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Persuasion Not Propaganda: Overcoming Controversies of Domestic Influence in NATO Military Strategic Communications

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Abstract

There are significant differences of opinion between the thirty member nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as to the appropriate place of influence within military strategic communications. This paper finds that the sensitivities of some nations regarding influence stem from concerns of being accused of propaganda. While definitions of propaganda are diverse and complex, NATO's particular definition is unhelpful in distinguishing between propaganda and the legitimate rhetorical influence activities of NATO and its nations. Therefore this paper proposes a new definition of propaganda for NATO, incorporating academic arguments of propaganda as a co-produced strategic process of deception. By creating distance from

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NATO's communications activities, this new definition is intended to guide NATO nations beyond the sensitivities and towards a common approach to communications influence operations.

Introduction

There are significant differences of opinion between the thirty member nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as to the appropriate place of influence within strategic communications.

Debates over the limits of persuasion, and the appropriateness of campaigns which aim to change attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours, are common. Such debates encompass what strategic communications is and is not, which activities contribute to it, and where the boundaries are. Within these discussions, one of the most polarising debates is whether it is ever appropriate for military strategic communications to aim to influence a domestic audience.

Starting from the premise that a unified approach to communications is vital, if NATO is to properly compete and contest within information warfare, this article aims to help guide NATO nations towards a common approach on communications influence operations.

At the outset, the article will demonstrate significant differences between NATO nations regarding whether it is appropriate for a military to aim to influence its domestic audience. It will use the UK and US as examples of nations at opposite ends of the debate, and outline why such differences can be detrimental to NATO's joined-up strategic communications activities and message cohesion.

The US will be used as a case study to explore the reasons behind the sensitivities. From this foundation, the paper aims to build the case that some of the sensitivities are misplaced, and contain inherent contradictions. It will do this in the following way.

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First, it will suggest that a communications mandate of 'inform, not influence' is built on flawed logic. There is no such thing as value-free information. There is, or should be, an intent behind all military communications: we are always trying to persuade audiences to see the world as we do.

Second, citing legal experts, it will suggest that the mandate is based on an erroneous interpretation of historical law. At the heart of this misinterpretation, the paper shall find, is the term 'propaganda' and, specifically, the desire to protect the American people from it.

Finding that the crux of the sensitivities surrounding influence lies in propaganda, the article will then embark on an exploration of that subject. It will scrutinise definitions of propaganda, and suggest that the US's and NATO's definitions of the term are problematic.

As a primary step towards overcoming the sensitivities and building a more helpful definition for NATO, the article will first suggest the need to explain transparently NATO and NATO nations' influence activities, such as psychological operations (PsyOps). Failing to explain openly and transparently what PsyOps are and are not means that the practice is often misrepresented. This misrepresentation only adds to sensitivities surrounding influence.

Once legitimate influence activities are properly acknowledged, this transparency in turn allows us to explore the differences between these activities and propaganda. Using this understanding, this article then notes two key facets of propaganda which are useful in building a new definition for NATO: firstly, propaganda as a strategic process of deception, and secondly, the practice as a co-production between producer and consumer.

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Among the many definitions of propaganda, this article suggests that a formulation following Jowett and O'Donnell's definition,[1] and incorporating the argument of propaganda as a co-produced strategic process of deception, would best serve NATO. The new definition differentiates propaganda from NATO's rhetorical influence activities, which should help guide NATO nations beyond the sensitivities and towards a common approach to communications influence operations.

Differences of opinion on StratCom influence

Opinions as to the appropriate place of domestic influence within strategic communications vary widely between NATO nations. The US and UK, for instance, sit at opposite sides of this debate.

The UK Ministry of Defence has proposed a definition for defence strategic communications:

> advancing national interests by using Defence as a means of communication to influence the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of audiences.[2]

It explicitly lists attitude and subsequent behaviour change as main strategic outcomes of defence communications strategy formulation and execution, 'both at home and abroad'.[3]

Meanwhile the US, which shall be used as a case study, rejects the idea that military communications targeted at an American audience should be designed with behaviour change as an aim. Traditional doctrine has held that public affairs may not 'focus on directing or manipulating

1 Originally 'The deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist': G. Jowett and V. O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2006), p. 7. A slight amendment to this formulation for NATO will be suggested in the conclusion.

2 UK Ministry of Defence, *Defence Strategic Communication: An Approach to Formulating and Executing Strategy*, Joint Doctrine Note 2/19, April 2019 [Accessed 15 March 2021].

3 Ibid.

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public actions or opinion',[4] and the culture of public affairs is that the mission is to 'inform not influence'.[5] For instance, new recruits joining the US military in communications roles train at the US military's Defense Information School (DINFOS), where they are taught that there are different 'Information Capabilities'. Of these capabilities, strategic communications is explained as conducted only by governments, not militaries. MISO—military information support operations (formerly known as PsyOps: more on this later)—can influence, but only foreign audiences. Civil-military operations (CMO) can also influence, but only local populations in a foreign operational area. Meanwhile public affairs can be conducted by a military *and* can be employed towards a US domestic population—but its purpose is to 'inform' only.[6] Of the 'Information Capabilities', there is none which appears to mandate the US military to purposefully influence its domestic audience towards cognitive or behavioural change.

The US and UK militaries are two examples at opposite ends of a sliding scale of acceptability of domestic influence, with the twenty-eight other NATO nations scattered across this spectrum, too.

NATO policy

As the US is perhaps NATO's most influential member, its doctrine has significantly informed NATO military communications policy. In 2008 NATO's highest politico-military body, the North Atlantic Council (NAC), stipulated that 'information operations activities focused on influence and counter command […] may only take place as part of

4 United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Military Information Support Operations,* 7 January 2010, *incorporating* Change 1, 20 December 2011, Joint Publication 3-13.2 [Accessed 10 April 2022].

5 See discussions in J. Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Georgetown University Press, 2012); C. Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts and Current Debates* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011); and M. Armstrong, 'Holmes, Caldwell, Psy-Ops and the Smith-Mundt Act', *MountainRunner.us,* 28 February 2011 [Accessed 10 April 2022]. This is also the case for instance in the Canadian Armed Forces: see J. Janzen, 'What If the Pen Is the Sword? Communicating in a Chaotic, Sensational and Weaponised Information Environment', *Canadian Military Journal* 19 Nº 4 (2019).

6 See DINFOS Online Learning, *Information Capabilities (IC) Descriptions* [Accessed 9 March 2022].

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an OPLAN [Operation Plan] and thus with NAC approval, including definition by the NAC of adversaries and potential adversaries'.[7] This meant that communications with intent to influence were for a long time only permitted as part of a defined mission or operation, and focused on a foreign local population or on those NATO was explicitly defined as fighting. As in the US, communications directed at NATO populations were to 'inform' only.

The debate over influence has moved on significantly since then within NATO military communications structures. When Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, it also unleashed 'information warfare' targeting NATO's populations. NATO nations became bombarded with disinformation, which attacked NATO's very centre of gravity—its unity. Facing this threat, NATO acknowledged that a passive approach of merely 'informing' of its activities might not be sufficient to fight in this new kind of war: it needed to compete more strongly in the domestic information sphere. Modern counter-propaganda efforts require persuasion and influence as a considered part of a domestic audience communications strategy.

