



Defence Academy
of the United Kingdom

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Central Asia Series

The Effectiveness of US Military Information Operations in
Afghanistan 2001-2010: Why RAND missed the point

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Executive Summary

In May 2012 the RAND Corporation published a detailed study of the effectiveness of US Information Operations in Afghanistan between 2001-2010. The paper identified six key lessons that the US must learn from that experience and made five recommendations.

This paper finds much to agree with in RAND's findings, but much, too, with which it disagrees, particularly in RAND's recommendations. However it is the view of this paper's authors that RAND has missed THE fundamental failing in not just US IO and MISO/PsyOps but wider ISAF efforts as well:

A naive and immature understanding of the very process of communication in non-compliant conflict environments and misplaced confidence, and over reliance, upon marketing and advertising principles.

This paper advocates that marketing and advertising must now be considered as an **utterly failed model** for IO and MISO/PsyOps, one which must now be discarded in favour of a behaviorally-led approach embracing proper, proven, social and behavioural science.

During World War 1 the allies flew aircraft made of Balsa wood and fired archaic weapons across No Man's Land. In 2012 the allies fly super-sonic stealth aircraft and deliver precision weapons from unmanned drones. In World War 1 the allies dropped MISO/PsyOps leaflets. In Afghanistan in 2012 ISAF drops MISO/PsyOps leaflets. Unlike any other current military capability MISO/PsyOps has not evolved any substantial concept during the past 90 years. This paper, set against the backdrop of RAND's study, attempts to bridge that 90 year gap and in doing so identify the real reasons behind the failure of US (and wider ISAF) IO and MISO/PsyOps in Afghanistan.

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BACKGROUND

In May 2012 the RAND Corporation published 'US Military Information Operations In Afghanistan: Effectiveness of Psychological Operations 2001-2010', a report commissioned by the United States Marine Corps. This paper's single most important conclusion was that: "*if the overall Information Operation (IO) mission in Afghanistan is defined as convincing most residents of contested areas to side decisively with the Afghan government and its foreign allies against the Taliban insurgency, this has not been achieved*¹". In assessing why this may be the case the report's author, Arturo Munoz, identifies six key lessons. These are:

- Inability to effectively counter Taliban propaganda.
- Inadequate coordination between IO and Psychological Operations (PsyOps)
- Long response times in approvals process
- Lack of IO and PsyOps integration in operational planning
- Absence of Measures of Effect (MOE)
- Poor Target Audience Analysis (TAA)

The report makes a series of five recommendations to improve the effectiveness of future IO and PsyOps activities. These are:

- Hold a conference of IO and PsyOps personnel who have served in Afghanistan to define best practice
- Use local focus groups to pre-test messages
- Conduct public opinion surveys for TAA and post-testing
- Use key communicators to help develop and disseminate messages
- Harmonise IO doctrine and practice and integrate greater integration between PsyOps and Public Affairs

In January 2012 this paper's authors published *Behavioural Conflict: Why Understanding People's Motivations Will Prove Decisive in Future Conflict*. All three authors welcome the detailed study undertaken by RAND and agree with the author's six key take away lessons, although not the recommendations. However, it is our view that the normally sure-footed RAND Corporation has, on this occasion missed fundamental errors in the US (and indeed wider International Security Assistance Force [ISAF]) IO campaign; further, we are of the view that the lessons they have identified simply do not articulate the problem either in breadth or depth. We find the recommendations anodyne, if not naïve; and by some margin distant from the more drastic action that we believe is now required by the West's IO and PsyOps communities if the errors of the past are not to be repeated in future conflict.

¹ We very strongly agree with this objective and as scholars such as Galula, MacKinlay and Kilcullen have observed, placing the population at the centre of operational design and activities is central to any successful COIN strategy.

NOMENCLATURE

The 'tyranny of terminology' bedevils and inhibits nuanced understanding of these issues; indeed RAND acknowledge that IO and PsyOps have become almost indistinguishable in their usage. For the purposes of this document we define the terminology we use thus:

- Information Operations (IO) is a coordinating staff function, not a discreet line of activity in its own right. IO embraces many different forms of activity, including but not limited to PsyOps, Electronic Warfare and Physical Destruction
- PsyOps is the abbreviation for Psychological Operations, a resourced activity that disseminates truthful and attributable information to approved target audiences in support of an operational directive
- MISO is Military Information Support to Operations and is the US term for PsyOps
- TAA is the abbreviation for Target Audience Analysis, an empirical process in which the motivations for specific group behaviour are analysed using qualitative and quantitative research methods.
- DIME – Diplomatic, Information, Military & Economic
- Influence (noun) – the inherent understanding that all DIME activities have the potential to influence the behaviours and attitudes of specific groups
- Influence (verb) – the application of specific activities on a target audience to influence behaviours and attitudes

THE HISTORIC ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

In 1916 the British Royal Flying Corps (the precursor to the Royal Air Force) flew Sopwith Pup fighters over the Western Front; a wooden bi-plane with a top speed of 106mph. Today, the Royal Air Force flies the Tornado, a super-sonic jet with a top speed of over 1200mph; In 1916 the Lewis Machine Gun fired 400 rounds per minute out to a range of 300m. Today, the British Army fires 700 rounds per minute out to a range of 2000m from the L1A1. In 1916 the allies dropped attitudinal PsyOps leaflets over the western front; in 2012 the US-led ISAF coalition drops attitudinal leaflets over Afghanistan.

Unlike any other current military capability PsyOps has not evolved in any substantial way during the past 90 years, despite the concept of 'influence' being now firmly embedded in western military doctrine, the psychological dimension of operations being regarded as central to success in Afghanistan and despite the science of behavioural change (and our ability to capture and measure it) having advanced rapidly and significantly over the last 60 years.

It is therefore our view that if there is one single reason why the International Security & Assistance Force (ISAF) have been unsuccessful in convincing Afghans in contested areas, we believe it to be a corporate failure to adapt IO and PsyOps' operating practices to the 21st century, instead relying upon ages-old methods of communication now proven moribund. If there is one single area more than any other in which this is obvious, it is in the over reliance of IO and PsyOps on commercial advertising and marketing strategies – substituting NATO and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) for the 'product' and Afghans for the 'consumer'.

THREE TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

There are three types of communication: Informational, Attitudinal and Behavioural. Understanding each is seminal to understanding why ISAF have been so unsuccessful in their operations in Afghanistan.

- INFORMATIONAL COMMUNICATION

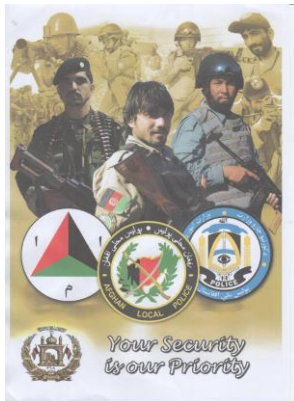
As the name suggests, Informational Communication conveys from a source to an audience a piece of information that may not previously be known. In the context of military operations in Afghanistan, Informational Communication is regularly deployed. For example, ISAF may wish to explain why a Forward Operational Base (FOB) is being expanded or reduced; why military vehicles should not be tailgated, of new schools or community projects being undertaken in the area or of the number of the confidential Tip Line to report insurgent activities. All are perfectly valid and fall within the NATO definition of PsyOps: *'truthful and attributable activity directed at an approved target audience'*. A good example of an informational poster is that shown to the left, informing the local population that a British serviceman was missing and what he would look like. The audience's attention is also brought to the 110 Confidential Tip Line. Clearly this poster is designed to encourage behaviour (to find the missing serviceman), but at its heart it is informational, not least as the area in which the soldier was missing was immediately flooded with ISAF troops and the local populace would have been puzzled, perhaps even concerned, at their presence. Informational communication is a vital component in a counter-insurgency (COIN) environment; the insurgent will take every opportunity to twist events to their advantage. The insurgent typically is unbothered by either accuracy or veracity of message and, as important as being first with the truth is the need to constantly keep the contested population abreast of current events.



