

Counterpropaganda: An Important Capability for Joint Forces

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Editorial Abstract: The authors address a topic given little attention in current IO doctrine and planning, counterpropaganda. With the explosion of low cost, easily accessible media production and communication capabilities, any individual or group can access a wide target audience to spread a message. Countering propaganda must be given more attention by IO planners.

What role, if any, does IO actually have in countering propaganda? Current IO doctrine pays little attention to this increasingly important supporting IO capability. A review of doctrine reveals a lack of guidance and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) for counterpropaganda. In fact, JP 3-13, *Joint Doctrine for Information Operations*, mentions counterpropaganda only five times and fails to include a discussion on how IO staffs implement propaganda countermeasures that involve IO capabilities other than psychological operations (PSYOP).

Furthermore, Joint doctrine casts counterpropaganda operations in a passive light, defining it as activities “that identify adversary propaganda, contribute to situational awareness, and serve to expose adversary attempts to influence friendly populations and military forces.”²¹ This perspective incorrectly implies that counterpropaganda commences upon discovery of opponent propaganda and therefore does not actively seek to mitigate propaganda’s effects before its onset. In reality, in today’s operating environment, propaganda and counterpropaganda are ongoing phenomena, and the most effective counterpropaganda measures are pro-active in nature.

This article presents a different view, arguing that Joint forces must expand the scope of counterpropaganda beyond the

realm of PSYOP, to the employment of other IO capabilities that can actively counter hostile propaganda, and for that matter, to counteract any opposing information, to include misinformation and disinformation.²



A Muqtada al-Sadr poster
Photo by: SSG. MICHAEL NASWORTHY

What is Propaganda?

The DoD definition for propaganda is “Any form of communications in support of national objectives designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes or behavior of any group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly.”²³ However, the use of “national” is a misnomer. As the costs of spreading propaganda decline, many non-state actors are now capable of disseminating propaganda on a scale equal to the old state model.

Historically, the sources of mass propaganda were government-sponsored

entities or well-funded groups. But now, with the advent of the Information Age, propaganda is becoming less centralized as non-state actors – political movements, insurgencies, and even social causes – can afford mass communications means. Furthermore, classical propaganda forms and media such as art, architecture, opinion-editorials, posters, and novelty items are being supplanted by new innovative electronic forms such as interactive web sites, quality videos, and podcasts. As these and other information technologies become cheaper, the use and localization of propaganda will increase among our adversaries and their target audiences. For these reasons, it may be more useful to think of propaganda as the manipulation of information to promote attitudes and behaviors that advance the ideology and objectives of its sponsor.

Analyzing Propaganda

Army FM 3-05.301, *Psychological Operations Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures*, is the doctrinal reference for counterpropaganda. It details how to embed counterpropaganda into the PSYOP planning and development processes. This article does not argue for the removal of primary responsibilities for propaganda analysis and counterpropaganda activities from PSYOP personnel, who are typically the most qualified and experienced

personnel for those activities, but rather, is concerned with employing all Joint force IO capabilities by building upon established PSYOP processes. This position is in line with PSYOP doctrine which states, "All elements of IO can and will support the counterpropaganda plan, but the focal point for such operations should remain with the PSYOP forces."⁴

To effectively counter opponent propaganda, the Joint force must first understand the environment in which the propaganda exists. Under the best of circumstances this is a difficult task, as effective "propaganda includes the reinforcement of societal myths that are so deeply imbedded in a culture that it is often difficult to recognize a message as propaganda."⁵ Generally, propaganda will be effective when its lines of persuasion match the existing attitudes of the receivers.⁶

For the purposes of IO, propaganda is the opponent's argument that justifies its actions and bolsters its legitimacy. By communicating with the populace, and at times our forces, the opponent offers a window into its philosophy, goals, objectives, and operations. Therefore, propaganda may provide a useful insight into how to defeat the adversary in the information environment. One way to establish the context of propaganda is to determine the interrelationship between information indigenous to the operational area and the culture and history of the target audience. Much of this information is often available in the PSYOP appendix to the command's operations plan. The IO staff can enhance this effort by expanding its intelligence preparation of the information environment to include PSYOP target audience analysis.

Next, the Joint force must have a way to identify opponent propaganda from other forms of information in the operating environment. Propaganda is likely to be subtle and nuanced, and in today's operating environment, misinformation and disinformation may be intermixed with the propaganda. To

separate out the propaganda, it is necessary to identify adversary capabilities to develop and spread propaganda, as well as the receptiveness of key target audiences to the adversary's lines of persuasion. Under normal circumstances this is a PSYOP task, conducted using objective analysis, subjective analysis, or source-content-audience-media-effects (SCAME) analysis for individual pieces or instances of opponent propaganda and series analysis to grasp the operational impact of the opponent's propaganda.⁷ The IO staff can facilitate these analyses by assisting intelligence and PSYOP personnel in the collection of suspected propaganda, as reflected in FM 3-05.301: "PSYOP forces do not have the organic ability to collect all available information. In addition, PSYOP personnel may be lured by the obvious propaganda appearing in the AO and miss collecting the more subtle and potentially effective propaganda being disseminated through the local media."⁸

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A possible staff solution is to assemble a working group consisting of a handful of personnel from the IO, PSYOP, public affairs (PA), and intelligence staffs who can use fuse two core analytical functions – propaganda analysis and media analysis – with the current intelligence estimate. Although the exact functions of the working group are variable by echelon and mission, in general it must acquire and document suspected opponent propaganda in each sub-sector of the operational area, preferably at regular, periodic intervals.

