Communicating to Win

By Air Commodore Simon Harper and Wing Commander Jim Beldon

Biography: Air Commodore Simon Harper joined the Royal Air Force in 1988 as a Personnel Support Officer. A former Station Commander of RAF Halton, in 2015 he co-authored a paper, '*The Military Instrument in the 21st Century*', for the Churchill 21st Century Leadership Programme. He is currently Assistant Chief of Staff Personnel Policy at Headquarters Air Command.

A Tedder Fellow, Wing Commander Jim Beldon is a navigator and ISTAR specialist who works as a strategist in the Directorate of Defence Communications. His previous essay 'Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems – Warfare's Best Humanitarian Hope?' was published in *APR* in Autumn/Winter 2015, and earned him the Gordon Shephard Memorial Essay Prize at the 2016 Air Power Conference.

Abstract: Recent operations have highlighted the primacy of influence and the role of communications in achieving it. No longer performing just a supporting role to 'kinetic' operations, communications operations are increasingly important in their own right, especially in an information environment in which audience perception is fed by instantaneous digital feeds from a multiplicity of sources. This article examines the challenges that this new communications environment presents to air power professionals, and explores how the RAF can survive the threats and exploit the opportunities the new era of communications presents. The article studies how, in particular, factors surrounding offensive air power and the use of Remotely Piloted Air Systems might best be communicated in the future.

Introduction

'Conventional bureaucracies and military establishments are uncomfortable with modern means of communication and need to understand and exploit them…'[1]

While Western democracies continue to be engaged in a battle of ideas, identities and values, the digital space and information age have provided a new dimension to conflict and competition; instant perception has become the new reality as non-kinetic activity and 'soft' power play an increasingly important role in the delivery of objectives and outcomes. The RAF has been reasonably successful in communicating *how* it delivers air power, but it has been less successful in communicating *why*. However successful the RAF has been tactically, in an era in which the narrative is king and is delivered digitally across the globe, we need to adopt a new approach to communications which levers tactical advantage into strategic success. Communicating is no longer a minor supporting activity; it is, at the very least, an intrinsic component of every military line of operation, and is increasingly becoming a supported component in its own right. This has a potentially profound effect on the role of communications as part of the air power panoply. Simply put, unless we change our mind set and approach to communications in the digital age, we risk ceding the information environment to our detractors and adversaries, which is the strategic critical ground both at home and abroad.

This paper examines the new digitally-driven communications operating space and considers its implications. It sets out the case for being appropriately configured – conceptually and physically – in order to understand the new digital age and how best to survive the threats and exploit the opportunities it presents. Finally, the paper studies how, in particular, factors surrounding offensive air power and the use of Remotely Piloted Air Systems might best be communicated in the future.

Context

Much has been written about the modern 'digital' communications revolution and the impact of the information age. Not only has the character of communications changed almost unrecognisably in the past 20 years, but it could be argued that its nature has also been transformed. Speed, connectivity, accessibility, and increasing bandwidth provide seemingly unlimited opportunity to comment on any matter, from any location and at any time, often without the constraints of accuracy, understanding, legality or legitimacy; it is essentially an anarchic environment. The basic principle of communications – transmitting and receiving – has been redefined by social media, whose networks are increasingly used as the gateway to the traditional news sites. YouTube routinely attracts 1 billion visitors per month and, within the USA, 30% of on-line adults use Facebook as the primary means to access news,[2] albeit data analytics tend to highlight stories that are most likely to interest the user.[3]

As a result, communications are now immediate, more personal, often emotive, increasingly interactive and predominately visual. Already, 2.4 billion users worldwide access the web and

the speed of technological adoption is accelerating. For example, while there are 20 billion devices connected to the internet today, this is estimated to increase to 40 billion by 2020.[4] Social media drives information and disinformation to a world-wide audience instantaneously, and a well organised campaign can change behaviours and perception.[5] Increasingly, conflicts, their root causes, culpability and even outcomes are being shaped by the instant perceptions cultivated and disseminated in the digital space. Social scientists such as Manuel Castells argue that, '*the conflicts of our time are fought by networked social actors aiming to reach their constituencies and target audiences through the decisive switch to multimedia communication networks*.'[6] This reality has not been lost on our adversaries, whose exploitation of the 'potent narrative'[7] has changed the character of conflict and will increasingly be used in '*more sophisticated and unpredictable ways in the future*'.[8] Warfare, conflict and competition now come with a digital component.[9]