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- ATTITUDINAL COMMUNICATION

This type of communication seeks to either reinforce positive attitudes or dislodge negative attitudes in discreet target audiences. In NATO's mission to Afghanistan it is perhaps best exemplified by the twin and long-standing projects of roadside billboards and newspapers. Across Afghanistan there are some 296 billboards which are used to promote GIRoA and 'good' governance. Concurrently ISAF produces a newspaper entitled *Sada-e Azadi*² which, in three languages, presents to literate Afghans a post-insurgency view of their country.



An example of an attitudinal type PsyOps product is shown here. In many areas of Afghanistan this is a message that resonates with Afghans, but that is not uniform across the country. As already noted, in many places the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are simply not respected or trusted. Regardless, an Afghan's attitude to the ANSF may be swayed by this poster and it may give them confidence, but both of these are highly

temporal, given to change rapidly if personal experience of deeds does not match the words.

- BEHAVIOURAL COMMUNICATION

This type of communication is focused on mitigating or encouraging specific pre-determined behaviours. For example, a PsyOps campaign may be used to directly target the trafficking of drugs, or to boost retention amongst the Afghan National Army.

² <http://www.sada-e-azadi.net/>

The **poor understanding of each of these and their inter-relationships is, we believe, at the root of ISAF's IO & PsyOps / MISO failure.** Specifically we believe that it is remiss that behavioural communication is not employed more widely. Naively and unquestioningly implementing attitudinal campaigns are costly, particularly if the impact or effect sought – behavioural change – is highly unlikely. In any conflict environment it is the behaviours of different groups that determine outcomes, yet ISAF have pursued attitudinal change at the cost of behavioural change. It is rare, for instance, to hear senior officers talk of behaviours but exceptionally common to hear discussion of perceptions. For example, something as seemingly measurable as 'support for ISAF' must manifest itself ultimately in behavioural terms. How can we possibly know there is not support for ISAF troops if we were not observing specific types (or absence) of behaviours. It would be meagre satisfaction if opinion polls indicated that support for ISAF was buoyant, and yet there was no evidence of that support on the ground. Taking a behavioural approach to communication will lead the way to identifying which behaviours are most indicative of 'support', and what we can do to encourage them.

Behavioural communication can be surprisingly effective in changing some attitudes when an attitudinal approach is too obvious, or is unlikely to work. This stratagem was utilised to great effect during, for example, President Barack Obama's 'Change' campaign. Working closely with behavioural psychologists, the campaign team generated a social media 'viral' that aimed to excite people into turning up at Obama's rallies by informing locals that record numbers of supporters were to turn up, and it would be an incredible spectacle to behold. The idea behind this approach was that the very act of attending the rallies – even for non-Obama supporters and fence-sitters – would be so emotionally arousing and stimulating that people would form fresh positive attitudes towards Obama, and subsequently vote for him; history books bear testament to the idea's validity.

Because the attitudinal/behavioural issue is so poorly understood, and missed completely by the RAND report, we deliberately labour the point in this paper.

THE FOLLY OF ATTITUDINAL COMMUNICATION

In compliant societies attitudinal communication, which is the basis for commercial advertising and marketing, is largely used to differentiate between competing product brands. One brand of toothpaste, for example, is not significantly different to another, but if you associate with it, through an attitudinal marketing campaign, certain 'desirable' qualities or characteristics (for example, extra whitening capability, pleasant breath qualities etc) you effectively differentiate it from your competitors in the eyes of the consumer who is now more likely to purchase your brand. As a consumer walking into a supermarket you will be confronted by an array of different toothpastes and your decision to purchase may well be swayed by an advert you have seen for a particular brand. The key to this, however, is that you have already made the decision to purchase; your behaviour has been predetermined by your upbringing (always clean your teeth before bed), your education (not cleaning your teeth will cause you painful medical problems) and other social factors (guys with bad breath don't get girls!) for example.

A further compounding problem is that there is much dispute amongst psychologists over what attitudes are, although what they are not is often easier to understand: they are not values or beliefs, and not really opinions, which are often terms used interchangeably with attitudes. In practical terms this means that attitudes are very difficult, in fact all but impossible, to measure accurately as they are influenced by so many other compounding variables. We collectively blanch when we see surveys that ask if an individual is 'slightly happier, much happier or considerably happier' with a particular issue; how can these possibly be delineated, so that trends across sample groups are measured?

However, the single biggest problem with the use of attitudes in PsyOps is that they bear so

little resemblance to behaviour and ultimately, as we have already asserted, in conflict-ridden societies it is undesirable behaviour that the military must mitigate. There are numerous studies that show this to be the case. The first major study of its kind, and oft-quoted, is that conducted by Richard LaPiere in 1930s America. In his *Attitudes Versus Actions* study of 1934, which appeared in the journal *Social Forces*, LaPiere spent two years travelling across the USA by car with a couple of Chinese ethnicity. During that time they visited 251 hotels and restaurants and were turned away only once. At the conclusion of their travels LaPiere posted a survey to everyone of the businesses they had visited with the question, "Will you accept members of the Chinese race in your establishment?" The available responses were "Yes", "No", and "Depends upon the circumstances". Of the 128 that responded 92 per cent answered "No". This study was seminal in establishing the gap between attitudes and behaviours.

Because the West is a society where advertising is the norm, we accept, largely without comment, the deluge of adverts and marketing that we encounter on a daily basis. Indeed, it was because of this that the US expressed such astonishment when Al-Qaeda (AQ) seemed better at communicating its message than Washington: "How can a man in a cave out-communicate the world's leading communications society?", Richard Holbrooke famously enquired.³ The answer of course is that Afghanistan is not a compliant society, where GIRoA / ISAF-friendly behaviour is the norm; indeed far from it. As we see from LaPiere's work the link between attitudes and behaviour is poor. Thus the problem with attitudinal communication is that it (erroneously) presumes that by changing attitudes, behaviours will follow (and clearly the behaviours that ISAF seeks in Afghanistan are in not supporting the Taliban, not laying IEDs, supporting GIRoA etc). The difficulty with this presumption is that firstly, Afghanistan is not a compliant audience waiting to be steered in a particular direction like the metaphorical toothpaste consumer of earlier, nor do NATO PsyOps necessarily reflect what is actually happening on the ground. The example below illustrates the point:



This ISAF road-side billboard, which extols the virtue and loyalty of the Afghan National Security Forces, is clearly designed to inspire confidence amongst those who see it. This is all well and good in a compliant society, one in which the rule of law is the norm. Yet in a society where corruption is endemic, where successful passage through a check-point will almost certainly require the giving of some money, such attitudinal communication does not stack up against the pragmatic reality of life on the ground.

LaPiere's work was closely followed by that of Fishbein and Azjen in 1947,⁴ and has continued to this day as a vibrant area of scientific enquiry. The unequivocal consensus is that attitudes are very poor *predictors of behaviour*; indeed, one very influential social psychology text proclaims that: "The original thesis that attitudes determine actions was countered in the 1960s by the antithesis that attitudes determine virtually nothing."⁵ For the non-social scientists amongst us a simple consideration of many circumstances in our own lives will lead us to the same conclusions. Some examples are illustrative:

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³'Get the Message Out', *The Washington Post*, Richard Holbrooke, 28 October 2001.

⁴ <http://people.umass.edu/aizen/f&a1975.html>

⁵ Myers, D. (2010). *Social Psychology*

- **Car Seatbelts.** For many years governments have sought to persuade drivers of the positive benefits of wearing a seat belt when in the car. They largely failed and it took enforcement (punishable by a fine) to make the wearing of seat belts an accepted and unconscious activity. Today, particularly if you are North European, we would guarantee that you put on a seat belt as an unconscious act as soon as you get into a car and will point out, often disapprovingly, if you see someone not wearing one.
- **Cigarette Smoking.** For years the UK government has sought to persuade the British public that they should not smoke. They did so with pictures of diseased lungs and warnings that smoking could curtail your life. Yet people continued to smoke and indeed in certain groups, notably young teenage women, smoking became more, not less, acceptable. However, one of the largest ever drops in smoking in the UK came about when, again, the government legislated and smoking in public places was banned. Apocalyptic tales of Britain's pubs and clubs going out of business were legion and landlords quickly put covered smoking areas outside their premises. Yet today people's attitudes appear to have softened and popping out for a quick cigarette in the cold or pouring rain is not quite such an attractive proposition as lighting up in warmth and comfort of a pub or bar.