Another task of the working group is to fuse the PA media and PSYOP propaganda analyses. Because propaganda is often carried by news media in opinion-editorials, news articles and broadcasts, and publicized

as "newsworthy" events, it is useful to examine the media within the framework of propaganda analysis. Additionally, news clips and images may appear in propaganda products if the adversary attempts to exploit the credibility of news organizations in the eyes of the target.

Finally, a database should be constructed to catalog and share identified propaganda with higher and lower echelons of command in order to provide a common view of opposing information in the operating area. In sum, these efforts can establish propaganda trends and patterns and provide long-term outlooks that will carry over beyond the tour of duty of rotating personnel.

The culmination of the working group's efforts is an understanding of how the opponent is affecting the content and flow of information in the operating environment, how its propaganda impacts the various target audiences, and perhaps most importantly, what needs of the target audiences are being preyed upon by the propagandists.

Countering Propaganda

Counterpropaganda is a difficult and complex challenge. To mitigate or nullify the effects of the propaganda, the IO staff must determine the appropriate countermeasures, as well as anticipate the effects of those countermeasures and the opponent's response. This is more than a matter of merely coordinating the assets and competing requirements of the core, supporting, and related capabilities. Success rests with the IO staff's ability to correctly direct the Joint forces' capabilities at affecting specific information content and flow to the target audience. An effective counterpropaganda effort selects the appropriate assets, both IO and non-IO, and determines how these assets can be employed to match or overmatch the effects of opponent propaganda.

Efforts to counter propaganda will most likely become a long-term operation. For this reason, counterpropaganda can easily take the form of an IO objective.

When developing an objective for counterpropaganda, particular attention should be paid to the effects of the propaganda on the target audience. An essential component of this process is PSYOP pre-testing because it provides the opportunity to capture the social dimension of propaganda's impact on the target audience.⁹ However, complete knowledge of the attitudinal or behavioral effects resulting from a particular set of countermeasures is unlikely. Therefore it may be necessary to identify a series of likely outcomes stemming from the countermeasures.¹⁰

Chances are slim that any one set of countermeasures will apply a silver bullet solution. The effects of the opponent propaganda and friendly countermeasures will likely develop in a non-linear fashion, hence a constant process of analysis and application is necessary. To do this, the IO staff must monitor any effects produced by the countermeasures, changes to the operating and information environments, adversary responses to the countermeasures, and then if applicable, reengage the target audiences with new countermeasures. Furthermore, because countering propaganda will unlikely be a simple matter of churning out more PSYOP posters and handbills, extensive coordination for operational or strategic assets, or even the use of civilian media may be necessary.

Conclusion

This paper provides little more than a starting place for the application of a supporting, albeit critical, IO capability. Unfortunately, the absence of a methodology to determine the effects of opponent propaganda and predict the effectiveness of friendly countermeasures remains a major gap in the IO staff's TTP. Aside from the pre-testing techniques typically used by PSYOP forces, little is available for the IO staff to predict whether the selected countermeasures are appropriate. Therefore, three worthwhile future efforts are the development of procedures for identifying, dissecting, and cataloguing opponent propaganda;

techniques for quantifying the effects of opponent lines of persuasion, and tactics to employ friendly countermeasures.

Endnotes:

¹ The definition of counterpropaganda operations is from Joint Publication 1-02, *DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*. The authors of this article prefer the Army definition: "Programs of products and actions designed to nullify propaganda or mitigate its effects" (FM 3-05.301, *Psychological Operations Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures*).

² Misinformation is unintentionally incorrect information emanating from virtually anyone for reasons unknown, or to solicit a response or interest that is not political or military in origin. Disinformation is information disseminated primarily by intelligence organizations or other covert agencies designed to distort information and deceive or influence U.S. decision makers, U.S. forces, coalition allies, and key actors or individuals via indirect or unconventional means (FM 3-05.301).

³ Joint Publication 1-02, *DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*.

⁴ FM 3-05.301, *Psychological Operations Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures*, p. 11-3.

⁵ Jowett, G. & V. O'Donnell. *Propaganda and Persuasion*. Sage Publication, London, United Kingdom, 1992, p. 212.

⁶ Jowett, G. & V. O'Donnell. *Propaganda and Persuasion*. Sage Publication, London, United Kingdom, 1992, p. 153.

⁷ For an in-depth depiction of the SCAME technique see pp. 11-10 to 11-16 of FM 3.05.301.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 11-5.

⁹ In a sound summary of effects research, Jowett and O'Donnell argue: "It is also important to pay attention to the historical and cultural contexts in which propaganda and persuasion occur, and especially to recognize that people construct different meanings according to their social experiences."

¹⁰ Smith, Edward E. *Effects Based Operations*. CCRP, November 2002, p. xvii. 