NATO's most recent Military Policy on Strategic Communications, MC 0628, therefore talks of desired 'effects' of StratCom policy among friendly audiences and the need for a commander to 'inform and influence audiences through actions and words'.[8] The organisation accordingly began defining military StratCom as a process to *shape* the information space:

> The integration of communication capabilities and information staff function with other military activities, in order to understand and shape the

7 'NAC Decision reflected in cover page to MC 422/3(Final), 08 Jul 08)', cited in *NATO Military Public Affairs Policy*, MC 0457/2, February 2011, p. 14 [Accessed 20 March 2021].

8 MC 0628: *NATO Military Policy on Strategic Communications* (2017). Nevertheless the publication highlights the need to avoid the perception that NATO is 'inappropriately influencing audiences or the media': the importance of influence is recognised, as long as it is not inconsistent with NATO policy. This hints at the underlying debates between nations (which must all sign off on the policy in order that it be agreed) regarding the place of influence within military strategic communications.

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> Information Environment (IE), in support of NATO aims and objectives.[9]

NATO started adopting the UK government's 'OASIS'[10] campaign model, which specifies objectives of 'home' communications and does not shy away from domestic change as a strategic goal.[11] To give one example, at the time of writing, NATO has been undertaking a politico-military communications campaign entitled #WeAreNATO, showcasing NATO values, capacities, and capabilities with photos, videos, and other products, in order to 'reinforce the NATO brand and improve the understanding and value of the organisation among key audiences in member countries'.[12] This campaign does more than explain what NATO is and does: its published aims are 'to shift perception of a target audience' which includes citizens of NATO nations. This entails not just informing. Its social media posts invite readers to engage with and share content. Its online 'campaign toolkit' sees NATO as a 'brand'; has 'colour guidelines'; and provides campaign graphics and artwork for download. This campaign, and public affairs in general, *is about influence*.[13] Such an approach is standard public affairs practice and should be neither surprising nor controversial.

NATO communications doctrine and practices therefore reveal an understanding that all communications—including those undertaken by military members and with a domestic audience in mind—can and should intend to influence. Among NATO nations themselves, however, what influence means and when it is and is not appropriate remains a sliding scale. While perceptions are changing, the use of military strategic communications to influence domestic audience perception continues to raise eyebrows among some NATO nations. This article focuses principally on the US as demonstrative of the controversy.

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9 Ibid.

10 The UK government's OASIS (objectives, audience/insights, strategy/ideas, implementation, scoring/evaluation) framework is a series of steps to guide communications campaigns: UK Government Communication Service, *Guide to Campaign Planning: OASIS* [Accessed 26 December 2022].

11 For instance: Countering Propaganda: NATO Spearheads Use of Behavioural Change Science, NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, 12 May 2015.

12 *We Are NATO: Defence and Security Campaign Toolkit* [Accessed 21 March 2021].

13 'Smart PA *is* about influence': Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 42.

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Why is this diversity of approach a problem?

A diversity of approach is a challenge for an organisation whose centre of gravity is its unity. Strategic communications is at the forefront of information warfare. To 'fight' effectively, strategic communications officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) arriving to fill NATO billets need to be clear on their mission and the extents, and limits, of their mandate. When this mandate runs counter to what they have been taught during basic training at home, it can result in confusion and ineffective (or erroneous) application of policy to practice.

NATO's enhanced Forward Presence mission is an example. The rotational deployment of four multinational battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland under NATO flags is intended, as explained on the website, to 'demonstrate Allies' solidarity, determination and ability to defend Alliance territory'.[14] At first glance, this communications aim would seem to fit nicely into the 'inform' mandate. If sufficient photos, videos, and press releases make it into the media, publics will be deemed to have been informed, and solidarity demonstrated.

But NATO wants to demonstrate its solidarity, determination, and ability *towards* a purpose. NATO's statement that the mission 'is a tangible reminder that an attack on one is an attack on all'[15] provides an indication of this purpose. In fact, the mission aims to assure NATO publics that NATO is present, is united, and can defend them. It also aims to deter adversaries from a potential attack on NATO soil. And assurance and deterrence are cognitive aims well beyond the 'demonstrate' surface.

Failure to recognise that 'demonstrating' is in fact 'demonstrating towards a purpose', as some nations' communications approaches do, can cloud StratCom planning and practice. It could mean that two military officers communicating on this same mission could potentially have different

14 NATO, 'NATO's Military Presence in the East of the Alliance' [Accessed 21 January 2022].

15 Ibid.

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aims in mind: one might be aiming for cognitive influence, the other to merely 'inform'. This entails the risk that communications will be less effective in their contribution to overall mission success.

Recognising this challenge, NATO is currently redesigning its strategic communications training courses at the NATO School in Oberammergau and at the Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga. New courses will clearly explain military communications—including those targeted at domestic audiences—as influencing activities. Nevertheless these courses require a reframing of what some attendees have been told their national mandate is. And while military officers and NCOs are usually seconded to NATO billets for two to three years, they are nevertheless still answerable to their national chains of command. There will inevitably be some confusion, if not friction. It would be simpler, clearer, and ultimately more conducive to mission success if NATO nations, individually as well collectively, began to approach strategic communications in comparable ways.

Towards this, this article aims to contribute to current efforts to create a common approach to NATO nations' communications influence operations. To do so, it will first build the case that some national sensitivities are misplaced and contain inherent contradictions, with a view to overcoming them.

'Inform, not influence' is flawed logic

At the outset, a communications mandate of 'inform, not influence' is built on flawed logic. As Christopher Paul, senior social scientist at the RAND Corporation, testified to the House Armed Services Committee:

> Informing without influencing is impossible: there is no such thing as value free information. Every provision of information passes on the attitudes and beliefs of the speaker or writer, and seeks

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> to serve some purpose. 'Letting the facts speak for themselves' presupposes that the facts have something to say, and that it is something the speaker wants said. Every provision of information is an act of persuasion.[16]

Even where a communicator attempts to be as objective as possible, communications will inevitably be coloured by bias of background, history, culture, and other factors. Indeed, the Alliance itself is founded on shared values rooted in Western democracy, different from value systems of alternative models of governance elsewhere in the world. NATO's communications will, we would hope, reflect these values.

Further, as any other organisation, it should not be assumed that NATO will *try* to be as objective as possible. Truthful and factual, yes, but not disinterestedly objective. The information NATO uses to inform and educate inevitably supports NATO's messaging and overall communications objectives. It does not also publicise Russian narratives in the interests of objectivity—nor is it expected to do so.[17] Arguing, as many NATO nations doctrinally still do, that public affairs communications should merely 'educate' a public towards 'informed choice' denies that there is a clear direction and objective for such education. The suggestion that public affairs should inform without influencing therefore falls at the first hurdle. There are in fact indications that even those nations which are in the 'inform, not influence' camp acknowledge the contradictions inherent in the doctrine—as evidenced by debates in Pentagon circles over the difference between 'influencing' versus 'actively informing' or 'informing with intent'.[18]

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16 C. Paul, *Getting Better at Strategic Communication*, Testimony to US House of Representatives, 12 July 2011 [Accessed 3 March 2021].

17 This is not to suggest that NATO seeks to hide negative information counter to its messaging. Such information is freely available and revealed when requested; any attempt to conceal negative information would risk reputational damage and be counterproductive.

18 Cited in Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 46.

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All strategic communications therefore aspire to influence people,[19] whether this is acknowledged openly or tacitly. In light of this, why is domestic influence in military strategic communications contested by some nations?

