NEXT-GENERATION STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION:

BUILDING INFLUENCE

THROUGH ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING

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Introduction

The value of a social network is defined not only by who's on it, but by who's excluded.
—Paul Saffo, *The Economist* (October 18, 2007)

Social networks existed long before MySpace and Facebook hit the headlines. Sociologists and researchers have used the term *social networks* for over a century to describe complex sets of relationships between members of social systems at all levels. At its core, a social network—whether face-to-face or web-based—is a map of relevant ties among participants in the network. Within this social network map, individuals in a particular network may exhibit varying degrees of interconnectedness—ranging from tightly connected cliques to those with few connections within a single network—but nonetheless, they act as gateways to other networks. Online social networks have become technologically-driven extensions of the relationships, interactions, and alliances that people establish as part of their everyday lives. However, the Department of Defense (DoD) and other interagency partners underutilize online social networking to advance the U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication. Government departments and agencies should increase their influence through social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogging to support U.S. national strategy as it relates to strategic communication and countering messages sent by violent extremist organizations.

Strategic Communication

Although the United States invented modern public relations, we are unable to communicate to the world effectively who we are and what we stand for as a society and culture, about freedom and democracy, and about our goals and aspirations. This capability is and will be crucial not only for the Long War, but also for the consistency of our message on crucial security issues to our allies, adversaries, and the world.
                                                                    —*U.S. National Defense Strategy* (June 2008)

United States public diplomacy and strategic communication are intended to synchronize and coordinate messages, themes, and programs throughout the Department of State (DoS), DoD, and other government agencies to advance U.S. foreign policy and achieve national security objectives. In 2004, a Defense Science Board task force concluded, "U.S. strategic communication must be transformed." The report points out, "Strategic communication is a vital component of U.S. national security. It is in crisis, and it must be transformed with a strength of purpose that matches our commitment to diplomacy, defense, intelligence, law enforcement, and homeland security."[1]

Before developing and proposing a plan to improve U.S. national strategic communication, one first needs an understanding of who is responsible for strategic communication. In 1983, President Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive Number 77 (NSDD-77), which highlights how public diplomacy relates to national security. He established a Special Planning Group under the National Security Council composed of the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, Director of the U.S. Information Agency, Director of the U.S. Agency for International Development, and Assistant to the President for Communications. These are the departments and agencies charged with organizing, planning, and coordinating strategic communication.[2] Since the release of NSDD-77, several Presidential

directives on information and public diplomacy have been issued. NSDD-130 (1984) recognized

improvements in international information programs, but encouraged exploration of new

technologies. It warned officials to maintain appropriate capabilities during war and peace and

increase their assessments of foreign opinion to U.S. information.[3] Presidential Decision

Directive Number 68 (1999) ordered the creation of an International Public Information Group

made up of top officials from the interagency and chaired by the Under Secretary for Public

Diplomacy and Public Affairs at DoS. This group was formed as a result of military missions in

Kosovo and Haiti where it was demonstrated that no single U.S. agency had the authority to

coordinate efforts. The group was ordered to "assist efforts in defeating adversaries."[4] No

additional, unclassified strategy was implemented until the 2007 U.S. National Strategy for

Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication. It serves as an action plan for strategic

communication, addressing resource needs, stating objectives, and listing priorities. Most

notably, the strategy outlines a structure for interagency coordination and it defines three

strategic audiences, including *Key Influencers* as "those whose views can have a ripple effect

throughout society."[5]

United States Government Strategic Communication Programs

The International Broadcasting Committee (IBC) was established by NSDD-77. It is

chaired by a representative of the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and is

responsible for coordinating U.S. Government-sponsored, non-military, international

broadcasting.[6] NSDD-45 (1982) is still in effect and gives the authority for international

broadcasting via programming on Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Radio Marti, and other

stations.[7] In addition to these broadcasts, the DoD has directed all Combatant Commands to

develop, operate, and maintain websites in the targeted languages specific to their respective

areas of responsibility. Using conceptual approaches approved by the government, U.S. Special

Operations Command supports this directive with websites tailored to both promote U.S. policy

goals and counter the messages of political and religious extremists.[8] Among the diplomatic

corps, strategic communication emanating from U.S. embassies is managed by their Public

Affairs Sections, which produce magazines and newspapers, manage official Internet portals, and

regularly conduct press conferences to disseminate messages tailored to their specific countries.

