program offices to the front office (i.e., command suite), authority to be the clearance and release authority of DIA-related information, a policy to provide an enforcement mechanism to use DIA branding, and a restructuring of all DIA communications assets to be organic assets of OCC with embedded assignments to the directorates and program offices.

The...most comprehensive recommendation for DIA includes a complete overhaul of the communication personnel structure within the agency.

Establishing a policy that mandates OCC inclusion in conversations and traffic to-and-from the front office ensures that the communications office has visibility on agency activities in real-time. The OCC, in this instance, would not be used as a filter or gate guard, just as NOAA Fisheries Communications is not.

Instead, OCC would be a trusted agent for sound counsel, a PAO role defined by DoD doctrine. In doing so, OCC would have situational awareness to appropriately and timely interject to ensure the agency is protected and communications efforts are more proactive, thereby aligning strategy to mission for the betterment of the agency. In serving as a trusted advisor, there is a responsibility to explore and anticipate how information will or could be received to posture the agency (and its leaders) for follow-up questions or blow-back, as well as act as a sounding board to enhance opportunities to promote transparency and instill trust among audiences. Additionally, with the OCC as the sole release authority of agency information, capitalizing on the currently existing directive, but with the above policy in place, enhances efforts to cohesively and coherently disseminate information about the agency.

Currently, the OCC DIAD identifies that agency elements will adhere to the branding guidance. The DIAD charges the OCC with creating and maintaining branding guidance. However, there are no enforcement mechanisms established to generate followership of the directive. If the DIAD were expanded to articulate that no agency information would be shared unless it is in proper branding, using more stringent language, could provide enough deterrence for issuances off-brand. This would effectively mitigate the lack of knowledge about the DIA, its mission, and program office activities though ensuring released content has a unified look and feel.

The last and most comprehensive recommendation for DIA includes a complete overhaul of the communication personnel structure within the agency. Essentially, this action suggests that all communicators within DIA—from the program offices and directorates—alongside all related service capabilities would be absorbed into OCC. This restructuring would include the design

and print department from the Office of Facilities and Services, the Prepublication and Security Review Program from the Information Management and Compliance Office, the design and dissemination team from the Directorate for Analysis, and the outlier program-specific communication specialists. These assets would be organic to OCC, with direct accountability and authority from OCC. To that end, personnel would be task-organized and embedded in the program offices and directorates for day-to-day operations. Bringing the entire communication specialties and capabilities into and under one umbrella ensures alignment with the agency strategy as the primary function and purpose; this would reduce mission creep and overtasking of communicators while enabling better collaboration and coordination among communication efforts for the betterment of the agency brand and consistency of messaging.

Naughten said that at NOAA Fisheries collegiality drives collaboration. However, with DIA as a DoD entity, in which policy drives nearly everything, having a restructuring with the policy that authorizes the manning strength and tasking capabilities of OCC, it would be easier to gain traction and have a lasting impact for the long-term agency gain. Thus, top-level reinforcement and building relationships in order to use the NOAA Fisheries Communications model as the standard operating procedure will not be enough for OCC.

The one aspect not yet addressed is the DIA application of a communication model that works for an agency outside of the Intelligence Community (IC) and with a completely different mission set. Promoting more authority, a restructure, and codified access and visibility does not mean that additional content will be shared to public audiences. However, it presents an opportunity to share more, when appropriate, with intentional audiences because the correct technical experts are aware of real-time reports and operations. To this point, during

the Annual Threat Assessments hearings and other open congressional sessions, politicians and oversight officials have asked the IC to be more transparent and share more information. If additional access and authority were given to the right communicators, brought together by a cohesive and collaborative structure throughout the agency, that request could more easily be met. The emphasis of this recommendation is about information, not influence; if more meaningful content about the agency, its mission, and operations could be shared, it would be the responsibility of the agency and its leaders to promote transparency, tell its story, inform the public, and raise situational awareness about the DIA and the IC.

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Conclusion

In conclusion, if the DIA is going to continue to expand situational awareness of stakeholders and compete for its equal place among federal agency messaging, it must implement changes in the way of policy and authority for the OCC. The CIA and other DoD entities have a large publicly accessible information flow, while the DIA is working to better posture its messaging in the public arena. But without the appropriate time and coordination among agency program offices, there are numerous missed opportunities or underdeveloped communication plans. By issuing policy, the OCC would have the legitimacy and resources it has been lacking. Additionally, by providing expanded authority the agency would reinforce the role of the OCC. In the current information age, it is imperative that DIA messages and information are heard

and understood among stakeholders. The DIA must lean forward and be proactive in its approach to communications or fail in the information environment. **IAJ**

Notes

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