Why is domestic influence controversial to some nations?

Why is domestic influence in military strategic communications contested by some nations? This is not a debate entered into elsewhere. In the corporate world, the term 'strategic communications' is used uncontroversially to describe activities designed to make the corporate entity 'look good' and to influence consumers towards certain behaviours (we expect Coca-Cola to try to influence us to buy its product). Meanwhile governments try to influence domestic populations towards healthy choices such as stopping smoking, limiting alcohol, wearing a mask, or accepting vaccinations. These kinds of communications are routine, and often regarded in Western society as effective means of promoting the public good.

The difference is that such domestic strategic communications activities are conducted by commercial or political communicators—not the military. Sensitivities around domestic influence by the military reveal concerns over propagandising a domestic public.

In the US the foundations of this sensitivity are built on a 1948 law known as 'Smith-Mundt' and its amendments.[20] Officially the US Information and Educational Exchange Act, the 1948 law gave the secretary of state the authority to conduct information activities abroad, marking a shift from military to civilian control over efforts to influence foreign publics.

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19 J. Techau, *What Makes Communications Strategic? Preparing Military Organizations for the Battle of Ideas*, Research Paper no. 65, NATO Defense College, February 2011 [Accessed 10 April 2022].

20 US Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948, Pub. L. No. 80-402, 62 Stat. 6 (1948), Popularly known as the Smith-Mundt Act and identified with sponsors H. Alexander Smith and Karl E. Mundt. The 2013 Smith-Mundt Modernization Act lifted some of the 1948 restrictions on domestic access to government-funded media intended for foreign audiences.

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Amendments in 1972 and 1985 sought to prevent the domestic dissemination of information products that were produced as a result. Therefore the purpose of Smith-Mundt is often characterised as protecting Americans from attempts at influence by prohibiting the domestic distribution of propaganda.[21] As legislative analyst Matthew Weed succinctly outlines, 'These provisions have been interpreted as attempting to curtail the intentional or unintentional propagandizing of the American populace through exposing it to public diplomacy materials whose purpose is to influence foreign public opinion.'[22]

It was this interpretation of the Smith-Mundt law that led to criticism of former US Defense Secretary Rumsfeld back in 2002, when he brought together public affairs and PsyOps under one 'Office of Strategic Influence'. Critics accused him of setting up a 'propaganda arm' and Congress demanded that the office be shut down.[23] Later, in 2008, the Pentagon's inspector general released an audit which found the Department of Defense (DoD) 'may appear to merge inappropriately' its public affairs with operations that try to influence audiences abroad,[24] which was characterised as possibly crossing the line into propaganda.[25] 'Violation of Smith-Mundt' was cited by the media as a reason that Lt Gen. William Caldwell was brought under investigation (and subsequently cleared) during his post as a commander in Afghanistan.[26] Meanwhile fear of violating Smith-Mundt has been argued as a reason that US

21 D. Murphy, 'Strategic Communication: Wielding the Information Element of Power', in *U.S. Army War College Guide to National Security Issues,* vol. 1: *The Theory of War and Strategy,* J. Boone Bartholomees (ed.), (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Publications, 2012), pp. 159–72. See also, for instance, W. Sager, 'Apple Pie Propaganda? The Smith–Mundt Act before and after the Repeal of the Domestic Dissemination Ban', *Northwestern Law Review* 109 Nº 2 (2015): 551–46. Sager suggests the 2013 repeal of parts of Smith-Mundt gives the federal government greater power to covertly influence public opinion with 'surreptitious government propaganda'.

22 M. Weed, *U.S. Public Diplomacy: Legislative Proposals to Amend Prohibitions on Disseminating Materials to Domestic Audiences,* Congressional Research Service, 21 September 2012 [Accessed 15 March 2021].

23 'Pentagon Sets Sights on Public Opinion', *NBC News,* 5 February 2009 [Accessed 11 September 2021].

24 United States Department of Defense Inspector General, *Organizational Structure and Managers' Internal Control Program for the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs) and American Forces Information Service,* Report No. D-2009-028, 10 December 2008 [Accessed 11 September 2021].

25 'Pentagon Sets Sights on Public Opinion'.

26 M. Hastings, 'Another Runaway General: Army Deploys Psy-Ops on U.S. Senators', *Rolling Stone*, 24 February 2011 [Accessed 10 April 2022], and E. Reeve, 'Where Is the Military's Line between Psy-Ops and P.R.?', *The Atlantic*, 24 February 2011 [Accessed 10 April 2022].

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military counter-propaganda operations were not as effective as they might otherwise have been in Iraq.[27]

But Smith-Mundt expert Matthew Armstrong takes issue with what he terms the US military's 'accepted wisdom' of using Smith-Mundt in debates on influence.[28] Three of the challenges he raises are of particular note to this discussion. First, Armstrong highlights that neither the original law nor the amendments cover campaigns specifically designed for domestic consumption. Second, he argues that this law does not apply to the US military. Third, the internet allows domestic audiences free access to materials not intended for them. To these important points I add my own challenge: whether or not we agree that the law is being erroneously applied, this legislation is characterised as protecting from propaganda—not influence.[29]

I shall address each of these points in turn, and then concentrate the core of this article on the last point: the debate on the conceptual differences between propaganda and rhetorical influencing activities conducted by the West.

First, in 1972, the 1948 act was amended to specifically prohibit domestic dissemination of information prepared for foreign publics, stating that such materials 'shall not be disseminated within the United States, its territories, or possessions'. This was then followed in 1985 by a provision (the Zorinsky Agreement) which prohibits using public diplomacy funds 'to influence public opinion in the United States'. But, as Armstrong highlights, outlawing the distribution of funds and materials destined for foreign audiences is not the same thing as prohibiting campaigns which have been designed at the outset to persuade (and influence) home audiences. Smith-Mundt does not appear to cover designated domestic influence campaigns.

27 A. Garfield, 'The US Counter-Propaganda Failure in Iraq', *Middle East Quarterly* 14 Nº 4 (2007): 23–32.

28 M. Armstrong, discussion with author, 9 April 2021. Armstrong explores in great depth the misinformation and contradictions associated with Smith-Mundt on his blog *MountainRunner. us.*

29 See the website *Smith-Mundt*, whose tagline is 'confront propaganda' [Accessed 10 April 2022].

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Second, even following the 1972 and 1985 amendments, Armstrong asserts that prohibitions would categorically not apply to US military public affairs.[30] He notes that there was no discussion that this legislation applied in 1948, 1972, or 1985 to any agency other than the Department of State, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), or the United States Information Agency. He further highlights that this is a Title 22 law: it covers foreign relations, not normally the DoD.[31] Weed, writing in 2012 in support of modernisation of the legislation, summarised:

> Although current legislation seems to apply the restrictions of these provisions only to certain activities of the Department of State and broadcasting by the BBG, other agencies, including the Department of Defense, have considered themselves bound by the provisions, potentially limiting their communications activities unnecessarily.[32]

Erroneous interpretation of the law—which Armstrong terms the 'myth' of Smith-Mundt—has entered corners of the US military collective consciousness, conforming to the belief that US military public affairs personnel 'inform but do not influence'.[33] However, there appears to be nothing in Smith-Mundt that covers domestic influence campaigns, and even if there were, Armstrong argues, it would not apply to the US military.

