PAPERS

A Revolution in Informational Affairs: Winning the War of Ideas

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With an unprecedented opportunity at hand, the modern world is poised to abolish the single greatest source of man's inhumanity: the monopoly over truth. On countless occasions over the course of both ancient and modern history, despots, states, extremists, and religious fanatics have leveraged actual or claimed informational advantages to dehumanize and degrade others. A paucity of informational resources and—more serious still—uneven access to information have repeatedly enabled self-interested actors to construct ideologies around a foundation of fictitious narratives made legitimate through an organization's simple claim to a monopoly over truth. The informational control of the few has proven resilient against historical advances in mass communications, such as the inventions of the printing press, typewriter, and even the modern word processor. However, more recent developments in the information revolution will prove qualitatively different from these previous technologies and will eventually prevent states, organizations, and individuals from convincingly asserting any monopoly over truth.

Unlike previous epochs in the history of mass communications, the information revolution is ushering in an era that is inherently decentralized.

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Previous technologies fundamentally depended on centralized control for the generation of content. The proliferation of the Internet has turned this paradigm on its head, creating an increasingly diverse network of open systems that have enabled individuals across the world to access information and interact directly with one another without the distorting influence of self-interested intermediaries. Most importantly, barriers to the benefits of the information revolution such as Internet access and cost are eroding at an increasing rate. This should, by all accounts, be a profoundly positive development for democratic governments that embrace transparency, such as the United States. In a 1996 Foreign Affairs piece entitled "America's Information Edge," Joseph Nye and William Owens eloquently argued this point, insisting that the United States both appreciate the power of information and embrace its position astride the most powerful informational networks on the planet.[1] Unfortunately, their predictions were not entirely accurate, and things have not turned out as we might have expected.

To date, the principal ideological struggle of the twenty-first century between violent jihadists and world powers such as the United States has been dominated by a loosely coupled conglomeration of radical religious fanatics. While this struggle must not be the only focus of American public diplomacy efforts, it should be the predominant one from a security perspective and, as such, will be the exclusive focus of this paper. The profound dissonance between what was expected of the information revolution and what has come of it begs a number of confounding questions: Why have belligerent transnational actors been uniquely able to frame the terms of the public diplomacy discussion to date? How can states compete—and win—in this new informational environment? Will the information revolution truly spell an end to the monopoly over truth, or will it simply usher in an era of greater instability, uncertainty, and vitriol "delivered on the cheap?"

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In recent years, al-Qaeda and other like-minded organizations have proven far more adept than established institutional actors at influencing international opinion. This paper will examine the reasons why belligerent transnational actors have been the successful first-adapters to the new realm of twenty-first century public diplomacy, briefly analyze how states can counter non-state decentralized networks, and conclude with a decid-

edly positive analysis of the long-term prospects for states to counter belligerent transnational actors in the "war of ideas."

A REVOLUTION IN (INFORMATIONAL) AFFAIRS

The phenomenon of tipping points and complexity theory, if not fully understood, is at least familiar to professionals in any number of disciplines whose histories are punctuated by acute periods of dynamic change. The military community, in particular, has developed a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon and sought to explain it through the concept of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). Competing definitions of the variables of an RMA exist, but in general RMAs comprise three key elements:

- Technological change
- Organizational adaptation
- Doctrinal innovation[2]

Examination of the post–September 11 landscape of public diplomacy through the conceptual lens of the RMA lends provocative insights into the causes of the U.S. failure to win the "battle of ideas." Careful consideration of the theoretical underpinnings of the military concept of the RMA and the distinctions between the military and informational "battle space" suggests that, with only slight modification, it is possible to distill the key elements of a Revolution in Informational Affairs (RIA):

- Technological change
- Organizational adaptation
- Informational transformation

Technological change has consistently precipitated rapid organizational change and transformation of the type of information conveyed through mass communications media. Gutenberg's invention of the printing press catalyzed the formation of printing organizations and facilitated mass distribution of new types of information, which were previously limited in circulation. Likewise, the advent of radio broadcasting in 1910 had a similar effect.[3]

Examination of the latest RIA, the information revolution, and more specifically the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies that promote decentralized collaboration through forums, message boards, and other open systems highlights the reasons why violent jihadists have, thus far, been able to best the United States in the field of public diplomacy.

