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Strategic Communications And The Challenges Of The Post 9/11 World

Philip M. Taylor

The 21st century has brought us significant challenges that would be unrecognisable to our forefathers a century ago. In 1907, women could not vote – indeed many men could not vote unless they possessed property or land. In 1907, wealthier people in the western world were just coming to terms with the wonders of new communications technologies such as the land-line telephone while the poorer ones were marvelling at all sorts of moving images being produced for the nickelodeons or cinemas that were springing up in the towns and cities. The movies were, of course, still silent at that time, although Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid were still alive in 1907. Automobiles were rare (the model T Ford was invented the following year); motorways and traffic jams unknown. By 1907 Marconi was able to introduce the first commercial transatlantic telegraphy service and people were talking about a shrinking world - but few as yet could travel to those far-flung places, unless of course you were a soldier. The first trans-Atlantic flight only took place 12 years later. More ominously, in 1907, the Triple Entente between Britain, France and Russia was formed that was to establish the power-bloc lines that were erupt in the First World war seven years later. It was a different world.

On this 50th anniversary of Malaysian independence, let's consider what the world was like in 1957. The Second World War was still a recent memory, although European power had been displaced by two emerging superpowers in the USA and USSR who were about to embark upon a race for space; the first satellite, Sputnik, was launched in 1957. Communists had taken power in China. Stalin was dead although the Cold War was in full flight under the spectre of global nuclear annihilation. Television was displacing cinema and, although both could now talk, the TV images were still in black and white. It was the last year *I Love Lucy* was made. FORTRAN, the first high-level computer language, was developed in 1957 by a team at IBM headed by the American mathematician John Backus. Fangio won his

fifth and final world driver's championship at the German Grand Prix and many people were able to travel to see it in the new generation of jet powered commercial aircraft. And of course Malaya was mopping up the remnants of the communist insurrection which gave the world a phrase we hear so much about today, namely the struggle for 'hearts and minds'.

But, while a little more familiar, it was still a very different world removed from today's realities. Please turn your mobile phones off or onto silent. Don't forget to catch Nancy Snow's presentation by video-conference. I hope your arrival this morning was not delayed by the KL traffic jams. I hope this lecture is not boring you so much that you resort to reading your email on your laptop computers or your Blackberry devices. If it is, take comfort in the fact that you can watch tonight's English Premiership game live or, if you don't like football, you still have dozens of TV satellite channels to choose from. Maybe even the 1969 colour movie *Butch Cassidy* and the *Sundance Kid* is showing on one of them. If you watch the news, you can choose from local Malaysian channels or you can consult CNN or Fox or the BBC or Al Jazeera or CCTV9. Most of you, including women, can vote in your national elections although, if you are under 25, you are more likely to vote for your favourite Big Brother candidate. That is, if you are not listening to music from around the world on your i-Pods. Tomorrow, when you visit KL City Centre, you can go shopping in Marks and Spencer, Gucci, Channel or, in Chinatown, you can buy your fake Rolex watches and bootleg DVDs of Hollywood and Bollywood movies. You can even engage your friendly KL Indian taxi drivers in conversations about whether 10 years ago Princess Diana was killed in a secret plot by the Royal Family or why the CIA conspired with Mossad to bring down the Twin Towers on September 11th 2001. Or maybe you can just talk about David Beckham's signing for a hitherto unknown US soccer team whom everyone now knows to be the LA Galaxy.

This is the reality of our world today in 2007. It is not just communications rich, it is positively affluent – and all at relatively low cost. Communications are becoming to the 21st century what petrol, gas and electricity were to the 20th. They are increasingly the lifeblood of our globalised world and the conduct of business, politics, entertainment, travel, education and, of course, the conduct of war are unimaginable without them. Cameras and computers are everywhere. The cameras

are on our mobile phones, in shops, on our motorways, on the noses of precision guided missiles while the computers are being used to analyse, identify and disseminate the billions of bits and bytes including images, moving or otherwise, that can be accessed on a world-wide scale. Multi-media companies like Disney and Dreamworks are global economic powerhouses while Microsoft has an annual turnover greater than many developing countries Gross Domestic Product.