Both these examples provide us with a second important lesson. Whilst attitude is a poor precursor to behaviour, behaviour is actually a very strong precursor to attitude. Or in other words, **if you change behaviour, even in non-complaint audiences, there is a good chance that with time that attitudes will follow suit.**

Because the West is so attuned and accepting of attitudinal communication it takes a real leap of faith to convince military commanders that adverts and marketing will not achieve the operational effect they seek. But we would venture that there is now enough evidence to dismiss advertising and marketing as a concept from the battlefield. This will of course be met with howls of protest from the civilian advertising community who have milked this particular cash cow since 9/11. Indeed in 2007, Todd Helmus, Christopher Paul and Russell Glenn produced a report, also published by RAND, entitled '*Enlisting Madison Avenue: The Marketing Approach to Earning Popular Support in Theaters of Operation*'.⁶ Their paper declared that "[b]usiness marketing practices provide a useful framework for improving US military efforts to shape attitudes and behaviours of local populations." In particular, the paper declared, attention should be paid to "branding, customer satisfaction and segmentation of audiences." We would venture that you do so at your peril. Take, for example, the segmentation of audiences. This is a standard marketing technique that looks to subdivide a specific sector of consumers – perhaps based on demographics or income or address - in the hope that the characteristics of this new group will be more susceptible to a marketing campaign. But this is very much a 'push' activity and the 'group' is an artificial construct that exists only on the marketers spreadsheet. Of course in military operations we are dealing with 'actual' groups, who are bonded by a myriad of factors outside of our control. It would be wonderful if, for example, our job could be done by targeting only the affluent, or the middle-aged, or women in a specific area. But in theatre, on operations, we do not have the luxury of choosing our own groups, we have to deal with the audience as it is in reality. Consequently, the process of Target Audience Analysis (TAA) is used to understand the actual group and to decode under what circumstances that group may be motivated to exhibit a specific behaviour. We are simply not interested in picking out a few 'potential customers' in the group, we need the whole group to conform (or at least a very, very, large part of it), otherwise we have failed in our mission. Commercial marketing and advertising methods are designed to increase the hit rate of customers in a target group. A conversion rate of 10% (i.e 1:10 buying a different brand of car or toothpaste) would be considered outstanding and highly profitable. But in military operations achieving a 10% change in the behavior of an insurgent group or a hostile community would be operationally insignificant.

⁶ Available to download at : www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG607.html

But perhaps most importantly, in the West, advertising is a well understood concept where there is an unwritten 'contract' between marketer and 'potential customer'. For example, we watch TV advertisements about Guinness or Ford – in the full knowledge that Guinness and Ford are trying to persuade us to buy more of their products. But this simply does not translate to the battlefield. **We have absolutely got to stop looking at audiences in foreign countries, often under-developed and crisis rich, through Western rose tinted lenses. We have got to stop exporting values and beliefs that we do understand to environments that we do not, in the hope that clarity will ensue. It will not.**

In *Positioning: The Battle for your Mind*⁷, one of the most successful marketing books of all time, the authors, Ries and Trout, clearly make the point that marketing cannot change the way people think. It is behaviour we must study; behaviour we must understand; good behaviour we must encourage and bad behaviour we must mitigate. The solution is not branding and it is not customer satisfaction. And by implication the solution is not marketing and PR companies.

In marketing, the desired behaviour is fairly uniform, and quite identifiable: buy more of a product. The whole campaign, from planning to research to execution, wraps linearly around that single trajectory. Unlike the sorts of behaviours we seek to influence in Afghanistan, when selling products it is sufficient if just a small percentage of the target group actually buy your product. For instance, there are countless brands of toothpaste on the shelves, but if you get 10 per cent of the market, you can stay in business and make a healthy return to your investors. That is just not the case in many operational environments where it is vital that the majority of a group is influenced by PsyOps campaigns. Marketing is therefore not the kind of discipline that is equipped to deal with behavioural outcomes or scenarios that are more complex or require more nuanced definitions. Marketing principles just cannot be effective enough to drive our military capabilities and development; the end of that road can only be dramatic failure. In our view, only a scientific approach will do, and it must be based on the sciences pertaining to human behaviour, in all its myriad manifestations, and with all its bewildering complexities, and not the limited perspective of consumer behaviour, or the misguided assumptions of attitudinal psychology.

We think the tide may now be beginning to change. In February 2012 the newspaper USA Today ran an article entitled: '*US Info Ops Programmes dubious, costly*'⁸ in which it asserted that the Pentagon had spent hundreds of millions of dollars on poorly tracked marketing campaigns with little proof that the programmes worked. The paper quoted Colonel Paul Yingling who served three tours in Iraq between 2003 and 2009: "*Doing posters, fliers or radio ads. These things are unserious*". The same paper suggested in May 2012 that the Pentagon would soon be making yet further cuts to what it referred to as its 'propaganda budget'.⁹ Yingling's comment "unserious" is absolutely right and that if the USMC wishes to understand why its PsyOps activities have been unsuccessful in Afghanistan then they need to look further than RAND's report.

BEHAVIOURAL COMMUNICATION – THE 'HOLY GRAIL' OF PSYOPS?

Behavioural communication seeks to link together specific communication activities to affect or mitigate audience behaviour. In assessing behavioural communication it is vital to take out the attitudinal dimension because it is largely irrelevant to the desired outcome. For example, if ISAF wish to deter Afghans from making Improvised Explosive Devices (IED), a behavioural campaign would study the motivations for making them in the first place. Almost certainly that analysis would determine that for some there is an ideological imperative that may be almost impossible to ameliorate or mitigate. Yet for many more there will be

⁷ Ries & Trout, *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*. McGraw-Hill, 2000

⁸ *US Info Ops Programmes dubious, costly*. USA Today dated 29 Feb 2012.

⁹ *Panel calls for cuts to DoD propaganda spending* USA Today 17 May 2012

numerous other reasons for their actions. If we can understand what those motivations are, both amongst the current community that practice the art and those that might replace them in the future, then we can intervene effectively.

To adopt and apply a behavioural approach to communication requires a scientifically accurate understanding of human behaviour in real environments. Perhaps the most important principle to acknowledge is that the enacting of behaviours is always contextual. That means that people's behaviour is continually modified by the context in which it is played out. Factors such as environment, mood, social situation, and physical ability will determine whether and how a behavioural disposition is displayed. Some examples from Afghanistan will make this clear.

- **Environment.** The environment in Afghanistan is, in most places, harsh, and will have an effect on behaviours in numerous ways. Consider that in the worst months temperatures can reach 50° centigrade - anyone who has been to a very hot country will know how hard it is to motivate oneself to do anything under such conditions. Also, the environment will affect activities such as agriculture, such that even if a farmer is willing to plant an alternative crop, he may simply not be able to do so.
- **Mood.** Some areas of Afghanistan and some strata of Afghan society suffer from persistent drug problems. In areas where this is severe, decision-making and motivation will be significantly compromised. Emotional states can be profound and enduring too amongst Afghans: loss of honour amongst men will be all-consuming and will not be rationalised. These feelings will persist until avenged.
- **Social situation.** Respect for elders is paramount, and decisions are often made collectively, with the senior members holding sway. Individual preferences are subjugated to those of the group, for instance, in voting. A strong social network is most prized, whereas wisdom holds little weight. It is a case of 'who you know, not what you know' in Afghanistan. One aspect that is often misunderstood by Western influencers is that individual achievement means little to Pashtuns. Achievement from the perspective of the village or community is the overarching goal.
- **Physical ability.** Afghans are limited in what they are capable of doing, often because they do not have the means or skills. Things like voting, watching television, travelling to large towns, reading papers or leaflets, using telephones to report insurgent activity, and a wealth of other activities can often be hampered because of physical limitations, and not necessarily attitudinal or emotional ones. If people cannot get to voting stations or recruiting stations for instance, then no amount of persuasion is going to help. This is where behavioural influence offers a solution that supersedes communication or attitudinal approaches: the behavioural campaign would alter behaviours by providing the necessary means to carry out the behaviour. If you want people to vote, then make sure they can get to the voting station – or, better still, bring it to them. (Although, as an aside, there is evidence that voting behaviours can be influenced by the *environment* in which people place their vote. For instance, voting in a school assembly room can 'nudge' people to vote for the party that places most emphasis on education.)