Third, in an information age, it is no longer possible to hold a monopoly over audience segmentation. The internet creates supranational communities not bound by physical geographic boundaries. It is meaningless to talk of protecting US audiences from 'foreign propaganda'

30 M. Armstrong, email exchange with author, 12 April 2021. See also M. Armstrong, 'Mind Games: Why Rolling Stone's Article on the Military's Domestic Psy-Ops Scandal Gets It So Wrong', *Foreign Policy*, 1 March 2011 [Accessed 10 April 2021].

31 M. Armstrong, 'Neglected History, Forgotten Lessons: A Presentation and a Discussion', *MountainRunner.us*, 2 April 2021 [Accessed 10 April 2021].

32 Weed, *U.S. Public Diplomacy.*

33 M. Armstrong, discussion with author, 9 April 2021.

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when such materials are available to a domestic audience at the click of a button. This was the reason that, as far back as 2003, Rumsfeld acknowledged in a secret memo that 'information intended for foreign audiences […] is increasingly consumed by our domestic audience'.[34] As the UK MoD's Joint Doctrine Note 1/12 expressively puts it, 'what is said in Helmand is heard in Huddersfield'.[35]

This invites a further point. Citations of Smith-Mundt in debates on influence generally reveal concerns about propagandising a domestic public. But propagandising goes far beyond influencing.

Confusion is understandable. 'Propaganda' is a complex and diverse term, such that even proponents apparently on the same 'side' of the argument often talk past each other. In an essay critiquing Armstrong's arguments, *Wired* writer Sharon Weinberger uses Smith-Mundt to suggest public affairs should 'inform' only in order to avoid propagandising.[36] This would seem to be the same (Armstrong would say flawed) logic as the US military's. However her argument then breaks with the US military's as she also argues that, to avoid propagandising, crafted messages should not be within the toolkit of public affairs. She states: 'The role of public affairs is to convey information, not messages'. Weinberger's opinion that crafted messages are akin to propaganda is a valid theory—definitions of propaganda are diverse, as shall be discussed below. However, it is not an argument that the US military would seem to agree with. Field manual guidance states that 'it is imperative for PA personnel to rapidly develop themes and messages to ensure that facts, data, events, and utterances are put in context'.[37] While the US military also uses Smith-Mundt's citation of propaganda to claim that influence is not permitted, it does not include crafted messages under this heading. Interestingly, Weinberger cites US military doctrine to support her

34 *Information Operations Roadmap, 30 October 2003*, The National Security Archive, posted 26 January 2006 [Accessed 11 September 2021].

35 UK Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Communication: The Defence Contribution*, Joint Doctrine Note 1/12, January 2012 [Accessed 10 April 2022].

36 S. Weinberger, 'Debating Domestic Propaganda, Part II', *Wired*, 12 August 2008 [Accessed 10 April 2022].

37 US DoD Joint Publication 3-61 (Public Affairs), 17 November 2015, incorporating Change 1, 19 August 2016 [Accessed 28 March 2021].

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point, despite going much further than the military in the activities she deems propaganda.[38] Arguments over what propaganda is and is not, and subsequently how this should affect the place of influence in military communications, are therefore complex, confusing, and at times contradictory.

Armstrong's arguments explain how Smith-Mundt does not apply to US military domestic communications. Yet sensitivities surrounding domestic influence persist, indicating this does not seem sufficient to resolve the issue. Rather, if we are to move forward with the aim of guiding NATO nations towards a common approach to communications influence operations, it will be necessary to unpack and explore the underlying sensitivities. This requires sifting some of the complexity associated with the term 'propaganda', since it is with this term that the crux of sensitivities regarding influence lies.

What is propaganda?

The term *propaganda* derives from the Latin *propagare* (to spread or enlarge). Historian and Senior Associate Fellow of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) Gill Bennett notes that its gerund form *propaganda* 'carries a purposive meaning'[39] (*should be* or *intended to be* disseminated), which suggests that propaganda does not just inform, but persuade.[40] It first appeared in Europe in 1622, during the Counter-Reformation, when Pope Gregory XV established the Congregatio de propaganda fide (Office of the Propagation of the Faith) to supervise missionary efforts to spread Roman Catholicism against Lutheranism and Calvinism. As an act of propagating, then, it carried no associations

38 To back up her claim that crafted messages have no place in public affairs, Weinberger quotes the Pentagon's 'Principles of Information' that public affairs activity 'is to expedite the flow of information to the public; propaganda has no place in DoD public affairs programs'. Thus she equates crafted messages with propaganda—which the US military itself does not seem to do. Weinberger, 'Debating Domestic Propaganda'.

39 G. Bennett, 'Propaganda and Disinformation: How a Historical Perspective Aids Critical Response Development', in *The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda,* P. Baines, N. O'Shaughnessy and N. Snow (eds) (London, California, New Delhi and Singapore: SAGE Publications, 2020), p. 246.

40 Ibid.

with lies[41] but, as Bernays claimed, it was a 'wholesome word' of 'honourable parentage'.[42] It is important to note that its genesis denotes a positive, rather than a negative, because it gives context to later academic arguments that propaganda can often be truthful and straightforward, as shall be explored below.

The meaning of 'propaganda' gradually evolved over centuries, for a long time valueless or suggestive of positive or negative action.[43] Before 1914 it referred to the process by which 'the converted attempted to persuade the unconverted'.[44] It was due to British communications techniques and the aftermath of World War I that overwhelmingly pejorative overtones emerged. Renowned scholar of communications and propaganda Phil Taylor described a turning point in the semantic journey of propaganda as soldiers returning from the battlefields were shocked at the war fervour at home, 'and by the consequent perceptual gap that had clearly opened up between the civilian image of the war and the reality of the soldiers' experience'.[45] The word became discredited as both civilians and soldiers realised that nationalism had been systematically 'whipped up' for the Great War—concealing the horrors of the trenches and using atrocity propaganda to contrive falsehoods about the enemy.[46]

Popular discomfort with propaganda was cemented in World War II. Set against Soviet, British, and US state communications, Nazi use of propaganda became a defining tool of governance, to odious effect. Given this history, 'propaganda' now colloquially denotes 'dirty tricks'

41 M.C. Miller, Introduction to *Propaganda* by E. Bernays (1928; New York: Ig Publishing, 1955), p. 9. Page references are to the 1955 edition.

42 Bernays, *Propaganda*, p. 50, quoting *Scientific American*.

43 As indeed it continues to be in some non-Western nations. For instance the term 'propaganda' in a Chinese context often has neutral connotations, referring to dissemination of public information: 宣傳 'propaganda; publicity'. The Chinese Communist Party for instance has a 'Central Propaganda Department', often termed a 'Publicity Department' when referred to in Western communications to avoid the pejorative implied in the English translation.

44 P. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era* (1990; Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 4. Page references are to the 2003 edition.

45 P. Taylor, 'Strategic Communications and the Relationship between Governmental "Information" Activities in the Post 9/11 World', *Journal of Information Warfare* 5 Nº 3 (2006): 1–25.