If what many see as an information overload wasn't enough, digital technology can also be manipulated to spread misinformation and disinformation. How do we know any longer what is real and what is not? Surely the camera never lies? Seeing is believing, isn't it? Well, not necessarily. We now live in a world in which perhaps the greatest educational challenges are how to teach people to distinguish between rumours, speculation, falsehoods and facts and to provide them with the skills to analyse and evaluate the mass of information available to them. If we do not equip them with the intellectual skills that enable them to make their own minds up over any given issues – in other words to think for themselves – then they become vulnerable to manipulation by unscrupulous persuaders who need a herd mentality to achieve their objectives. This was also the Great Challenge of the 20th century and we are still living with the consequences of that first mass media age through the legacies of Hitler, Stalin and Mao Tse Tung. But today, in our post 9/11 world, there are new adversaries who threaten international peaceful co-existence, adversaries who understand only too well how to utilise the global communications environment to achieve their ends.

In 2007, we are approaching the end of the sixth year of the so-called Global War on Terror, with no apparent end in sight, and it is sobering to think that this current conflict has already lasted almost as long as World War Two. Many analysts would argue that this present 'war' cannot be 'won' by military means alone and that calling it a war in the first place was misguided as wars have traditionally been defined as armed conflict between two or more nation-states. Most nations are in fact currently engaged in a counter-terrorism campaign against a non-state actor, although Americans tend to see Afghanistan and Iraq as the first two 'battles' in what is now being re-branded as 'The Long War'. The American President has repeatedly stressed that 'America is at war' but he has been vague when explaining what he means when he calls it a 'new kind of war'. Despite his use of World War Two type rhetoric

such as 'axis of evil' and his repeated condemnation of appeasement, it is more likely that he was thinking of a previous ideological competition that took almost two generations to end, namely the Cold War, which some now call 'World War Three', giving the status of the current conflict 'World War Four'. But whatever you call the current conflict, the struggle for hearts and minds will be every bit as important as it was during these previous struggles.

Despite Afghanistan and Iraq where the use of hard power is so evident everyday on our TV screens, we are in fact involved in a global information war in which soft power is more likely to prove the long-term weapon of victory. Our contemporary mass media may be preoccupied with events - what happens today is the most important thing that matters to them. Yesterday is history and therefore largely irrelevant but there's no reason why we shouldn't speculate about what might happen tomorrow, because that's entertaining. We all like to speculate and gossip, don't we? This events-based approach to world politics is even driven by many of our world leaders. One of President Bush's favourite phrases is 'Move On', as though the past simply doesn't matter as a factor shaping the way we should see the future. That may well be a characteristic of capitalist societies weaning on the 'I want it now' philosophy that underpins credit card and consumer debt, pensions crises and even the problems of global climate change, but it is not conducive to developing a long-term Grand Strategy that is required to defeat the forces of extremist terrorism. We still desperately lack a Grand Global Information Strategy that will assist the struggle against Al Qaida, JI and whatever other terrorist networks have yet to form.

The short-term approach was evident in Iraq in 2003 where no real consideration was given to what might happen after Saddam Hussein had been driven out of Baghdad. The same could be said of Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban. How do you rebuild a society whose economy is predicated on drugs? How can you persuade farmers to cultivate cocoa instead of cocaine? How long will any of this take? Is our short-term, I-want-it-now, approach to events appropriate to such long-term *issues* as Nation Building and Public Diplomacy? On the evidence of the last six years, the answer would appear to be that it is not.