In these four simple examples, we show instances of where behaviour is shaped by factors other than personalities, attitudes, desires, and tendencies.

In the 1920s Yale psychologists Hartshorne and May¹⁰ investigated the extent to which character traits determined behaviours. They were interested in whether different situations would influence schoolchildren who were given the opportunity to lie, steal or cheat. Across

¹⁰ Hartshorne H & May M, *Studies in the Nature of Character* (MacMillan Press), 1928.

10,000 children they found that most of them behaved badly in some situations and not others. But perhaps most important is that these behaviours did not correlate with measurable personality traits or assessments of moral reasoning. In technical terms, this research (and much more like it) demonstrates that behaviour rarely displays 'cross-situational stability'.

In short, people's behaviour is controlled or modulated by a whole host of personal, social and environmental factors, many of which are beyond the control of the individual, or only marginally in his or her awareness. Any attempt to understand and change behaviour therefore needs to identify the causes present at all levels, and not simply focus in on the personal, or the social, for example. This approach is termed the ecological method for it seeks understanding in a broad context, at all levels and in a naturalistic way, i.e. what people actually do in their real lives.

Now, if we are willing to concede that our own behaviour is subject to all sorts of influences that are mostly beyond our control, are we not also able to extend that same understanding to Afghans? It is difficult enough in our own safe and predictable world to always behave as we would like, and in accord with our attitudes and opinions. Should we not therefore see the difficulties that the average Afghan faces, in a harsh social and physical environment, in a country ravaged by war and hardship? To expect that there should be any straightforward relationship between attitude and behaviour is farcical.

Consider Figure 3.13 on page 61 of the RAND monograph. It shows that the Afghans perceive the biggest threat/danger to be from the Taliban (approx. 60 per cent), with very little from the US (less than 10 per cent). This sounds like good news. But what does it really mean? Does it mean that they will behave in an agreeable manner towards coalition forces? Does it mean that they will reject the Taliban, or behave unfavourably towards them? Does it mean that they perceive the US positively? We do not think the result relates to any of these possibilities. Moreover, if Afghans regard the Taliban to be a greater threat, and yet their behaviour remains unaltered, then we are no closer to a solution. We need to understand what it would take to get the Afghans to reject the Taliban and embrace the ISAF's efforts. Just because the population do not think that the US is a threat, does not mean that they respect them (they could think they are just ineffective or too timid). The locals could quite reasonably believe that the US poses little threat to them, and still hate them with a passion. It is just this kind of attitudinal polling that is preventing progress in Afghanistan on the things that really matter, something we discuss below.

RAND's paper presents a brief evaluation of an anti-IED campaign that appeared to have a modicum of success in changing behaviour. We quote from page 78: "*In some places, there have been verifiable, positive results, with local people volunteering critical information. In other places, the locals remain too afraid of the Taliban to come forward. The key variable here seems to be not the credibility of the USMIL IO and PSYOP but the degree of fear of the Taliban and the credibility of the Taliban threat against collaborators.*" This exemplifies the point we make. The campaign has looked at the target audience from an attitudinal perspective. As RAND note, it is not the credibility of the message campaign that is the key variable. Indeed, the campaign *may* have entirely succeeded in changing the attitudes of the local population, but crucially it has done very little to actually change behaviour. What use is it in providing information about how to report IEDs and in shifting a change in attitude in favour of doing so if there is no appreciable and measurable change in people actually providing information to our troops? Proper PSYOPS and IO initiatives need to begin by asking: under what circumstances would behaviour change? As we have already noted this is not audience segmentation.

HOW TO ACHIEVE BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

We have already explained that contextual factors are critical to the manner in which behaviours are (or are not) displayed. These need to be assessed and understood at the beginning of any behavioural campaign. However, once it has been determined which behaviour(s) you want to try and change, attention needs to turn to the question of *how* change can happen. This is a very complex question and area of study, and a full answer goes well beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless we venture several principles drawn from the behavioural and social sciences.

A good starting point is the triumvirate of awareness-motivation-ability. These are the 'Big Three' of behaviour change, because without them being in place, widespread robust change cannot occur (except by force). Awareness often comes first because if your target group does not know about the behaviour you want them to enact, then it is highly unlikely that they will start doing it spontaneously. If you want to get young men to join the ANSF, then they at least need to be aware that recruitment is happening and where. Motivation follows because awareness will not change behaviour if there is no way to motivate the desired behaviour. It is almost impossible to get someone to do something if they don't want to do it, unless you use threats and force, or you make it worth their while. But lastly, even if your group is aware of what is required of them, and they are willing to comply, they will perform the behaviour if they are not capable or able to do so. For instance, if there is no way of travelling to the recruiting station, then they cannot join the ANSF.

This all sounds rather obvious – and indeed it is – but it is surprising how many behaviour change campaigns do not consider these three fundamental principles. In the IED example above, it seems that the target population had awareness of the details of the campaign, and presumably there was some motivation (and incentive) to provide information to coalition troops. But did the people have the ability to do so? And were they sufficiently motivated to do so? Given the threat of the Taliban, perhaps the motivation to stay on their good side was greater than to help our troops, even for a monetary reward. Perhaps the reporting channels were just too risky or too conspicuous? If there were an entirely non-risky and anonymous way to provide information (i.e. no way, ever, that the informant could be found out), then the 'ability' factor could have been enhanced.

Another fundamental consideration in building any behaviour change campaign is that of the power of social norms. Social norms are the socially accepted standards and codes of behaviour that most people in a group or society conform to. For example, in British society sexual discrimination has become socially unacceptable in the last few decades. This is quite independent of individual attitudes however. We can imagine that men still exist who privately think that women should not be paid as much at work, or who should not occupy high positions, but the likelihood of actually displaying that trait is now very low.

Elizabeth Levy-Paluk is a field social psychologist who trained at Harvard, and has done experimental work on the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic tensions in Rwanda.¹¹ In a year-long field study, she used specially crafted radio programmes to try and change attitudes, beliefs and norms of tribes in a bid to reduce inter-ethnic conflict. The study was carefully designed according to rigorous scientific standards, she used appropriate controls, and meticulously collected data through interviews and covert and overt behavioural observations. The study proved very effective in positively changing the behaviours of the two groups towards each other. Her conclusion drawn from the data was unequivocal: whilst the study did little to change the beliefs of the people, it was very effective at instilling social norms, and these social norms drove the observed measurable changes in behaviour.

¹¹ Paluck, E.L. (2009). *Reducing intergroup prejudice and conflict using the media: A field experiment in Rwanda*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96, 574-587.

RAND notes the research work conducted during September-October 2010 in Afghanistan by UK Strategic Communication Laboratories (SCL) which showed that ANP recruitment was powerfully influenced by binding social norms that deterred young men from joining up. Many potential recruits were motivationally and morally pre-disposed to work in the ANP. The desire for a job and reasonable pay was very high, and they desired to do good for their country and thought that by being a police officer they could make a difference. The research discovered that the main reason holding men back from joining was the fear of recrimination, hostility, or being ostracised by the wider social group, that is, the mothers, the elders, older men, and disapproving peers. The research further uncovered that the primary reason for the existence of those social norms was that the ANP were deemed to be un-Islamic. The research concluded – through the use of some complex statistical modelling of the data – that boosting the Islamic credentials of the ANP would be the most effective way of breaking down those social norms and consequently boosting recruitment.