46 Ibid.

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utilised by 'hidden persuaders', 'mind manipulators', and 'brainwashers'.[47] Yet closer inspection reveals a more complicated reality. Despite its commonplace interpretation, there is considerable 'definitional fog' about what constitutes propaganda:[48] L. John Martin, in his 1958 work on propaganda under international law, collected twenty-six definitions.[49]

Today, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines propaganda as:

> The systematic dissemination of information, esp. in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a political cause or point of view. Also information disseminated in this way; the means or media by which such ideas are disseminated.[50]

Jacques Ellul, one of the preeminent scholars in the field of propaganda studies, would have argued that this description of propaganda's aims does not go far enough:

> The aim of modern propaganda is no longer to modify ideas, but to provoke action. It is no longer to change adherence to a doctrine, but to make the individual cling irrationally to a process of action […] It is no longer to transform an opinion but to arouse an active and mythical belief.[51]

Scholars Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell pick up on cognitive manipulation and direction of action in their definition. It is this definition which shall later serve as a foundation on which to build a new definition of propaganda for NATO:

47 Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind*, p. 1.

48 P. Baines, N. O'Shaughnessy and N. Snow (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda* (London, California, New Delhi and Singapore: SAGE Publications, 2020), p. xxv.

49 J. Martin, *International Propaganda: Its Legal and Diplomatic Control* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), p. 10.

50 *OED Online*, March 2021 [Accessed 20 March 2021].

51 J. Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. K. Kellen and J. Lerner (1965; New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 25. Page references are to the 1973 edition.

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> The deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.[52]

NATO's current definition focuses on content rather than action, denoting propaganda as:

> Information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view.[53]

NATO's definitional focus on content adds to national sensitivities

A definitional focus on content is unhelpful to NATO nations' inform/influence debate. This is because, while there is nothing necessarily erroneous about NATO's definition of propaganda, it exacerbates national sensitivities by opening NATO up to accusations of conducting propaganda itself. As James Farwell, strategic communications advisor to the US DoD and Special Operations Command, highlights, use of the word 'especially' in definitions such as NATO's means that disseminated information does not have to be biased or misleading to fall under the definition of propaganda.[54] While not going as far as Jacques Driencourt's adage 'everything is propaganda',[55] any '*information used to promote a political cause or point of view*', misleading or not, is logically captured under NATO's definition. And as has been stressed above, NATO communications, as those of any organisation, are always promoting a particular point of view.

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52 Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, p. 7.

53 *NATO Term* (NATO's terminology database), 'propaganda' [Accessed 21 March 2021].

54 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 25.

55 J. Driencourt, *La propagande, novelle force politique* (Paris: Libraire Armand Colin, 1950).

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This echoes many academic arguments. Ellul for instance highlighted the idea that propaganda is composed only of lies is erroneous,[56] and nothing in any of the preceding definitions of propaganda—including NATO's—renders lying a prerequisite for something to be 'propaganda'. Elements of truth (whole truths, half-truths, or misapplied truths) in propaganda communications are often intrinsic to what makes them compelling: only when claims are plausible do they hold power. Even the US military explicitly recognises that much propaganda is 'honest and straightforward'.[57] While Western institutional recognition of this is generally helpful in practice to signpost adversary propaganda, NATO's definition is problematic. Since NATO's definition focuses on content rather than practice, it is not then apparent what distinguishes propagandic information from the communications of Western nations and NATO itself. Therefore a focus on content, while not necessarily erroneous, merely contributes to extant national sensitivities and the fear of being accused of propaganda when undertaking influence communications.

The US DoD definition seemingly skirts the danger of being accused of propaganda by simply adding the word *adversary* to its definition. Hence:

> Any form of *adversary* communication, especially of a biased or misleading nature, designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes or behavior of any group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly.[58]

But this does not stand up to academic scrutiny. The use of the word *adversary* as the qualifier means that propaganda can only ever be 'something done by other people'[59]—it is a catch-all that shields America from ever being accused of it. It attaches a subjective value to the

56 K. Kellen, Introduction to Ellul, *Propaganda*, p. v.

57 US DoD Joint Publication 3-61.

58 US DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, Joint Publication 1-02, 8 November 2010 (as amended through 15 February 2013) [emphasis added]. The more recent JP 1-02 (through 15 February 2016) does not include 'propaganda' among its definitions.

59 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 25.

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definition, forcing us to take sides: word-for-word the same message, communicated in the same way, at the same time, could fall under either 'enemy propaganda' or 'US messaging' depending on the originator. As a subjective term, the word *adversary* also indicates the opposite—a Talib could correctly use this definition to claim that US communications directed at him, as his adversary, are propaganda, whereas his own communications are not. By this definition, propaganda is all and none of the communications by the US or the adversary, depending on which side of the argument one falls. Turning Driencourt's assertion on its head, propaganda could be everything; equally it could be nothing. This limitation makes understanding propaganda problematic; similarly, employing *adversary* renders it more, not less, difficult to differentiate the activities from legitimate Western military influence practices.

Towards a new definition for NATO

The US definition does not stand up to academic analysis. Meanwhile NATO's definition is not necessarily erroneous but is nevertheless unhelpful, since it adds to national sensitivities by failing to distinguish propaganda from NATO's legitimate influencing activities.

Even if semantic definitions and academic debates allow space for propaganda to be truthful and straightforward, Farwell highlights that propaganda is popularly viewed pejoratively, as an effort to lie, trick, deceive, or manipulate.[60] Taylor similarly notes that, colloquially, propaganda is understood as 'dirty tricks' utilised by 'mind manipulators',[61] and Nicolas O'Shaughnessy highlights that 'deception is not some essential essence of propaganda's definition but it is critical to the popular understanding of propaganda'.[62] And as he argues, no working definition of a term can be separated out from its colloquial uses.[63] Indeed in

60 Ibid p. 3.

61 Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind,* p. 1.

62 N. O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction* (Manchester, New York and Vancouver: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 7.

63 Ibid., p. 15.

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everyday communications, NATO's leaders and communicators often use the term propaganda interchangeably with disinformation,[64] which, although the NATO Standardization Office has no officially agreed definition, always implies purposeful deceit.[65]

Given the vast and contradicting scholarship, no definition of propaganda will be perfect—defining propaganda has been characterised as a 'maddeningly elusive' task.[66] But NATO's definition can be improved upon to reflect the way its leaders use the term, and to make it practicable for the organisation. A new definition which distinguishes propaganda from NATO influence activities for its publics would help NATO nations to move forward on the inform/influence debate. In creating such a definition, it would be advisable to incorporate academic arguments which reflect the colloquial understanding of propaganda (and the way NATO itself uses the term in public) involving intent to deceive.

What about PsyOps?

When trying to originate a new definition of propaganda for NATO that clearly distinguishes it from NATO's activities, there is an immediate hurdle. If intent to deceive is key to popular understandings of propaganda, how can we distinguish propaganda from PsyOps?[67] PsyOps is doctrinally a form of strategic communications, aimed at influencing the perceptions

64 European Parliament, *At a Glance: Understanding Propaganda and Disinformation*, November 2015 [Accessed 29 March 2021].

65 G. Bennett, 'Propaganda and Disinformation', p. 246. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines disinformation as 'the dissemination of deliberately false information esp. when supplied by a government or its agent to a foreign power or to the media, with the intention of influencing the policies or opinions of those who receive it; false information so supplied' (*OED Online*, March 2021 [Accessed 20 March 2021]).

Compare 'misinformation': 'The action of misinforming someone' / 'Wrong or misleading information', which covers the accidental spreading of mistruths (*OED Online*, March 2021 [Accessed 25 March 2021]).