Issues Affecting United States Government Strategic Communication Strategy

In spite of official guidance laid out by the U.S. Government requiring the coordination

of strategic communication, The current *National Defense Strategy* identifies "a weakness across

the U.S. Government, and that a coordinated effort must be made to improve the joint planning

and implementation of strategic communications."[9] Lack of coordination can hinder the use of

innovative media (i.e., online social networks, mobile technology, chat rooms, and blogs) to

disseminate official messages. As such, the U.S. Government risks failure in reaching its target

audiences around the world by this underutilization of commonly-used communication networks.

Online Social Networks

Social dynamics for creating identity and meaning are especially germane to the Internet, which is an incredibly powerful vehicle for creating grand narratives and constructing community.
                                               —David Bollier, *People/Networks/Power*

An online social network is a web-based or mobile service that allows individuals to

construct a public or semi-public profile among various domains, develop a list of other users

with whom they share a connection, and manage their list of connections and those made by

others within the system. While the term *online social network site* is used to describe this

phenomenon, the term *social networking sites* also appears in public discourse, and the two terms are often used interchangeably. Currently, popular online platforms include Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace. On many of the large online social networks, participants are not necessarily *networking* or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network.

Recent Successful Online Social Network Events

Though a relatively new phenomenon, many successful strategic uses of online social networks have been documented. In February 2008, over six million people in 185 cities around the world marched against the Colombian narco-terrorist group, the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC), for kidnapping hostages and holding them for years in hidden jungle camps. The inspiration for the march originally came from a campaign started online by a group of students on the social network site Facebook, where they called their protest "Million Voices against the FARC." The catalyst the students used to build the protest group were videos, messages, and documents posted on Facebook proving that while FARC hostages were still alive, they were being held in the harshest of conditions. This message appealed to millions of people worldwide who demanded the immediate release of all hostages through a massive popular outcry. The march was then actively covered by mainstream media around the world, specifically *El Tiempo,* Colombia's major national daily newspaper, *The New York Times*, CNN, Fox News, and the British Broadcast Corporation (BBC). Due to the international momentum gained by this demonstration, the FARC was forced to release additional hostages and was subsequently put on the defensive in their revolutionary media campaign.[10] The protests succeeded in Colombia, and it all began from strong popular support through the online organizing group.

In another use of online social networking, President Barack Obama used Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace to bring his campaign to millions of new followers in the United States through their computers and cell phones.[11] This innovative method of campaigning allowed the then presidential candidate Obama and his campaign team to influence young and undecided voters who frequently visit these online social sites. By September 2008, President Obama's Facebook page boasted 6,267,981 supporters.[12] Recognizing the potential of this new frontier, Republican Party presidential candidate Senator John McCain and his campaign team also created a Facebook site, eventually reaching 625,000 supporters by the end of the national presidential campaign.[13] Not only were both presidential candidates' campaign messages delivered to new followers through Facebook, but social networking also allowed them to collect millions of dollars of individual contributions for their political campaigns.