Both Paluk and the SCL studies amply illustrate why the attitudinal approach will not work. The types of problems being dealt with in these environments with these populations are just too complex for a superficial marketing approach. In contrast, properly conducted scientific research based on a behavioural model can arrive at solid conclusions and achieve results.

Although having a nuanced understanding of your target group's contextual motivations for their behaviour and how social norms can modify behaviours, the problem remains of knowing *how and when* to intervene in effecting genuine change. If you are a frequent flyer, you may have experienced the annoying feeling of standing in the security queue and *only then* realising that you had intended (since your last flight) to not wear a belt, wear slip on shoes, have your toiletries already packed in a plastic bag, and to have your laptop at the top of your bag. But no, just like last time, you are ill prepared. By that stage, it is too late to change your behaviour. You should have remembered all this back at home, but of course you were not thinking about it then.

Any airport wishing to speed up waiting times in security would achieve little if they placed reminders to be prepared at the airport, or worse, in the security queue itself. The decision point at which to reach flyers is when they are packing, or maybe as a reminder when booking their tickets. People who check in at home online could be reminded then, or perhaps provide a visible nudge on home-printed tickets. Knowing when best to reach people is as important as the message itself.

A recent UK Department of Transport campaign aimed to persuade young men not to drink and drive. The research pointed to a move away from shock tactics towards emphasising the negative personal consequences to the driver. Audience research, semiotics analysis and behavioural theory identified the key intervention point as being after the first pint when the subject is still in control and able to think straight. (The campaign was called 'Moment of Doubt', and used the word Think! in its adverts.) But obviously, the campaign could not intervene at that precise moment in time, so the proposed solution was to create *cognitive dissonance* that would hopefully kick in at the required intervention time. Loosely, cognitive dissonance is a psychological theory that proposes that inconsistencies in thoughts and behaviours will cause internal conflict. People often seek to reduce that conflict, either by changing their attitudes or behaviour so that they are more closely aligned. The 'Moment of Doubt' campaign therefore focused on the inconsistency between having another drink and the dire consequences of losing your license, getting a criminal record, and damaging relationships. The credibility of this argument and its manner of dissemination was clearly effective as although breathalysing increased in 2007, the number of people testing positive dropped by 19.5 per cent.

How do our troops go about determining the correct intervention points for Afghan campaigns? How do we decide which psychological theories are best suited to helping with message resonance? Knowing the ideal decision point for Afghan opium farmers, or the

strategy for intervention on potential recruits are complex issues. It is hard to imagine how these kinds of strategies and results could come about without the deployment of good quality science informed by theories of behaviour change. It is imperative that these approaches are used in Afghanistan and that they are integrated into military practice for PsyOps, IO and similar disciplines as soon as we are able.

To achieve this level of success we need to base campaigns on better TAA and on better scientific theory, models and methods. All the knowledge exists, and, as we have seen, is being used to good effect in civilian campaigns. It is not possible in the context of this paper to provide extensive detail of the wealth of science that could be used. Besides, any decent social psychology textbook is a good place to start. But it will be necessary to bring in specialists and to tackle the arduous task of synthesizing and applying the knowledge of a vast number of disciplines to military communication. Social psychology we have mentioned, but we also need to bring in behavioural economics¹², system dynamics, environmental psychology, computational behavioural modelling, group dynamics, and social network analysis, to name a few.

During a visit, by one of this paper's authors to ISAF, nine behaviourally-based IO and PsyOps campaigns were proposed. Two examples: 1) increase retention in ANSF and, in particular, the number of Pashtuns joining. Whilst the newspapers will often report that recruiting (from other ethnic groups) into the ANSF is buoyant, retention is less so. While the ANA is slowly becoming more broadly representative of the Afghan ethnic mix there remain notable gaps, for example the recruitment of southern Pashtuns. This cannot be good for the future. 2) Migrate men of fighting age away from the insurgency and into the sustainable livelihood programmes being run by Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). Yet all nine proposals were refused because they required upfront funding for qualitative and quantitative research and would have taken over 18 months to have come to fruition. Yet ISAF itself cannot undertake quantitative/qualitative research wearing body armour, carrying weapons and driving armoured cars – here there is a real need for contractor support which of course means money. But the ideas did not gain the necessary traction solely because of the funding issues alone, the reality is that no-one was really very interested in behavioural change campaigns that would outlive their particular tour in theatre. We find this absence of imagination and a slavish approach to process very concerning.

NARRATIVE

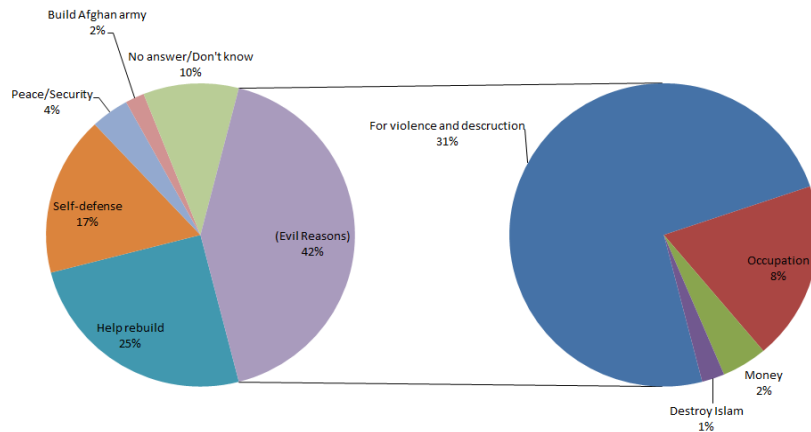
The Consortium for Strategic Communication,¹³ an academic body located at the University of Arizona, recently published on their blog a report from November 2011 published by the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS). Professor Steve Corman, of the Consortium, wrote he had been 'floored' by the fact that when several ordinary Afghans had been handed pictures of the 9/11 World Trade Centre attacks almost none were able to identify the event or its location. Indeed the full ICOS report¹⁴ finds that only 8 per cent of those surveyed knew about the "event that foreigners call 9/11". A further question asked why foreigners were in Afghanistan. Of the 42 per cent who stated that they were here for "evil reasons", the largest percentage believed it was for "violence and destruction". The graphic below details the other answers that were associated with the question:

¹² This has become a particularly vibrant area of research in recent years and we believe has been under utilized by the armed forces. We note that this is not true across wider [UK] government; No 10 Downing Street now has a behavioural 'nudge' unit attached to it.

¹³ <http://comops.org/journal/page/4/>

¹⁴ www.icosgroup.net/static/reports/afghanistan_transition_missing_variable.pdf

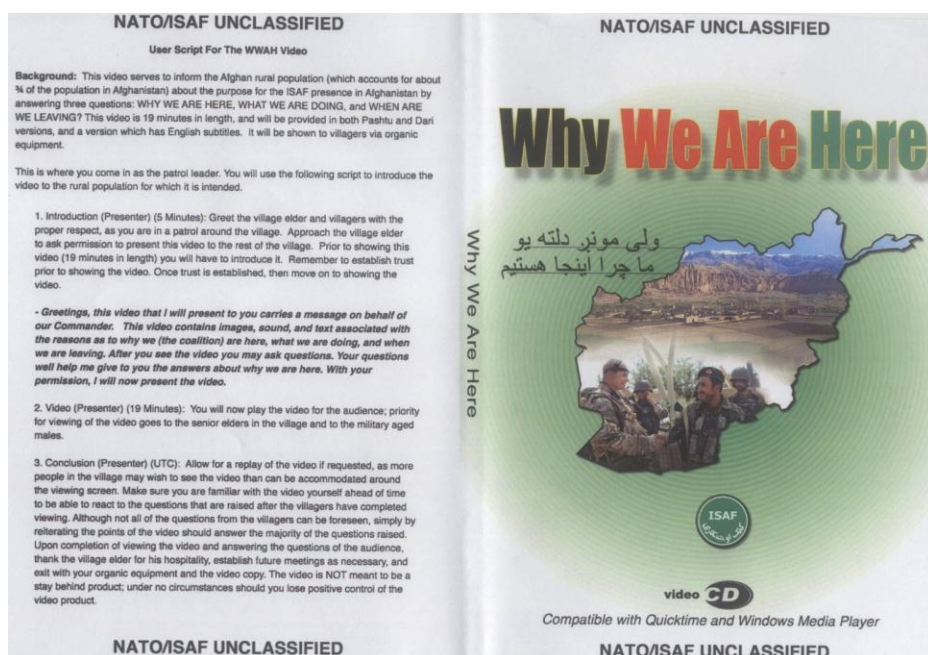
Why Are Foreigners Here?