Technological Change

To be sure, the Internet is fundamentally altering the way people communicate, collaborate, and develop their beliefs. The old mechanisms of public diplomacy, such as Voice of America, were largely dependent on one core assumption: that demand for relevant, high-quality, and reliable information outstrips supply. During the Cold War, this assumption often proved valid among the populations targeted for American public diplomacy efforts. However, this assumption no longer rings true in a networked world where target populations are suffering from disenfranchisement and disillusionment in societies awash in competing information sources. The old tools of public diplomacy have been reduced to only marginal effectiveness, and new tools have taken their place. The United States continues to rely on many of the same programs, venues, and events to communicate its message to the world, while violent jihadists have adapted to this new reality and achieved early successes as a direct result.

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Al-Qaeda's exploitation of the global media shifted to embrace the Internet in three clearly discernible phases, each driven primarily by technological change. During the 1990s, Osama bin Laden recognized the inherently personal nature of public diplomacy. He gave personal interviews to Western news media outlets in order to get his message out. At one point, he even directed an Arab student in the United Kingdom to establish a physical presence for the "media wing of Al-Qaeda" in the West.[4] However, with the rising notoriety of his network came increasing physical danger. This reality, in combination with an evolving media environment, made change both necessary and advantageous. The emergence of Al Jazeera as a truly global TV network enabled al-Qaeda leadership to work through Arab TV to reach both the Arab population and the Western media.[5] The third evolution of al-Qaeda's media operations removed intermediaries from the process entirely. Al-Qaeda has recently embraced the Internet as a means of direct communication through its own websites and indirect communication through postings on sympathetic organizations' websites.[6] Since this shift began, the Internet offerings of violent jihadists

have become increasingly sophisticated. Most recently, al-Qaeda's number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri, solicited questions online directly from the besieged organization's senior leadership circle.[7]

The information revolution has fundamentally leveled the playing field with respect to information assimilation and distribution. Violent jihadists are using the Internet for a variety of purposes, but it is in the realm of public diplomacy where their capabilities have improved the most as a result of technological change. The July 2007 National Intelligence Estimate on the Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland soberly assesses this new reality:

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> "Globalization trends and recent technological advances will continue to enable even small numbers of alienated people to find and connect with one another, justify and intensify their anger, and mobilize resources to attack—all without requiring a centralized terrorist organization, training camp, or leader."[8]

However, it is important to note that while this technological transformation has indeed enhanced the outreach opportunities available to the violent jihadists, it has presented equal opportunity to those institutions opposed to their agenda. If anything, the existing institutions of the United States should possess a decided advantage in their ability to manipulate information flows on account of their scale and control over the physical infrastructure governing cyberspace. However, the "battle of ideas" is not won only through immutable technological change but also through organizational adaptation to this change.

Organizational Adaptation

Organizations such as al-Qaeda have been among the first to adapt to this new information environment successfully for two principal reasons. First, it was unable to compete effectively in the traditional realm of public diplomacy and was eager to push its informational struggle into a new environment. Second, its size and structure is better suited to leverage the opportunities available in this new decentralized and amorphous paradigm of information operations.

Desperation can be a source of great innovation. Al-Qaeda and like-

minded organizations have been interested in instigating a global insurgency of sorts since at least the mid–1990s. However, at the time, they were presented with a debilitating challenge: they could not directly influence the peoples who composed the notional center of gravity in this conflict, the very peoples whose "hearts and minds" would decide the outcome of the global jihad. By the late 1990s, al-Qaeda was in desperate need of an asymmetric means of challenging the status quo powers for influence over the disillusioned and disenfranchised. The concurrent rise and proliferation of the Internet presented the violent jihadists with precisely the transformational opportunity they needed. At the organizational level of analysis, al-Qaeda's desperation made it more willing to take risks and tolerate adversity than its competitors, the comparatively conservative public diplomacy institutions of the United States. At the individual level of analysis, the characteristics of the persons populating violent jihadist organizations also contributed decisively to their ability to adapt to the new realities of the information revolution. At the turn of the millennium, it is likely that al-Qaeda operators were generally younger and more technologically adept than their civil service counterparts in the United States. Yet al-Qaeda's true innovation—and perhaps the key to its adaptability—lies in its decentralized organizational model.