66 O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda*, p. 13.

67 'PsyOp' is defined by NATO as 'Planned activities using methods of communication and other means directed at approved audiences in order to influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, affecting the achievement of political and military objectives': *NATO Term* [Accessed 19 March 2021]. See C. Lamb, cited in Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 5. See also pp. 25–26 for a discussion on what Farwell terms the US DoD's 'neat but disingenuous' use of language in distinguishing between propaganda and PsyOps.

and shaping the behaviour of foreign audiences. Dropping leaflets over Baghdad to urge populations not to support insurgents; building a well to persuade Afghan villagers to think favourably about foreign forces; using loudspeakers to broadcast news to North Koreans about the attractions of life in the South. Yet to echo Farwell's interview with Christopher Lamb of the National Defense University, PsyOps 'is inherently biased' and 'may mislead the audience'.[68] Leaflets dropped may purport to be from another source than the Western force; informational adverts in a local newspaper may not bear the mark of a Western military, if so desired by a commander.

The US recognises three different forms of PsyOps—White, Gray, and Black—depending on transparency of attribution. NATO itself only conducts white PsyOps (products disseminated and acknowledged by the sponsor or accredited agency).[69] As with public affairs products, NATO's PsyOps products must be based on evidenced, factual information, attributable to NATO or a concurring partner, in order to preserve Alliance credibility. PsyOps in the NATO realm is, then, uncontroversial and merely a different influence tool that sits alongside other information capabilities, including public affairs. As Taylor so pithily put it, 'why should there be such a stigma surrounding a process of persuasion designed to get people to stop fighting, and thus preserve their lives, rather than having their heads blown off?'[70]

Nationally, however, PsyOps can also include grey PsyOps (products that do not specifically reveal their source)[71] and black PsyOps (products appearing to emanate from a source other than the true one).[72]

It is helpful here to recall the NATO and US definitions of propaganda:

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68 C. Lamb, cited in Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 5.

69 NATO, *Allied Joint Publication for Psychological Operations AJP-3.10.1*, Edition B, Version 1, September 2014 [Accessed 21 March 2021].

70 Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind,* p. 8.

71 UK National Elements: NATO, *Allied Joint Publication for Psychological Operations AJP-3.10.1.*

72 Ibid.

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> NATO: 'Information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view.'[73]
>
> US: 'Any form of adversary communication, especially of a biased or misleading nature, designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes or behavior of any group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly.'[74]

Excepting the loaded term 'adversary' which has no objective significance, grey PsyOps could clearly come under the 'biased or misleading' header of propaganda, and black PsyOps would qualify as 'deception'. It will be for some an uncomfortable realisation that both grey and black national PsyOps activities apparently sit within NATO's and the US's own definitions of propaganda. Indeed the terms delineating the different forms of PsyOps were first coined in 1949 by US Strategic Services officer Daniel Lerner, who termed the practice 'White, Gray and Black Propaganda'.[75] Meanwhile, President Eisenhower created a psychological warfare unit that saw PsyOps as 'the dissemination of propaganda designed to undermine the enemy's will to resist, demoralize his forces, and sustain the morale of our supporters'.[76]

The deceptive nature of certain forms of PsyOps adds to the reasons why current NATO and US definitions of propaganda are unhelpful. To help overcome sensitivities around influence, the difference between propaganda and the legitimate rhetorical influence activities conducted

73 *NATO Term,* 'propaganda'.

74 US DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, Joint Publication 1-02, 8 November 2010 (as amended through 15 February 2013).

75 D. Lerner, *Psychological Warfare against Nazi Germany: The Sykewar Campaign, D-Day to VE-Day* (MIT Press, 1949), cited in K. Marsh and J. Williams, *Strategic Communication* (London: Offspin Media, 2017), p. 49.

76 Paddock Jr., *Psychological and Unconventional Warfare, 20,* citing Historical Records Section, AGO, Reference aid no. 7, Records Pertaining to Psychological Warfare in Custody of Historical Records Section, 8 November 1949, 5, RG 319, P&O 091.412 (7 October 1949), F/W 25/2, National Archives, cited in Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 9.

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by NATO and its nations, including deceptive PsyOps, needs to be made clear.

The need to explain PsyOps transparently

As a first step in making this distinction, it would be helpful if legitimate PsyOps activities were discussed with more transparency. Failing to explain openly and transparently what PsyOps are and are not means the practice is often misrepresented, and makes it seem as if a government has something to hide with its influencing activities. PsyOps is regulated under law as an activity mandated only against a foreign public, usually in a theatre of war. While PsyOps can deceive, domestic influence activities must always be truthful and transparent.

But rather than explain transparently the difference, the US approach seems instead to stifle the debate. During his tenure then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates argued the need to replace the term PsyOp(s) to repair negative perceptions of the practice, lamenting that 'PSYOP tends to connote propaganda, brainwashing, manipulation, and deceit'.[77] Consequently, it has been renamed frequently since 2010, shifting away and back to MISO.[78] Rebranding PsyOps as MISO, it was felt, would neutralise the term in the eyes of government agencies and across American society.[79] In NATO and other organisations, however, the name PsyOps endured and is sporadically still used in the US military too. The debacle demonstrates the unease of some nations surrounding open and frank discussion of the range of influence activities conducted under strategic communications. The problem becomes about what people's *perceptions* of PsyOps are, rather than what it is: as propaganda acquired sinister associations in the vernacular, so too has PsyOps, having in popular culture connotations of mind control. But introducing

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77 *Changing the Term Psychological Operations to Military Information Support Operations*, 12 December 2011, MARADMINS 715/11 [Accessed 20 November 2022].

78 Secretary of Defense Memorandum, 'Interim Naming Convention', cited in D. Cowan and C. Cook, 'What's in a Name? Psychological Operations versus Military Information Support Operations and an Analysis of Organizational Change', *Military Review,* 6 March 2018.

79 Ibid.

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opacity to a name to protect it from accusations of not being transparent suggests hypocrisy. Far from reassuring publics, name changes serve only to confuse and give the impression that a government has something to hide. And failure to explain transparently this influence activity merely exacerbates the credibility dilemma NATO and its nations seek to avoid.[80]

In fact, ironically, Western military leaders seem to display less squeamishness when discussing kinetic influence activity abroad, including dropping bombs for cognitive effect, than they do when discussing PsyOps. To take an extreme case, in 2017 a MOAB—GBU-43 Massive Ordinance Air Blast (colloquially among soldiers, the Mother Of All Bombs)—was dropped as much to destroy ISIS's underground tunnels in Afghanistan as to convey shock and awe.[81] This is the largest non-nuclear bomb dropped in US history. It weighs 22,600 pounds, has to be transported by cargo plane, and creates a 150-metre shockwave on impact. Commander of US Forces in Afghanistan General Nicholson said it was the right bomb to overcome ISIS's bunker and tunnel defences.[82] But as scholars Bolt, Betz, and Azari highlight, 'fulfilling military objectives is only part of the battle [...] this remains a contest for narrative and symbolic space'.[83] Accordingly, the US made sure that the blast of its 'shock and awe' weapon was felt well beyond the site of impact, by ensuring the footage was released to the public afterwards.[84]

This constitutes a psychological influence operation much like any other. Yet attempts at influence involving force are talked about in military circles without the apparent discomfort that accompanies operations restricted to the cognitive space where there is no kinetic manifestation. Press releases are written and footage released, as they were following

80 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power,* p. 3.

81 J. Crosbie, 'The Mother of All Bombs Is a Psychological Weapon: Someone Wanted to Make a Statement', *Inverse,* 16 April 2017 [Accessed 3 March 2021].