The struggle to find a 'narrative' that resonates in the global information space has been one of the international community's most significant challenges, one that still has not been satisfactorily resolved. For the populations of NATO troop-contributing nations most ISAF members have adopted a similar framework: NATO troops are in Afghanistan to ensure that mass terrorism can never again emanate from Afghanistan and threaten European and North American homelands.

In the initial years after the 9/11 attacks this worked as a message, but over time, as memories of 9/11 fade, so too has acceptance of the message. Indeed events such as the 7/7 London bombings and the Madrid train bombs did not serve to reinforce a collective view of the righteousness of the Afghan mission, instead they have served to complicate the issue significantly. In the case of 7/7 the bombers were from the United Kingdom and the UK's continued presence in Afghanistan was given as a specific reason for the attack. And, as we have seen from the ICOS survey in paragraph 12 above, these are not motives that resonate with Afghans. In April 2010 the UK's now disbanded Advanced Research and Assessment Group (ARAG) secured funding from NATO HQ to bring some of the most experienced Afghan and communication scholars in the world together and work with NATO to produce a convincing narrative that would resonate, not just with domestic NATO audiences, but with Afghans. Some 10 years after the US-led invasion most Afghans were still unsure and unconvinced at the presence of foreign troops. Unfortunately, the explosion of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull prevented the conference from happening.

In late 2011 ISAF issued a DVD to its troops on the ground entitled *Why we are here*. On its back cover it contains a script for troops on the ground to use: "This video contains images, sound and text associated with the reasons as to why we (the coalition) are here, what we are doing and when we are leaving". This latter point is of particular importance. In 2011 ISAF Headquarters, and the various Afghan governmental ministries, were already deeply engaged in the first stages of transition – the passage of responsibility for security away from NATO to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The issue of the DVD was a welcome, if very late, step forward by ISAF HQ who were beginning to understand that there existed a real understanding vacuum on the ground amongst Afghans who were not attracted to the Taliban insurgency, but who were equally unhappy at the presence of foreign 'invaders' in their country.



However, its timing (coinciding with transition and the gathering momentum to draw down forces in preparation for the 2014 withdrawal) presented very real problems to troops on the ground and in particular to NATO PsyOps practitioners who were struggling to explain, in local terms and in ways that resonated with their specific local audiences, what foreign troops were doing and trying to achieve.¹⁵

RAND's paper quotes Oleg Svet's 2010 assessment of IO in Afghanistan, which reviewed the roles of the State Department, Department of Defense (DoD), and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in this area, concluding that "[w]ith diffused authorities, it has been difficult to pursue a comprehensive narrative providing legitimacy for the local government, quickly respond to the Taliban's propaganda, and proactively shape the information environment."¹⁶ We would suggest that the absence of a convincing narrative has been a significant handicap in convincing Afghans of the presence of ISAF troops. We predict that this will be an issue of increasing concern; Afghans may not like the presence of international forces in their country but they have become accustomed to it, particularly as some areas have flourished and prospered. The transition to Afghan forces should be a comparatively simple and good news story to portray, but this is hindered by confusion over why ISAF is present at all and the capabilities of a still fledgling Afghan civil and civic society.

We must constantly remind ourselves however, that the average Afghan is not really interested in our 'narratives', even though we do still need one that is consistent. The RAND monograph quotes LeGree (2010):

When the IO campaign's radio spots, billboards, and public announcements exclusively focus on reporting improvised explosive device (IED) incidents, offer rewards for information about insurgents, or make clumsy attempts to paint the insurgents as bad guys, the audience is not interested. These things are simply not what the average Afghan cares about. It just gives the insurgents 'free press'. Tell a man how to grow more wheat on his small plot, give him access to a wider variety of food, or tell him about the bridge that will let him walk to a market and you

¹⁵ It is also difficult not to note that the 'product' was a DVD. Our experience of Afghan villages in Helmand is that DVD players, and for that matter TVs, are few and far between; so for that matter electricity.

¹⁶ Svet, Oleg, "Fighting for a Narrative: A Campaign Assessment of the US-Led Coalition's Psychological and Information Operations in Afghanistan," *Small Wars Journal*, September 12, 2010. Available to download at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2010/09/fighting-for-a-narrative/>

*have the audience's attention. These are the things that matter, the most effective subjects for the IO campaign.*¹⁷

In keeping with our argument thus far, LeGree is close to offering a behavioural solution to the issue of communication: do not bombard the population with irrelevant (to them) messages conveying moribund ideas, give them something they can use, change their behaviour, get them doing something that might evolve into seeing the 'occupiers' and their Afghan sponsors in a favourable light. That is the most powerful form of communication imaginable, and we should be offering it.

The essential problem that ISAF faces when it considers the issue of narratives is that in western democracies the ruling political classes are under constant forensic scrutiny from their media and their electorates. Thus, narratives, which are inherently crafted by politicians, are almost always crafted for domestic audience consumption and the audience in the conflict zone is almost always forgotten.

MEASURES OF EFFECT

Quite rightly the RAND report identified the absence of robust and empirical measures of effect (MOE). Without MOE it is almost impossible to draw any sensible conclusions on the success, or otherwise, of IO and PSYOPS campaigns. Our experience is that if any thought is given to MOE then it is regularly in the context of measures of performance (MOP) or measures of activity (MOA). For example, the measure of activity associated with an airborne leaflet drop is that the necessary aircraft and equipment were serviceable and available to make a certain number of predetermined sorties. The measure of performance is that a specific number of leaflets or other products were dropped. The measures of activity are what specific actions the leaflets engendered in the audiences that they targeted.

Another attraction of behavioural, as opposed to attitudinal, campaigns is that MOE is all but impossible to measure in the latter. This is why surveys and polling blossomed so fully during the wars in Iraq. The focus has been on attitudes and survey and polling are a logical, if imperfect, way to measure changing attitudes. But in behavioural terms MOE is often observable. If the campaign is to grow less poppy you can visibly see if that campaign has been successful from the air. If the campaign is to encourage greater use of roads by private cars (and thus encourage a feeling of security) it is straightforward to measure road usage with a few strategically placed motion sensors. You could even measure accurately the numbers of calls to a hotline, and how many of those calls led to successful arrests or locating IEDs.

The key to successful MOE is twofold: Firstly, activity has to be properly baselined. It is no good attempting to measure behaviours, or for that matter attitude, after the IO/PSYOPS intervention if there is no record of what the behaviour or attitude was prior to it. RAND identify nine PsyOps campaigns in their report (below), noting whether they were effective, ineffective or not measurable.

¹⁷ RAND Corporation, 'US Military Information Operations In Afghanistan: Effectiveness of Psychological Operations 2001-2010', May 2012, p. 63

Theme	Assessment		
	Effective	Mixed	Ineffective
The war on terror justifies U.S. intervention.			Ineffective
Coalition forces bring peace and progress.	Effective 2001–2005	Mixed 2006–2010	
Al-Qai'da and the Taliban are enemies of the Afghan people.		Mixed	
Monetary rewards are offered for the capture of al-Qai'da and Taliban leaders.			Ineffective
Monetary rewards are offered for turning in weapons.		Mixed	
Support of local Afghans is needed to eliminate IEDs.		Mixed	
U.S. forces have overwhelming technological superiority over the Taliban.	Effective 2001–2005	Mixed 2006–2010	
GIRoA and ANSF bring peace and progress.		Mixed	
Democracy benefits Afghanistan, and all Afghans need to participate in elections.	Effective 2001–2005	Mixed 2006–2010	

NOTE: IED = improvised explosive device. ANSF = Afghan National Security Forces.