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For reasons of strategic imperative, operational efficiency, and organizational security, al-Qaeda has grown increasingly decentralized since the late 1990s. This decentralization of the violent jihadist community into a cohort of loosely coupled organizations has come at great cost to senior leadership's ability to exercise direct control over the operation of the network. At the same time, it has been profoundly advantageous with respect to the network's capacity to conduct effective public diplomacy.

Decentralized organizations differ from centralized organizations in crucial ways. They tend to distribute intelligence throughout the system and operate autonomously without a high degree of centralized control.[9] They are amorphous and mutate quickly.[10] They are difficult to identify, assess, and differentiate from centralized organizations.[11] Most importantly, they are ideally suited to translate global strategies into customized regional campaign plans and initiatives that are broadly consistent with strategic intent and yet resonate powerfully with local audiences. A brief

investigation of the new type of information that traverses global information networks reveals why organizational decentralization and customized messaging are so profoundly important to public diplomacy's practical success in the twenty-first century.

Informational Transformation

The final element of an RIA involves change in the type of information flows that are delivered to the masses. Traditional public diplomacy institutions are doubly disadvantaged in their attempts to adjust to the informational transformation experienced in recent years. First, they are not organized to produce and disseminate the new type of information necessary to win the "battle of ideas," and second, they are typically tasked to develop and deliver a message to global audiences that is so complex and abstract that it often fails to resonate with target audiences.

The rise of the Internet has created a "long tail effect" whereby users have come to expect an ever-greater degree of product and service specialization and customization to meet their unique needs and wants.[12] For the first time in history, individuals can efficiently conduct small-scale person-to-person commerce with anyone who has something to sell. This has created a massive marketplace for goods that is dominated not by the few but by the many. The market for both goods and ideas has expanded dramatically on account of the connective effects of the Internet, and decentralized organizations have proven infinitely more adept at producing customer-specific products and information than their overly centralized competitors. In short, al-Qaeda and its regional affiliates are well-positioned and ideally structured to conduct public diplomacy in the "long tail" environment of the twenty-first century.

The second informational challenge facing traditional public diplomacy institutions is a matter of substance. The tight ideological coherence of violent jihadist organizations is relatively easy to convey in a marketable way to disillusioned Muslim populations. Further, violent jihadists are able to amplify their messaging through exploitation of video and imagery depicting real or alleged atrocities against Muslims in the world's conflict regions. Conversely, the messaging of a pluralistic liberal democracy, such as the United States, tends to be less coherent and far more abstract. The U.S. Public Diplomacy Strategy seeks to convey America's most basic values and democratic concepts, especially the value of freedom.[13] These messages would indeed resonate among an educated population in a stable society, but they are of dubious value in regions of the world where these

conditions do not exist. Further, the United States relies on "propaganda of the deed" to provide a tangible backdrop to America's humanistic messaging. This endeavor is somewhat effective and indisputably worthy, but the unfortunate truth is that rumors of tragedies and atrocities tend to crowd out positive stories of American humanitarian operations, which the United States relies on to match its words with action.

PLAYING TO WIN

The United States will inevitably prevail in the "battle of ideas" against al-Qaeda and like-minded organizations on account of the depravity and fundamental contradictions of our adversaries' ideology and actions. However, by failing to recognize the realities of the first RIA of the twenty-first century and adjust our public diplomacy strategy accordingly, the United States is effectively conceding the initiative to our adversaries, and in so doing, delaying their eventual defeat. The United States should focus on three essential reforms that would systematically update America's public diplomacy strategy to the latest RIA and facilitate the decisive defeat of the violent jihadists with the greatest possible haste.