For example, Daesh deploys social media in 23 different languages[10] as a means both to instil fear and subversion in the West and as a means to inspire and attract new followers. In the latter respect, tweets, blogs and imagery are designed to demonstrate an overtly positive view of life under Daesh and the web supplies an online library of information for potential recruits covering subject matters as various as how to enter Syria, mounting a bomb attack in the West and which toiletries to pack for a one-way trip to Raqqa.[11] Similarly, the conflict in Ukraine demonstrates the effect Russia achieved through a digital narrative-driven social media campaign targeted at undermining regional and international cohesion.[12] The deployment of the Russia Today (RT) news outlets into NATO capital cities and the fact that Russia spends between US$600 million to US$1 billion annually on RT[13] and other outlets underlines not only the scale of the Russian operation, but the manner in which information and propaganda are integrated into a wider campaign. One of this article's authors was temporarily trapped in a Paris café as an anti-capitalist rally carried on outside, exclusively covered by RT.

However, while the digital age has enabled disinformation and propaganda to reach a wide audience in a very short period of time, it is also providing an environment in which so-called 'official' versions of the truth can be rapidly challenged and undermined. In 2014, the investigative website Bellingcat investigated the loss of Malaysia Airlines MH17 over Ukraine and instigated new levels of scrutiny to so-called deniable military actions.[14] Using open source material, including social media feeds, photographs and YouTube clips, it concluded (and alleged) that MH17 was downed by a surface-to-air missile fired from a SA-11 Buk (NATO: GADFLY) missile launcher of the Russian 53rd Brigade. The report's findings were denied by the Russian authorities and publication initiated a period of claim and counter-claim over the accuracy and relevance of the evidence presented. The truth, presumably, is buried among the narratives and counter-narratives that flowed freely in the weeks and months following Bellingcat's claims. The key point is that the digital age is a powerful and accessible tool. However, we can also expect our adversaries to learn the lessons of Bellingcat and to work harder to protect their actions from scrutiny and challenge. Whether they are successful or

not remains to be seen, but we should also be mindful that our actions will also come under scrutiny both at home and abroad. In the modern era, there may be no perpetual friends, but there are certainly no eternal friends, which makes OPSEC and PERSEC[15] factors as vitally important as ever.

In an era where the narrative is strategically vital, the domestic audience is also a key consideration. In his 2014 Lord Trenchard Memorial Lecture, the then CAS, noted that, '*In the Second World War the British public had a good understanding of what their air power was doing and why, across all of its roles. That is much less true today even though those same roles, such as protecting the nation's airspace, remain just as vital*.[16] Delivering air power in a democracy requires both parliamentary and public understanding and support. In April 2016, the UK Government rejected the need for a War Powers Act that would enshrine in law the requirement for Parliament to be consulted before military action is taken. However, while the decision to conduct military action still rests with the Prime Minister, it has become convention that Parliament will retain a role in any decision to engage in combat operations. This is unlikely to change in the near future given the fall-out from the Chilcot Report. As a result, communications must also set the conditions for the delivery of air power so that the RAF is in the best position to inform parliamentary debate and secure public support with accurate and timely information, such as it did ahead of the vote to extend air strikes to Syria in late 2015.

More broadly, recent ICM polling within the UK public indicates that while favourability towards the RAF remains high at 87%, only 69% consider themselves familiar with the role of the RAF and 30% claim to know little or nothing about the RAF. These figures reduce further among Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) audiences and those within the key recruiting audience of 16-24 year olds. When asked, a clear majority (68%) of the wider UK Public recognise that the role of Defence is to '*protect and defend the UK and its economy*'. Of these, only 14% specifically identified '*protecting and securing the skies*' as part of this role.[17] The good news is that the image and reputation of the RAF is consistently and exceptionally positive. The bad news is that there remains a lack of understanding on what the RAF does and why, particularly among key youth and BAME audience groups. This is an unsatisfactory position. In a recent article, the strategist Professor Sir Hew Strachan opined that the MOD's priorities are '…governed by fear of the media and they are focused on damage limitation, control, and sticking to a consistent story. This means it is failing to engage properly with society. I really do fear there is a democratic deficit there…..The MOD and the Armed Forces seem keen not to get pulled into what might be construed as a political debate, and so it does not enter the discussion at all, which is very damaging.'[18] In the age of instant perception, it could be argued that favourability cannot be guaranteed indefinitely and is at risk unless we secure broad public support and understanding particularly among those audiences where hitherto we have little or no success, and that this needs considerable proactive effort. It could be concluded that we are good at preaching to the converted. We now need to get better at evangelising.