82 'U.S. Bombs, Destroys Khorasan Group Stronghold in Afghanistan', *US CENTCOM,* press release 13 April 2017 [Accessed 11 September 2021].

83 N. Bolt, D. Betz, and J. Azari, *Propaganda of the Deed 2008: Understanding the Phenomenon* (Royal United Services Institute, 2008).

84 US Department of Defense (@DeptofDefense), 'A #MOAB bomb strikes #ISIS cave & tunnel systems in eastern #Afghanistan. The strike was designed to minimize risk to Afghan and U.S. Forces', *Twitter,* 14 April 2017 [Accessed 21 March 2021].

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the MOAB explosion. Meanwhile coercion, 'an attempt to influence the behaviour of another by using force, or the threat of force',[85] is openly listed as a 'success mechanism' within the US military's *Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept,* as one extreme of its 'Influence Spectrum' of strategic communications.[86] Munitions uniquely 'of the mind', such as PsyOps, seem often more controversial and less talked about by some national militaries than even lethal physical munitions deployed inter alia for psychological effect.

This seems to be because, in a democratic society, kinetic or coercive strategic communications activities are inherently understood to be targeted at an adversary. Rhetorical military influence activities, however, are conducted both against adversaries (in theatres of war, i.e., PsyOps) and domestically (#WeAreNATO). While only those deployed against adversaries (and when undertaken by nations) entail deception, there is a certain discomfort in these two distinct methods of rhetorical influence nesting within the same nomenclature. Much of the sensitivity around influence campaigns seems to come from a fear by military strategic communicators that they might be misunderstood as using foreign deception techniques (such as PsyOps) on domestic audiences. Therefore, it seems, they avoid the conversation altogether.

But concern that a public might be unable to distinguish between foreign and domestic influencing techniques is infantilising. Just as domestic audiences can understand dropping a bomb as an influence activity but know it would never be used against them by their own government, so can they understand that there are communications influence techniques which would only ever be used abroad. Reticence to discuss the difference transparently only adds to the confusion and misrepresentation. In the same vein, refusing to acknowledge that public affairs activities of national militaries or NATO might include aims to persuade and influence domestic audiences, for fear that such activities

85 G. Schaub, 'Deterrence, Compellence, and Prospect Theory', *Political Psychology* 25 № 3 (2004): 389–411, cited in US Department of Defense, *Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept*, October 2009.

86 US Department of Defense, *Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept.*

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might be misconstrued as deception, only risks communicators seeming untransparent and their activities suspect.

The above discussion brings into the open the difference between foreign and domestic influencing techniques. Transparently explaining NATO and national StratCom activities in this way allows a clear path to be laid towards understanding how these activities differ from propaganda, guiding us to a more practicable definition of propaganda for NATO.

Propaganda as a process

This article has highlighted deception as innate to popular understandings of propaganda and the way in which NATO uses the term. However, military deception and the practice of PsyOps demonstrate how 'aim to deceive' is insufficient in a new definition to understand the communications activities of NATO nations' militaries as distinct from propaganda. As O'Shaughnessy explains, 'to say that propaganda is manipulative is to define a necessary but not sufficient characteristic of the term'.[87]

To understand the differences, we should instead concentrate, as O'Shaughnessy suggests, on the *essence* of propaganda.[88] Scholar Edgar Henderson's characterisation of propaganda as a *process*[89] offers a way forward. First, it is not the content of a message which is important, but the overall process and aim of a wider communications strategy which makes something propaganda. As the European Parliament stresses in a comprehensive study of disinformation and propaganda: 'to fully understand the scope of the problem, there is a need to acknowledge emerging practices that are dangerous because of their potential for

87 O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda*, p. 7.

88 Ibid., p. 18.

89 'The process which deliberately attempts through persuasion-techniques to secure from the propagandee, before he can deliberate freely, the responses desired by the propagandist': E. Henderson, 'Toward a Definition of Propaganda', *Journal of Social Psychology* 18 (1943): 71–87, cited in Martin, *International Propaganda*, p. 11.

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divisiveness, rather than the misleading content'.[90] While PsyOps is one communications tool deployed at the tactical level, propaganda is a strategic process. This process of deception sees lies and truths employed to varying degrees:

> Propaganda is necessarily false, when it speaks of values, of truth, of good, of justice, of happiness—and when it interprets and colors facts and imputes meaning to them. It is true when it serves up the plain fact, but does so only for the sake of establishing a pretense and only as an example of the interpretation that it supports with that fact.[91]

The essence of propaganda is therefore not to tell one lie, but an embellished web of truths and lies towards constructing a new 'alternative truth'—perhaps the inspiration for George Orwell's 'all propaganda is lies, even when it is telling the truth'.[92]

To give a practical example, the choice of name for Russia's COVID-19 vaccination—Sputnik V—was labelled 'propaganda' in Western media,[93] whereas the US's 'Operation Warp Speed' vaccination programme was not. The Russian moniker was a nod towards the world's first artificial Earth satellite, launched by the USSR on 4 October 1957: space-age symbolism supporting Russia's narrative of the country as a global leader. The choice of name was seen to declare victory in the 'race for a vaccine',[94] echoing 1950s Russian pride and global competition, repackaged for a modern age. Meanwhile, the US's 'Operation Warp Speed'[95]—the

90 J. Bayer, N. Bitiukova, P. Bard, J. Szakacs, A. Alemanno, and E. Uszkiewicz, *Disinformation and Propaganda: Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law in the EU and Its Member States*, European Parliament, February 2019 [Accessed 2 March 2021], p. 30.

91 Ellul, *Propaganda*, p. 59.

92 G. Orwell, diary entry, 14 March 1942, cited in C. Fleay and M. Sanders, 'Looking into the Abyss: George Orwell at the BBC', *Journal of Contemporary History* 24 № 3 (1989): 512.

93 A. Kramer, 'Russia Approves Coronavirus Vaccine before Completing Tests', *New York Times*, 11 August 2020 [Accessed 2 March 2021]; 'Sputnik V: Here's Why Russia Chose This Historic Space Name for Its COVID-19 Vaccine', *Money Control*, 12 August 2020 [Accessed 2 March 2021].

94 V. Srinivasan, 'Vaccine Nationalism: Russia Ushers in Relic of Cold War Era Races', *The Federal*, 11 August 2020 [Accessed 2 March 2021].

95 Officially announced on 15 May 2020.

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federal programme 'to accelerate the development, manufacturing, and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics'[96]—was named after a 1950s sci-fi concept made famous by US television series Star Trek, referring to travel at faster-than-light speeds. The American name was also an apparent attempt to positively influence audience perception with a culturally shared evocation of high-speed technology. However, it was dismissed as a catchy and amusing pop-culture reference,[97] rather than given the label of 'propaganda' which hangs over the Russian designation.