ELEMENTS OF THE REVOLUTION IN INFORMATIONAL AFFAIRS	POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
Technological Change	Create new messages, not new channels
Organizational Adaptation	Decentralize the public diplomacy apparatus
Informational Transformation	Attack the adversary's open systems

Create New Messages, Not New Channels

Public diplomacy institutions in the United States routinely and deftly create technical mechanisms that directly message besieged audiences. Through radio stations or satellite broadcasts, they deliver messaging over the heads, often quite literally, of hostile governments or regimes. However, the modern battle for "hearts and minds" is more typically occurring in open societies where there is no shortage of information sources. Fundamentally, American state-sponsored information channels lack both the market share and credibility necessary to achieve the desired effect.

The key to a strategy designed to counter extremism is to reach the

exact same audiences targeted by the extremists themselves.[14] American messaging must be inserted directly into the global, regional, and local information sources that are carrying our adversaries' propaganda. If American messaging must change to secure airtime by, for example, "going negative" on the realities of jihadist conduct, then we should not hesitate to do so. In fact, market-driven regional news outlets are perhaps the most reliable sounding board we have upon which to evaluate the likely resonance of our messaging. In any case, leaflets and radio are out; satellite news, blogs, and Internet dailies are in.

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Decentralize the Public Diplomacy Apparatus

In their popular study of decentralized organizations, Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom propose three strategies to counter decentralized organizations.[15] First, organizations can attempt to change the adversary's ideology by altering the operating environment. Second, organizations can endeavor to force the enemy to centralize by raising the costs of decentralization. Third, organizations can decentralize themselves to mirror their adversary's structural advantages and directly counter their asymmetric tactics.

When overlaid against the public diplomacy challenge posed by violent jihadists, the strengths and weaknesses of these strategies stand in stark relief. The first strategy would require that the United States change what our adversaries believe. The second would demand that the United States identify and exploit methods of forcing our adversaries to change how they behave. The third would require that the United States reassess and reorient its own behavior to stop fighting yesterday's battle and begin winning today's. Historical experience teaches us that in an environment of constrained resources and limited information, it is best to focus our efforts on that which we know and control. It is nearly impossible to change what our adversaries believe and it is a difficult and uncertain endeavor to change how they behave. While it is indeed challenging to alter the way that our own institutions and bureaucracies do business, it is far easier and more controllable than the alternatives.

Messaging in the twenty-first century must be more customized and

timely than it ever has been before in order to compete in today's infor-
mational environment. The most crucial element of America's strategy to
win the "battle of ideas" in the "long tail" marketplace of the twenty-first
century must be decentralization of the public diplomacy apparatus.

Attack the Adversary's Open Systems

The open systems created by this latest RIA are our adversary's great-
est demonstrated strength and most pronounced unexploited weakness.
The webcasts, message boards, and electronic forums used by violent jihad-
ists to communicate messages to their constituencies are routinely used to
attack the policies and credibility of the United States. The information
being peddled through these venues is qualitatively different from that of
previous eras. The specificity, timeliness, scope, and multimedia nature of
the content posted to these sites is unprecedented in the history of mass
communication and has resulted in a fundamental transformation of the
type of information delivered to global audiences.

The United States should aggressively engage violent jihadists
in debate in their very own forums, using the same tools and tactics so
effectively employed against us in the past. The United States should
infiltrate jihadist forums where al-Qaeda ideology is disseminated into
open systems, discredit and defame jihadist actions and personalities, and
seek to unhinge al-Qaeda's virulent ideology from its violent strategy. This
type of ideological warfare is more practicable than many realize. In recent
months, high-profile al-Qaeda ideologues such as Sayyid Imam al-Sharif,
known as "Dr. Fadl," and Abu Yahya al-Libi have provided policymakers
with a host of arguments that the violent jihadists are at a loss to explain
away.[16] The U.S. Government must reorient its public diplomacy activities
to compete at the micro-level with the full range of multimedia tools in real
time. It won't be easy, but we know it is possible because our adversaries are
already doing it.

The technological and informational elements of this latest RIA have
fallen into place. The informational environment has changed and the days
of the monopoly over truth are rapidly drawing to a close. In due course,
organizations and institutions of peace, order, and stability will adapt to
this new environment and finally realize the open marketplace of ideas and
information that has eluded us for far too long. ■

ENDNOTES

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