Al Qaida, on the other hand, does seem well equipped in this regard. For them, the current conflict is merely the final battle in the

1000 year crusade against the infidel. Their exploitation of the past fuels their expectations of the future. Apart from their own skilful use of disseminating messages which can resonate on the uninformed, they exploit western mistakes with considerable skill – as when they pointed to the US President's initial use of the word 'crusade' or when the military campaign in Afghanistan was initially labelled 'Operation Infinite Justice'. Images from Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib were another 'gift' in terms of propaganda as well as being an own goal in the west's information war. Al Qaida are opportunistic – as when they webcast to the world that Hurricane Katrina was 'God's revenge on the city of homosexuals' – but they also have a long-term information strategy carefully pinned to long-term objectives about the establishment of a Caliphate and the driving out of 'Christian Crusaders' from the lands of Islam. In Iraq, they have proved particularly successful in making a link between 9/11 and this crusade, where none had really existed before. On the web, they are particularly good [slides]. Of course, by labelling it a war, the US actually bestowed the status of 'warriors' upon the terrorists; it empowered them with a status they did not previously have and reinforced AQ claims that this was indeed a war against Islam in a 'clash of civilizations'. It was a huge mistake that will take a long time to recover from.

Apart from these self-inflicted communications mistakes and the admitted skill of terrorist propaganda, one can only be astounded, as Richard Holbrooke famously put it, at how a man in a cave could out-communicate the most sophisticated communications nation in the world. For all the talk about 'hearts and minds' we have moved from a situation on the day after 9/11 when *Le Monde* declared that 'we are all Americans now' to one today where anti-Americanism is at an all-time high and where many people around the world believe that President Bush is a greater threat to world peace than Osama bin Laden. It has to be one of the greatest strategic communications failures in the history of communications. From being the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the USA has converted itself – with a little help from AQ propaganda – into the enemy, perceived outside not as the 'force for good in the world' it sees itself to be but indeed quite the opposite. [slides] Forgotten now are the 'humanitarian interventions' on behalf of Muslim victims in Kuwait, Bosnia and Kosovo or even, more recently, in this region during the aftermath of the Tsunami.

All this certainly makes the information war harder to win and eventual victory in the so-called 'Long War' more elusive and even further away. Can this situation be reversed? There are recent signs that Washington has recognised – finally – that more attention needs to be given to the soft power elements of this campaign. Its first mistake was to refuse to admit that mistakes had been made. But I think the more unyielding characteristics of the first Bush term of office – the 'you are either with us or against us' and 'there is no neutral ground' type of rhetoric used 5-6 years ago – are now on the way out. Troop losses in Iraq especially have tempered the wartime rhetoric of the original Global War on Terror and, pending the outcome of the current 'Surge' to gain greater security in Baghdad and Central Iraq, greater domestic criticism of the Bush policy concerning Iraq is likely to increase. Whatever the outcome of the Presidential election in a year's time, we shall have to see whether anti-Americanism was really anti-Bushism.

Even so, the strategic communications challenges for the US administration remain formidable. Up until now, while the US government was in an 'at war' mentality – 'we have to fight them over there to protect us over here' – the warriors in the Pentagon have been given freer reign to fight the war on terror. While we can question whether it was the right strategy to fight an idea – terrorism – with tanks and missiles and troops, the US military has approached the hearts and minds element within the limits of its information operations doctrines. On paper, these doctrines call for things like 'command and control warfare' to reach what they term 'full spectrum dominance'. The record of Information Operations and Psychological Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan is mixed. There have been some tactical and operational successes as well as some failures. But the real challenge is at the strategic level and it is here that military information strategies don't really work. Remember the Pentagon's attempt to fulfil Donald Rumsfeld's Information Operations roadmap by turning to contractors like the Lincoln Group? In itself, this was an admission by the Pentagon that it was not good at strategic communications. Whether the Pentagon will ever admit that not only is full spectrum dominance impossible in our chaotic, unregulated, global communications environment but also that the long-term way forward in tackling the *issues* is in the hands of the State Department, its Public Diplomacy activities and an emphasis on soft power remains to be seen.

Strategic Communications is a phrase that encapsulates a nation state's attempt to co-ordinate all the elements of its informational power. It involves Public Affairs at home and abroad, Public Diplomacy and Information Operations all working in harmony and with the same voice. If done well, it can communicate national messages explaining and justifying foreign policy actions. But it is not a process that can be treated separately from those foreign policy actions, which still speak louder than most words. If the foreign policy is disliked or mistrusted, then no amount of slick Madison Avenue style marketing can sell the policy. Think of the problem as being like the Durian. Your challenge is to overcome the bad smell on the grounds that it tastes great. Malaysians know that it tastes great and smells bad but what if the situation were reversed? If it smelt great and tasted terrible, would you be able to sell it more than once?