This is because the Russian name should be seen in the context of Russia's weaponisation of the COVID-19 pandemic: the 'Sputnik V' name was part of an overall propaganda strategy to undermine the Western vaccination programme, and indeed the West and NATO itself. Russia's propaganda strategy included the spreading of disinformation regarding potential side effects of Pfizer and Moderna and invented claims of forced inoculation.[98] There were spurious Russian reports of positive COVID-19 cases in the ranks of NATO's continuing to exercise troops, claiming that NATO was placing local citizens at risk.[99] A fabricated letter, allegedly from NATO's secretary general to the Lithuanian minister of defence, spoofed a NATO Command email address to communicate that NATO troops were pulling out of Lithuania due to the pandemic (it aroused immediate suspicion due to multiple spelling and grammar mistakes).[100] There was even manipulated video footage of a NATO press conference, altered to show the conference addressing the impact of COVID-19 on NATO's troops in Lithuania.[101] This was no mere trivial

96 T. Lopez, 'Operation Warp Speed Accelerates COVID-19 Vaccine Development', *DoD News*, 16 June 2020.

97 M.L. Kelly, 'The Trekkie Community Reacts to the Use of "Their" Term', *NPR*, 27 May 2020 [Accessed 1 June 2021]; D. Smith, 'Trump's "Warp Speed" Vaccine Summit Zooms into Alternative Reality', *The Guardian*, 9 December 2020.

98 J. Barnes, 'Russian Disinformation Targets Vaccines and the Biden Administration', *New York Times*, 5 August 2021; D. Shesgreen, '"Russia Is Up To Its Old Tricks": Biden Battling COVID-19 Vaccine Disinformation Campaign', *USA Today*, 8 March 2021.

99 '"Chumovyye" manevry NATO v Latvii: Tseli, sredstva i veroyatnyye posledstviya' ['Freaky' NATO Manoeuvres in Latvia: Goals, Means and Probable Consequences], *Sputnik*, 13 April 2020 [Accessed 2 March 2021].

100 Details in 'NATO's Approach to Countering Disinformation', *NATO,* 17 July 2020 [Accessed 3 March 2021].

101 Ibid.

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annoyance, but an all-out Russian information attack; the pandemic was termed a 'new battleground' of international information warfare.[102] In this context, naming a vaccination Sputnik V as part of a layered hybrid strategy to destabilise adversaries is a different activity to influencing people to think favourably about a counter-pandemic plan by calling it Operation Warp Speed.

Propaganda as co-production

A second important characteristic of propaganda is that of co-production between consumer and producer.[103] As a co-production, propaganda rarely manipulates passively. This is no straightforward 'hypodermic needle' communication:[104] propaganda is a process of creation *with* the recipient, and the recipient 'a willing accomplice in their own persuasion'.[105] Propaganda is therefore often based on fear, substantiating people's existing prejudices and calling to an individual's need in modern society for self-identity and self-validation.[106] It must always appeal to a consumer's inner convictions (which Ellul termed 'guiding myths') which gives the producer a 'sub-propaganda' base[107] from which to develop further distortions. Propaganda thus serves the needs of both consumer and producer[108]—the consumer of having their identity and 'world view' validated; the producer of shoring up power through communications. Unlike PsyOps, then, which are tactical materials deployed *against* an

102 M. von Hein, 'Disinformation and Propaganda during the Coronavirus Pandemic', *Deutsche Welle*, 31 March 2020 [Accessed 3 March 2021].

103 See N. O'Shaughnessy, *Selling Hitler: Propaganda and the Nazi Brand* (London: C. Hurst, 2016).

104 H. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (1927; Connecticut: Martino Publishing, 2013).

105 P. Baines, N. O'Shaughnessy, and N. Snow, Introduction to Baines et al., *SAGE Handbook of Propaganda*, p. xxvi; O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda*, p. 114.

106 J. Ellul, cited in R. Marlin, 'Jacques Ellul's Contribution to Propaganda Studies', in *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies,* J. Auerback and R. Castronovo (eds), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

107 Ibid.

108 Baines et al., Introduction, p. xxxvi.

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adversary or foreign public in a theatre of war, propaganda is based on a narrative created *with* the recipient: it is an 'invitation to shared fantasy'.[109]

Once propaganda is understood as a multifaceted process of deception with a strategic aim, co-produced by consumer and producer, it is easier to appreciate how NATO's communications activities designed to educate, persuade, or influence do not constitute propaganda.[110] Indeed propaganda is the antithesis of rational persuasion.[111] As a strategy, propaganda is manipulative, even when telling the truth.[112] And as O'Shaughnessy suggests, propaganda 'dramatizes our prejudices and speaks to something deep and even shameful within us […] it is a co-production in which we are willing participants'.[113] This cannot be equated with deceptive communications activities of Western nations against foreign audiences, such as PsyOps. Neither can it be equated with domestic influence activities as part of a public affairs plan designed to increase support for NATO and its activities.

A way forward

Western military strategic communications does, and should, aim to influence domestic audiences. NATO's acceptance and recognition of this has progressed significantly in recent years. Yet sensitivities remain in certain NATO nations' militaries over the separation between communications influence activities and propaganda, leading to confusion among publics and self-censorship among practitioners. Sensitivities derive from misunderstandings and are perpetuated by

109 N. O'Shaughnessy, 'From Disinformation to Fake News: Forwards into the Past', in Baines et al., *SAGE Handbook of Propaganda*, p. 66; O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda*, p. 110. We might argue that all communications, including PsyOps, are to a certain extent co-produced (meaning-making is iterative, since messages are received as well as sent). However, PsyOps materials are individual tools created by the military at the tactical level and deployed towards a foreign audience, rather than the complex strategy and protracted process of co-authorship that characterises propaganda.

110 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power,* p. 26: 'Communications activities designed to educate, persuade or influence do not, by themselves, constitute propaganda.'

111 O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda*, p. 16.

112 Ibid., p. 18.

113 Ibid., p. 4.

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misleading definitions and a failure to engage the debate head-on. But shying away from talking about legitimate influence activities exacerbates, rather than avoids, the problem.

As part of this problem, NATO's loose definition of propaganda ('information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view'[114]) reflects neither the complexity of propaganda, nor the centrality of strategic manipulation inherent in common understandings of the term. It fails to capture how NATO communicators publicly discuss propaganda. And NATO's failure to define it more clearly leaves it open to unjustified accusations of conducting propaganda itself.

Revising NATO's definition of propaganda in a way that shifts focus away from content to a more holistic understanding of propaganda could address this problem. To be of functional public use, such a definition needs to incorporate the points above as well as the pre-existing popular connotations involving deceit, which most definitions fail to do.[115]

A useful definition reflecting these points can be arrived at using Jowett and O'Donnell's definition as a foundation, and integrating this paper's argument of propaganda as a co-produced strategic process of deception:

> A deliberate, systematic, and co-produced
> strategic process of deception to shape perceptions,
> manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour,
> aimed at achieving a response that furthers the
> intent of the propagandist.[116]

Academic definitions of propaganda are numerous and diverse. But within this diversity, it would be productive for NATO to choose a definition which works for, not against, the organisation. This article's proposed

114 *NATO Term*, 'propaganda'.

115 See, for instance, A. Wanless and J. Pamment, 'How Do You Define a Problem Like Influence?', *Journal of Information Warfare* 18 Nº 3 (2019): 1–14.

116 Originally as given in note 1.

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change to NATO's definition, which is based on the academic literature, would help separate propaganda from the legitimate influence activities engaged in under strategic communications by NATO and its nations. Such a definition, it is hoped, will help certain NATO nations overcome their concerns of being accused of projecting propaganda in domestic communications activities. As a result, this definition should help guide NATO nations towards a joined-up approach to communications influence operations. NATO's centre of gravity is its unity: a common approach to strategic communications would seem vital for NATO and its nations to be as effective as possible in competing and contesting on the battlefields of information warfare.

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