Violent Extremist Organizations and Social Networks

The nearly limitless potential for strategic communication on the Internet has not gone unnoticed by terrorist organizations. No matter their political orientation, Islamists, nationalists, separatists, racists, and anarchists all find online social networks alluring. Today, most active terrorist organizations maintain websites, with many maintaining more than one using several different languages. Typically, these sites provide a history of the organization and its activities; a detailed review of its social and political background; accounts of its notable exploits; biographies of its leaders, founders, and heroes; information on its political and ideological aims; fierce criticism of its enemies; and up-to-date news. Despite the ever-present vocabulary of "the armed struggle" and "resistance," most sites do not feature a detailed description of violent activities. Even if they expound at length on the moral and legal basis of the legitimacy of the use of violence, most sites refrain from referring specifically to the terrorists' violent actions and

their fatal consequences. This reticence is presumably inspired by propagandist and image-building considerations.[14]

Online social networks are often used to recruit and mobilize supporters to play a more active role in the support of terrorist activities or causes. In addition to seeking converts by using the full continuum of website technologies like audio and digital video to enhance the presentation of their message, terrorist organizations capture information about the users who browse their websites. Users who seem most interested in the organization's cause, or are well suited to carry out its work, are then contacted. Recruiters may also use more interactive Internet technology to roam online social networks, chat rooms, and blogs looking for receptive members of the public—particularly young people. Electronic bulletin boards and user nets (chat rooms and blogs) are increasingly used as vehicles for reaching out to potential recruits.

Next-Generation Strategic Communication

Allied governments need to have the will to use public diplomacy as a political instrument.
> —Stefanie Babst, "Reinventing NATO's Public Diplomacy"

Having explored strategic communication and recent examples of social networking, one can analyze the problem space as it relates to the U.S. national strategy.

Implications for Strategic Communication Planning

Strategic communication planning for the whole of the U.S. Government is undoubtedly a daunting endeavor. From the military planning perspective, the three fundamental building blocks of strategic communication planning focus on: the delivery vehicle, timing, and tempo.[15] Additionally, strategic communication must be synchronized with other U.S. agencies.[16] From

the national policy planning perspective, adapting to the "new reality" of information transformation poses a significant problem for traditionally-minded governments.[17] As a NATO research paper by Stefanie Babst notes, "The successful application of soft power does not come for free but requires careful strategic planning."[18]

A changing understanding of hierarchical structures and communities is also an important planning consideration. The structure of nation states, government agencies and corporations are typically hierarchical in nature. Contrast that with the "communities of shared interest emerging on the Internet," [19] which typically manifest themselves as online social networks. The modern media environment vividly shows how important "personalization, customization, and interaction for, by and with audiences" has become. Some corporate enterprises quickly realized the traditional relationship between the organization and the audience had been usurped by this modern media environment.[20] For example, CatholicMatch.com—a ten-year old social networking site—identified three characteristics of success within the new reality: (1) grouping people by interest area, (2) making communication easy and edifying, and (3) providing a sense of community. The organization adopted this understanding into its planning and continues to generate strong traffic to this day. [21] In this age of information, effective strategic communication planning will occur within organizations which understand that identity and meaning now result from membership in social communities.[22]

Social Networking is the "New Reality"

Online and mobile media technologies are the new tools for governments, corporations, civic organizers, political candidates, and ordinary citizens "to reach out to others and galvanize community action on a wide range of issues."[23] The elements of a successful civic engagement using online and mobile media span the gamut from recruiting new members to encouraging

existing members to take action—all the while becoming a source of reliable and trusted information on an issue.[24] In the commercial sector, the key to strategic communication—influencing audiences in order to gain market share—is establishing and promoting the corporate brand. Likewise with governments, online and mobile platforms afford similar opportunities for them to introduce their brand to a global audience and reach an audience much larger than their traditional communities of interest. With respect to the U.S. Government, its representation in the digital sphere has been through websites featuring multiple modes of media (video, text, and photos), but still representing a one-way, non-dynamic approach. The digital age is one powered by blogs, chat rooms, and social networking platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.[25]

Given the myriad of challenges facing the U.S. Government and its finite supply of resources, it is reasonable to ask whether this media trend really matters. How popular is social networking and should the U.S. Government expend resources to utilize this capability for strategic communication? The statistics and trends are remarkable. Quantcast is a company which collects real-time metrics on digital media. It ranks one million web sites based on the level of monthly U.S. traffic volume. Table 1 shows that social networking sites accounted for four of the top ten sites. Facebook has monthly traffic of over 87 million monthly users. Twitter ranked 28th (leaping from 46th one month earlier) with over 23million monthly users. How did traditional news sources and government websites compare? Table 2 shows that the highest-ranked traditional news source (CNN.com) was commensurate with Twitter, but most traditional information sites fell below the social networking sites.