That has been the problem to date with most US Public Diplomacy initiatives, from Radio Sawa ('together') or al Hurra TV (the 'free one') or Hi Magazine or the 'shared values campaign' and a whole host of other strategic communications programmes that have fallen on deaf ears and blind eyes. The American dream has become an Islamic nightmare in which American universalist values such as 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' that once commanded almost universal admiration have been replaced by fear of American mega-power. It is, as I said earlier, an extraordinary failure of strategic communications.

So what can be done to put things right? We probably won't be unable to unravel anti-Bush sentiment from anti-Americanism until the next Presidential election. But it is essential to return to the *idea* of America. What I mean by this is to go back to those core perceptions which made the United States so attractive to so many people in the world, encapsulated in the words on the Statue of Liberty – 'bring me your tired, your poor, your oppressed'. Or perhaps this is impossible given that every detail of American life is under so much global media scrutiny. The media tend only to be interested in bad news so, when things go wrong, as they did in Hurricane Katrina, or when there is a latest school mass shooting, they make headline news all over the world. And such events hardly make the United States look attractive in soft power terms. Hollywood movies don't help either because they tend to depict a society which is drug and divorce ridden, violent and promiscuous – hardly characteristics that will resonate positively from

an Islamic point of view. And none of us like to be told what to do or how to think by foreigners. So if the *reality* of modern day American society clashes with the *idea* of America as a beacon of hope for all mankind, strategic communications can only be done effectively by others who wish to inherit the mantle of universalist values. That means it must concentrate not on what divides us but on what unites us all as fellow human beings, regardless of race, religion or culture.

It is in this regards that globalisation may provide the answer. For anti-globalisation protestors, their demonstrations are often a thinly veiled form of anti-Americanism. But on 9/11, Al Qaida's attack on the United States was its attack on the Pentagon and whichever other Washington target Flight 93 was trying to hit. The attack on the World Trade Centre was an attack upon the world. Over 90 nationalities were killed in the twin towers, including many Muslims. The World Trade Centre represented all that Al Qaida and its associates despise: modernity, globalisation, democracy, free market liberal capitalism. The terrorists had first tried to destroy the buildings in 1993. That failed attack is a sobering reminder that our current challenges did not begin on 9/11 or when the United States decided to remove the Taliban from Kabul. Bin Laden first declared his jihad on the US in 1996. We forget history at our peril. In this, the fiftieth year of Malaysian independence, we must understand the past if we are to chart a course to a peaceful future.

Ladies and gentlemen, I will conclude by quoting the ancient Chinese scholar of war, Sun Tsu. He wisely wrote that 'to subdue the enemy without recourse to war in the acme of skill'. He was basically saying that you can achieve your objectives without violence if you are supreme at communication and persuasion. General Templar understood this in his 'hearts and minds' campaign back in 1950s Malaya. President Ronald Reagan understood this in his dealings with the 'Evil Empire' of the 1980s which resulted in the collapse of the Soviet Union – his nickname as the 'Great Communicator' was for good reason. In today's global communications environment, however, communicating with a domestic audience also means communicating with a global audience. Modern politicians, wherever they are – in the west or in Islamic countries - would do well to appreciate that. That is why a modern democratic Islamic-based state like Malaysia has a role to play in world affairs. The *idea* of Malaysia sends a message to

extremists of all persuasions that peace-loving Islamic people can live alongside non-Muslims in relative harmony and co-existence. It belies the message of Al Qaida that Muslims and non-Muslims are involved in a 'clash of civilisations' or that there is a war taking place between Islam and the west. But Sun Tsu also had another wise warning for us all. He warned that, in order to succeed, you must not only know your enemy but you should also know yourself. It is this internal reflection about what kind people we all are as human beings, regardless of race, creed or culture, that is perhaps the greatest challenge for us in the 21st century. If we allow the enemies of modern, peace-loving, democratic, globalised societies to focus on what divides us rather than on what unites us, then they win.

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