The Planning Mind-Set

To respond successfully to the challenges of the digital age requires a conceptual shift in communications planning that places target audience analysis (their needs, perceptions, values and ideas) and clarity of what is to be achieved at its core. To fully realise its potential, targeted communications need to be considered and planned as a key enabler in the delivery of air power rather than as a discretionary luxury. The aim must be to provide the right information, at the right time and in a way target audiences choose rather than how we would like them to receive it. If ambition is limited to only communicating tactical actions, strategic objectives are unlikely to be achieved. At a more fundamental level, if the communications mind-set remains fixed, overly deliberate and too narrowly focused, appetite for risk and opportunities for innovation are diminished. A new and more adaptable approach to communications is required to gain the initiative in the digital age, translate objectives into communications activity and deliver behavioural outcomes.[19] It requires a mind-set that places insight-driven and targeted communications at the heart of planning and a delivery scheme that is primarily digital by design, instinctive and delivered at a rapid tempo. At its core is the ability to act and respond in real time, learn quickly, stimulate creativity, and accept that risk is an inherent part of communicating.

James Corum argues that, '*Speed is essential….and a traditional bureaucracy, which waits cautiously for details, does not help counter exaggerated or confusing reports.*'[20] However, the speed and ubiquity of communications reduce the time that can be spent on reflection, consideration and planning. The window of opportunity to decide and act is small and will reduce still further. This leads to the question: 'Do we have the agility and imagination to react at speed and, perhaps more fundamentally, are we prepared to take the necessary risk in order to gain and maintain the initiative?' At present, we probably do not. While being imaginative and adaptable is important, and can often provide an important 'edge', they are not on their own decisive and a balance between speed and accuracy needs to be found. This can only be provided when: communications are integrated as early as possible into the planning cycle and there is coherence between comms and policy staffs from the outset; there are clear and consistent communications objectives supported by a credible narrative; targeting is informed by a robust analysis of key audiences and a clear measurement and evaluation of communications outputs; communications are used as a means to deliver effect rather than merely reporting activity; and, communications are delivered by trained and qualified professionals.

Professionalising the Communicator

However, this mind-set cannot be delivered without a professionalised and trained cadre in place to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the digital age. For example, do we have the skills to adequately understand the importance of insight in identifying key audiences and their motivations, how to target audiences and how to sustain a communications campaign to deliver the effect we require? Under the direction of the Government Communications Service, UK Defence Communications is investing significant

time and resource in the professional development of civil servants and military personnel in communication roles. Based and formulated around the Civil Service career stream and Government Communications Service models, the intent is to 'professionalise' Defence's communications cadre through continuous training and formal links to professional bodies in order to increase capability, capacity, and credibility of output. While welcome, it highlights a fundamental gap in the skills and competencies of professional communicators across Defence that needs to be addressed. In the digital age, communicators will increasingly require different and more technical skillsets.[21] Within the RAF there is no formal career path for those in communication roles and through-life professional development is at best *ad hoc*.

As a minimum, we should look to provide greater structure and clarity to media and communications training and career development. This should include a focus on developing deeper digital skills (and regular reinforcement) and understanding in order to operate in the modern communications environment as well as the traditional broadcast methods. Concurrently, we also need to develop a pool of expertise in foreign cultures, traditions and political affairs so that we can better understand our target audiences abroad and provide the necessary insight in what they think, feel and do. Over time, the aim should be to create a cadre of qualified and professionalised personnel that have the knowledge, capability and confidence to deliver practically, as well as providing considered advice and guidance to our senior Commanding Officers and policy staff. However talented, our reliance on 'enthusiastic amateurs' will not suffice. To use the sporting parlance, we are not 'match fit' in the delivery of communications, but we need to be. As a recent NATO report on Strategic Communications in Afghanistan noted, it is insufficient to rely on, '*willing....officers eager to learn on the job*' and move to a position which is based on '*qualified, trained and experienced practitioners in all disciplines at each rank level*'.[22] We do not expect a Private Pilot Licence (PPL)-qualified pilot to jump into a Typhoon on a Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) air defence mission, so why should it be acceptable to do something analogous in the communications sphere?