Besides the traffic volume, the growth among social networking sites is phenomenal. Facebook nearly doubled its traffic in the four months ending in April 2009, while Twitter experienced nearly 2,000-percent growth during the same period (and nearly doubled in just one

Table 1 – Top 10 U.S. Websites based on Traffic[26]

Rank	Site	Monthly Traffic Volume
1	google.com	141M+ U.S. monthly people
2	yahoo.com	122M+ U.S. monthly people
3	live.com	114M+ U.S. monthly people
4	msn.com	100M+ U.S. monthly people
5	facebook.com	87M+ U.S. monthly people
6	youtube.com	82M+ U.S. monthly people
7	Microsoft.com	80M+ U.S. monthly people
8	Wikipedia.org	73M+ U.S. monthly people
9	myspace.com	64M+ U.S. monthly people
10	ebay.com	60M+ U.S. monthly people

Table 2 – Ranking of Traditional Information Sites[27]

Rank	Site	Monthly Traffic Volume
27	cnn.com	23M+ U.S. monthly people
61	nytimes.com	11M+ U.S. monthly people
67	people.com	11M+ U.S. monthly people
82	foxnews.com	9M+ U.S. monthly people
309	army.mil	3M+ U.S. monthly people
434	state.gov	2M+ U.S. monthly people
635	navy.mil	2M+ U.S. monthly people
703	whitehouse.gov	2M+ U.S. monthly people
1062	af.mil	1M+ U.S. monthly people
141,072	bbc.com	8K+ U.S. monthly people

month). One can only speculate how large these networks will grow and how quickly they will get there. Comparatively, growth among traditional news sites has shown no growth or has shown a decrease in their constituencies. As if growth were not enough, social networking sites are also consistent, as social network users are both loyal and persistent: 66 percent of Facebook users were categorized as either *addicts* or *regulars* and account for 97 percent of its traffic[28]; 28 percent of Twitter users were categorized as addicts or regulars and account for 76 percent of visits.[29] This level of dedication merits the consideration of using social networks, as well as identifying potential networks to build and grow through key influencers.

Key Influencers Bolster Social Networking Reach

Creating identity and meaning through online networks requires an understanding of the organizing principles of social networks. Four basic principles guide social network development: they make it easy for people to pursue shared goals, they are efficient and fast-paced, they shift power to decentralized *smart mobs*, and they "tend to be dominated by a few in influential hubs." [30] A significant implication of these principles is identifying "key nodes of influence in global networks, so that you can try to engage them constructively."[31] During the Cold War, the United States and its allies made use of existing intellectual movements against

Communism by providing "money and organization to turn individual efforts into a coherent campaign." [32] They used these movements to build influence while maintaining a distance between themselves and the messengers to increase the likelihood of success. This history is useful because three commonalities exist between the Cold War and today: (1) we are in a new and confusing geopolitical environment with a significant security threat, (2) new, large U.S. Government agencies were created to combat the issue, and (3) we are in an ideological struggle[33]—a *war of ideas*.

Consider this modern-day example of key influencers and social networks. Hollywood actor George Clooney travels to troubled areas of the globe to make statements about local situations. He frequents the Dafur region of Sudan, Africa to highlight local conflict. Mr. Clooney also serves the United Nations (UN) in an official capacity as a Messenger of Peace. This example spawns a practical question worthy of U.S. Government consideration: Which information source has greater influence over the world community, George Clooney doing a spot on *Entertainment Tonight* or a UN official posting an update at www.un.org? Both the Cold War and this contemporary example demonstrate the power wielded by key influencers within social communities to propagate messages while distancing those messages from the origin and reducing the perception of propaganda. A notable difference since the Cold War is that online and mobile platforms have redefined cultural values, identities, and loyalties and their influence on politics, economics, and culture. In essence, they "represent something of a slow-motion, geopolitical tsunami." These fast-growing platforms "are not simply conduits of information; they constitute a wholly new sort of global nervous system. They enable new sorts of virtual social communities to rise and flourish and facilitate unmediated flows of transnational communication."[34]