From anecdotal experience and observation on the ground we actually think that the coalition PsyOps effort may have been more successful than RAND state, but they are right to question it as there is such a paucity of evidence. We would, for example, split the joint reference to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Whilst the former still enjoy significant support, the latter do not and we think that RAND could be more upbeat in their assessment. So too, the issue of the US having overwhelming military superiority. But the absence, until now, of a robust methodology for assessing MOE and the ever present paucity of baselines does not make the task easy.

It is rather worrying that RAND seem to vastly underestimate the complexity of conducting MOE in theatre. RAND notes that for PSYOPS to be effective the messages and means of communication must be credible. This, we would argue, is not so much a measure of effectiveness, but an aspect of communication that must be firmly established when conducting TAA. It is not clear from their presentation where they place the emphasis on this perception of effectiveness. Moreover, RAND's third criteria of effectiveness is that "[o]perations must show evidence that audience perceptions or behaviour were influenced as intended." We noted above that there is an alarming paucity of this 'evidence'. But equally, if not more, concerning is the lack of understanding of how hard it really is to do MOE properly.

There are several issues here.

- **Establishing behavioural indicators.** From the outset it is necessary to identify appropriate behavioural indicators by which to measure change. This requires an in-depth understanding of the target group and their behavioural patterns, and a sufficiently rich awareness of which behaviours are most indicative of change. It is hard to do this in the beginning and actually must be based on high quality TAA of the prospective audience(s) to narrow down the possibilities. Often, several iterations may be needed to get this right.
- **Causality versus causation.** The real devil in all this is how to unravel the competing effects of factors that *cause* the behaviour change and those that are merely *correlated* with change. A well-worn but classic example is that ice-cream

sales increase in line with the numbers of drownings. This does not imply though that one caused the other. It is more likely that a third factor, hot weather, underlies both increases. How can we distinguish whether retention in the ANA has improved due to our behavioural campaign, or because more insurgents have infiltrated the ranks and wish to build up numbers for attacks from within? It is difficult to perform analyses of this kind, but if approached scientifically it is possible. Prominent US social psychologist Timothy Wilson has criticized the D.A.R.E anti-drug programme, which is used by 70 per cent of American schools, and yet, until recently, was not even tested. He explains on The Edge science website:

“If there's one thing social psychologists do know how to do, it's how to do experiments and how to test whether an intervention is working, and with good control groups and statistical analyses, seeing whether something works or not. Yet, a lot of the current programs in a wide variety of areas have never been vetted in that way, and are just based on common sense”.

The recent testing revealed a shocking result: the programme does not work, in fact it increases drug-use amongst the target population. MOE in Afghanistan needs to be based on rigorous scientific testing, not on weak *post hoc* or supplementary measures. MOE really needs to be woven into the process from start to finish. Granted, the RAND monograph (p. 28) does recognise the complexity of MOE and acknowledges the cause-effect hitch. We agree that it will not always be possible to relate cause to effect with certainty. Our concern however is that that should not deter us, and that we can do far better than we have currently done if we (a) decide to do so, and (b) adopt proper scientific procedures (and employ scientists) to do the best job possible.

- **Changes in audience.** Part of fulfilling the criteria above can be achieved by recognising that there are multiple stages of change (one influential behaviour model by Prochaska and DeClemete¹⁸ is called the ‘stages of change’ model), and that these should and can be measured. By doing this we can get a more accurate description of how change is occurring and to what extent it relates to military actions. Between basic behavioural indicators and the kinds of large scale behaviour changes that campaigns seek to measure, many changes occur at the audience level that are more subtle, yet highly predictive of behavioural outcomes. These will include attitudes, intentions, motivational dispositions, and perceptions, and they need to be measured too. Not as an end in themselves, but as ways of gauging intermediate changes in target groups.

WEAK CORPORATE KNOWLEDGE

The absence of baselining underscores another failure of coalition PSYOPS and IO in Afghanistan that RAND does not mention – the educational deficit of senior military commanders. We do not mean this unkindly; what we mean is that front line commanders have been trained and exercised for years in kinetic effects. They are completely familiar with the type of kinetic effects that can be achieved, their risks, operating windows and likely benefits. Their mastery and application of that knowledge is why they are senior commanders entrusted with great military responsibility. Unfortunately the operating environment has now changed from that which defined their formative years. Today [mis]perception equals reality and one single individual with a camera-enabled mobile phone can cause seismic strategic unrest as, for example, the events of 23 August 2008 in Azizabad showed. The Pentagon was forced into an abrupt U-turn over its military strike when images of dead children emerged, taken on a mobile phone. Our collective experience of many senior military officers is that they fall broadly into two distinct camps: those that get

¹⁸ *In search of how people change: Applications to addictive behaviors.* Prochaska, James O; DiClemente, Carlo C; Norcross, John C. *American Psychologist*, Vol 47(9), Sep 1992, 1102-1114.

'it' ('it' being the power of behavioural influence campaigns) and those that do not. However, both are characterized by professional ignorance of what is achievable and what is not in this very specialist area. This points to a significant educational deficit; whilst western militaries are exceptionally well trained, education is always the poor relation and we think much more attention needs to be paid to the more unconventional aspects of current and future warfare.

It may be too late for Afghanistan but it is clear that countries such as China and Russia have developed very nuanced understanding of offensive IO techniques. To quote eminent scholar Dr David Betz of King's College London:

"Like the shock paddles of a defibrillator on the chest of a heart attack victim the prefix 'cyber' has an electrifying effect on policymakers and strategists wrestling with the complexities of information age security. Thus while in practically every other aspect of public expenditure the talk is all of 'austerity' there has been a bonanza of resources dedicated to countering the threat from the internet."¹⁹

But not in other areas – like IO. Indeed quite the opposite, in the US and the UK IO capability is actually being reduced.

SURVEYS

The sheer number of polls and surveys undertaken in Afghanistan is astonishing, their results can be found all over the internet: from large polling organisations employed by ISAF through to indivisible national initiatives to measure their individual performance. But just how reliable is the science of surveys?

A significant determinant of the validity of polling is the manner in which the question is phrased and presented. But assuming this is done consistently across all polled groups, the reality of surveys is that they will only ever tell you what the polled thought about something at a particular point in time. Surveys and polling are highly temporal and closely related to attitudes. Far too much attention is paid to polling. For example, the Asia Foundation famously reported that 84 per cent of the Afghan population was happy with law and order in Afghanistan.²⁰ In a society with a rampant insurgency this was simply not a credible figure: it is unlikely you would get 84 per cent approval for policing in places such as New York City or London, let alone in a society in the midst of civil war. As one of our [very senior] proof readers privately observed:

"The Afghans appear to be the most surveyed people on earth. Everywhere I turned when I was there in October 2012 another group was telling me how they had a poll... when I asked the MISO Task force how they controlled for over polling in their 200+ question survey, they told me with a straight face they had questions in the poll to control for that".

By way of an example consider the recent US Presidential election and this front page headline reporting a GALLUP poll just days before the election:

¹⁹ Connectivity, War & Beyond Cyber War by David Betz. See: <http://kingsofwar.org.uk/2012/11/connectivity-war-beyond-cyber-war/#more-7474>

²⁰ http://asiafoundation.org/pdf/Afghan_Report_-_April082007.pdf



Polls and surveys cannot in the future be THE principle determinate of IO policy in the way in which they have figured in Afghanistan. In their place we must use the tried and tested mechanisms of TAA.

COMMAND AND CONTROL (C2)

In ISAF Headquarters there are some 500 officers from all troop contributing nations planning operations and policy. In the IJC some 900 officers fill similar functions; at regional commands a similar plethora of officers plan. At the operational Headquarters a smaller but still sizable number of military staff plan. In our book *Behavioural Conflict* we opine that the defining sound of 21st century conflict is now the steady and rhythmic click-click-click of multiple computer keyboards not the rat-a-tat-tat of weapons. The simple fact is that there are far too many people working on the same problems and subjects and duplication and confusion in such hectic environments is almost a given. We are on record as suggesting that this degree of bureaucracy is dysfunctional and counter to the operational need on the ground. There is a joke that routinely circulates around military circles that is not entirely fiction: What is the function of all of these staff officers? To create, of course, the two-hour Microsoft PowerPoint presentations that start every day of operations in Kabul, in IJC and in Regional Commands. Staff are so busy reporting what has happened that what could happen in the future gets drowned out by the noise.

SUMMARY OF OUR CONCLUSIONS

In summary, we find we reach rather different conclusions than those of RAND. This is not to say we disagree with RAND's conclusions; we find value in each and every one of them, if not the recommendations. But in our view, RAND's conclusions and the recommendations are too simplistic and evidence of a deficit of deeper thinking over the problem, which is by no means restricted to RAND. For us the key issues are:

- Failure to adapt and evolve.
- Unhealthy over-reliance on attitudinal products.
- The absence of a narrative that Afghans can believe and trust.
- No effort to conduct coherent TAA
- The absence of proper MOE procedures and methodologies.
- Over-reliance upon surveys and polling
- An educational and training deficit at senior levels.
- Complex C2 structures at every level of command and a concomitant dysfunctionality as a direct result

RAND RECOMMENDATIONS

Whilst we do not disagree with the conclusions of the RAND report, we believe that they profoundly miss the point and result in faulty recommendations:

- **RAND Recommendation 1:** Hold a conference of IO and PsyOps personnel who have served in Afghanistan to define best practice

Comment: We would not dispute that the sharing of information and good practice is a well-established means of improving outputs and we would not wish to denigrate this. However to place it as the principle recommendation of such a major report suggests a paucity of thinking and encourages group think when actually innovation is necessary.

- **RAND Recommendation 2 :** Use local focus groups to pre-test messages

Comment: This is already a principal tenet of UK PsyOps and utilises the services of many locally employed personnel; we would be collectively stunned if this was not also the case for US MISO activities. If it is not, and we are horrified that such a possibility may exist, then we wholeheartedly and unequivocally agree with RAND.

- **RAND Recommendation 3 :** Conduct public opinion surveys for TAA and post-testing

Comment: This, in the light of our previous discussions on the utility of polling and surveys is a misnomer and we cannot under any circumstances support this recommendation. It leads us further down an already failed and discredited path. TAA is a discreet scientific discipline practiced by one or two truly expert organisations in the world²¹ but routinely laid claim to by every commercial PR and Communication company bidding for government work.

- **RAND Recommendation 4 :** Use key communicators to help develop and disseminate messages

Comment: We understand that this recommendation refers to using believable conduits for message dissemination. Again, we are stunned that this may not already be a core tenet of US MISO operations.

- **RAND Recommendation 5:** Harmonise IO doctrine and practice and integrate greater integration between PsyOps and Public Affairs

Comment: Doctrine is only ever a handrail or guide for operations. Whilst doctrine must be consistent, over reliance upon generically written doctrine in specific operational scenarios is not desirable. Operators must be provided with the necessary tools to apply doctrinal principals in different scenarios. It is our view that far too much attention is paid to organisations and processes and far too little to actual operations. Further, we are sceptical at the level at which Public Affairs and PsyOps should be harmonised. Public Affairs exists to inform audiences, and often blanket audiences, about events. Whilst that inform process may influence, Public Affairs engages in no specific TAA activity. Nor does Public Affairs have control over the message or message conduit once released. PsyOps seeks to directly influence

²¹ The notoriously conservative US Government Audit Office specifically highlighted the work of the UK's Strategic Communications Laboratories in a report on US public diplomacy and outreach. See *Actions Needed to Improve Strategic Use and Coordination of Research* published by the United States Government Accountability Office. Available to download at: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d07904.pdf>

discreet target groups through military assets. Any confusion of these two would be highly prejudicial and, as we have already seen, arouse enormous concern.²²

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Consider this comment from a private circulation paper produced at the UK's Defence Academy in 2009:

For 300 years, during peacetime, the English/UK Defence Budget has been remarkably consistent at between 2-5% of GDP. At 2-3% GDP – without the running costs of current operations, we cannot sustain the capability to conduct the full spectrum of military operations that we have in the past. To do that we would need 4-5% GDP. Even to maintain our current reduced capabilities and associated minimal structures, Defence needs more money than it is getting. Conclusion: Either we need a serious increase in the Defence Budget or we need to introduce drastic changes in the way we do things. (And most likely, we need a combination of the two)²³.

It is our view that properly conducted influence activity, centred on the PsyOps/MISO architecture of western militaries, and using proven scientific techniques, makes this aspiration perfectly possible. Accordingly we have only one recommendation:

US MISO (and wider western military PsyOps) needs to mark the imminent end of the campaign in Afghanistan with a complete halt to current attitudinal practices and conduct a fundamental review of doctrine and operating practices.

We started our paper with an analogy from World War One. We make no apologies for using another analogy in the following conclusion: imagine a small child in a remote African village with a stomach disorder. With no medical expertise readily available that child is likely to be treated by the village healer, whom we might call the *Witch Doctor*. That individual may decide that the boy is ill because, for example, the spirit of his dead Grandfather is displeased. The healer may prescribe a 'remedy' to the ailment – perhaps an animal sacrifice, some secret concoction or perhaps some ancient chants. But imagine if a qualified medical doctor happened upon the village. He would apply a scientifically derived diagnostic process and may conclude the boy has a urinary infection or some stomach disorder, easily cured with some tablets or perhaps an injection.

67. Why is this relevant? We believe that ISAF's IO and PsyOps is currently anchored in the 'Witch Doctor' school of medicine. It is now time, in the light of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, to throw out the metaphorical chicken bones, and in their place inject both innovation and properly grounded science into MISO and IO practices.

STRATEGIC DETERRENCE

All too often, when we talk of deterrence, it is in the context of hard military capability, and often nuclear at that. Stopping conflict *before it has started* must be a key tenet of our future national security policy. Alongside international aid, public diplomacy and, yes, military deterrence, we need structures capable of understanding group motivations *before* they materialise into abhorrent or undesired behaviours. This is not PR, advertising or marketing; this is not even conventional Military Intelligence *per se*. This is the science, the proper and hard science, of social psychology and in particular Target Audience Analysis. We need to get a lot smarter at it.

²² The decision to merge PsyOps and Public Affairs in ISAF's HQ rightly, we believe, caused mass public controversy in 2008 and resulted in the decision being reversed some three days later. See <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/11/29/us-afghan-nato-idUSTRE4AS0ZV20081129>. Press and "Psy Ops" to merge at NATO Afghan HQ, Reuters, 29 Nov 2008.

²³ Realities of Defence Economics. Private circulation paper. UK Defence Academy.

During the writing of this paper one of the authors took a taxi driven by an Iranian man in his late 50s. He was an intelligent, well-educated, and mannered Muslim gentleman, whom the author mistook at first as an Afghan. They both talked a bit about the issues facing Afghanistan, and without prompting, the taxi driver turned to his passenger and said: "Do you know where the US went wrong in Afghanistan, why it has been so long, and such a mess? They didn't understand the people, their culture, their ways of behaving. They just went in there and from the start got it all wrong. It's too late to change that now. If they'd spent a billion dollars on research at the beginning, they could have saved themselves trillions, and many lives."

We end this paper with two quotations which we think rather nicely sum up the whole problem. The first is attributed to Mark Twain and the second to Alvin Tofler. Both are entirely apt.

"If you do what you have always done you will get what you've always got"

"The illiterate of the twenty-first century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn".

Biographies

Major General Andrew Mackay CBE, US Legion of Merit, commanded British Forces in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, between 2007-2008. He retired from the British Army in 2009 after 29 years of service.

Commander Steve Tatham Royal Navy is the Commanding Officer of 15(UK) Psychological Operations Group; he has worked extensively in Afghanistan. His Ph.D. examined the role of targeted influence in future conflict.

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The authors have previously collaborated in writing *Behavioural Conflict: Why Understanding People and their Motivations will Prove Decisive in Future Conflict*. They blog on issues of behaviour at: <http://behavioural-conflict.tumblr.com/>

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