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Implications for Strategic Communication Assessment

Assessment is crucial to effective use of the digital domain for strategic communication. Current literature invariably highlights assessment as an essential activity, but typically does not address the potential for broader assessment methods to bolster social networking platforms. Assessment techniques most commonly found in the literature include measures of objectives, effectiveness, and performance;[35] and underlying motives of public trends and attitudes.[36] However, a RAND report on building networks indicates the United States must build expertise and capacity to execute a broader strategy, specifically pointing out the need for "mechanisms for monitoring, refining, and overseeing programs" that "include a feedback loop to allow for inputs and corrections from those partners who have been found to be most trustworthy." A key finding states, "The U.S. Government and its allies need, but thus far have failed, to develop clear criteria for partnerships with authentic moderates."[37]

Assessment of U.S. strategic communication requires an understanding of the social significance of the new media available, paying particular attention to the *social physics* of these online social communities.[38] The U.S. Joint Forces Command publication entitled *Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication* recognizes the need for analysis of the cognitive dimensions permeating social, political, economic, and information networks. These represent complex adaptive systems and are much more difficult to understand than a closed-loop system.[39] This cognitive dimension is a very different domain for military members to assess and also varies greatly by locality. Outside expertise may be necessary to address this challenge, to include sociologists, local marketing experts, linguists, members of embassies, and the Department of State.[40]

The Way Ahead

A war can only really be fought against an enemy who shows himself. By infiltrating your opponents' ranks, working from within to bring them down, you give them nothing to react against—the ultimate advantage. From within, you also learn their weaknesses and open up possibilities of sowing internal dissension.
<div align="right">—Robert Greene, The 33 Strategies of War</div>

The U.S. Government must build its influence through online social networks as a pillar of strategic communication strategy. Today's world is dominated by electronic media, and online social networks have effectively been used to disseminate messages to the masses as well as to further political agendas. Effectively using these popular social outlets is imperative if the United States is to gain a foothold and build sufficient influence within a virtual frontier where violent extremist organizations have thrived. This strategy must be well-coordinated and synchronized through a whole of government approach.

Secondly, the U.S. Government must engage with moderate key influencers in desired social networks to disseminate messages stimulating discussion around key U.S. Government themes and messages. Drawing on its own history, the U.S. Government must increasingly spread its message through these key influencers—now via online social networks—to build influence in support of U.S. national strategy.

Finally, the U.S. Government must broaden its assessment of strategic communication beyond merely determining if activities are having their desired effects. A comprehensive assessment program requires analysis of social networking activities to understand trends within the online community and to identify key influencers. This may require expertise from disciplines currently not involved in strategic communication assessments.

While implementing these recommendations poses challenges, the advantages of working within the modern domain of social networking outweigh the disadvantages. Social networks can make networking and engagement with worldwide audiences more powerful, simple, and relevant; identify key influencers to assist in disseminating messages and building influence; provide mechanisms for combating negative publicity; and assess world audience sentiment towards U.S. Government policies and diplomacy efforts. The U.S. Government can benefit greatly by adopting progressive new approaches with online social networks and the indirect, intimate influence they propagate.

Although online social networks afford many benefits, these networks and their key influencers do not represent the total solution to improving strategic communication. Additional study and attention must be directed to strategies for organizing and resourcing the U.S. Government's efforts. For instance, additional direction and leadership will likely be needed to cultivate a conceptual framework to fuse together complementary programs under a coherent agenda for influence. It is time for the U.S. Government to embrace online social networking to operationalize public diplomacy programs for use in the war of ideas.

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