Educating the 'Undecided'

During his Trenchard Memorial Lecture, the then CAS observed that, '*Collectively, airmen are very good at describing what they do - we fly aircraft - but we are much less adept in explaining why. Everyone in the military aviation business has a responsibility to address this lack of public awareness.*'[23] Notwithstanding recent positive developments in the RAF's educational courses such as its Junior Officer Development Programme (JODP) and Intermediate Command and Staff Course (Air) (ICSC(A)), it could be argued that the training and education delivered throughout a RAF officer's career is often role-focused, without an appropriate wider view of the role of communications in the strategic context. As a result, personnel who have not worked directly in modern communications remain undecided on its utility and yet to be convinced on its overall value to the delivery of air power. Arguably, the 'undecided' fall into 2 distinct groups: those personnel who have little or no understanding of communications and therefore (understandably) only consider it a discretionary task at best; and those personnel who have little or no understanding but act as if they do. Neither is ideal.[24]

As the digital environment has transformed and the pace of change accelerated, the deficit in understanding and appreciation of how best to utilise modern communications has also widened. The gap can be closed, but only by investing in the skills required to understand the new digital space and appreciate the role that communications can play in delivering objectives. A quick examination of the training provided for senior command appointments provides an interesting illustration. Media training concentrates on how to prepare and deliver a 'traditional' TV or radio interview. While important, we revert to the 'how to communicate' (i.e. 'What do you do with your hands?', 'Should you wear a hat?', 'How can you best bridge to your message?') rather than focussing on the 'why' and 'what to communicate' and how to develop the necessary insight, identify target audiences, and evaluate activity. Furthermore, there is little if any training available on the opportunities and reach of social media. As a result, there is a risk that the 'undecided' remain overly fixed on the traditional media space and are unable to recognise and adapt to the impact and potential of the digital space, in which our key young audiences are natives.

The RAF, and Defence more broadly, are not providing the 'undecided' with either the broader understanding of what communications is or what it can achieve when used to its full capability. The current approach to training and education delivers an implicit message: communications is a discretionary luxury and it remains secondary in comparison with other outputs and activity. The key point is everything we say and everything we do (or do not do) sends a message; our training and education interventions need to adapt accordingly to inculcate a broader understanding of the vital role that communications can play in addressing the challenges facing Air Power now.

Air Power's Communications Challenges

Offensive Application of Air Power

'Air strikes' and the offensive application of air power generally has arguably become the most controversial facet of the military instrument in the post-Cold War era. Ironically, it was air power's much vaunted ability to deliver exquisitely precise and apparently risk-free (to the deliverer at least) 'kinetic effect' during the 1991 Gulf War that inculcated a perception of near perfection. General Norman Schwarzkopf's swashbuckling press conferences did much to amplify this notion, even though fewer than 9% of bombs delivered by the USAF during the conflict were 'smart'.

As a result of the highly effective use of laser-guided bombs and cruise missiles, and the even more successful public relations operation that accompanied their employment, an all too eager coterie of air power proponents were swift to declare that air power had at last come of age. Expectations were falsely raised – and almost as quickly dashed – as the limitations of such systems began to be realised. As the RAF found in 1999, laser-guided bombs which had been employed so successfully in the clear skies above Iraq and Kuwait in 1991 were to a large extent neutralised by cloudy skies above Kosovo, demanding a reversion to 'dumb' cluster bombs. The integration of satellite navigation into more modern weapons systems has largely addressed the limitations imposed by weather, dust and smoke and with it public and political

expectations of perfection have continued to soar. Consequently, when things go wrong, such as the erroneous US air strike on a hospital in Kunduz in October 2015, the public (provoked by an outraged media) is incensed.

The principal issue is that when tragedies occur, air power is presented as clumsy or, very often, a 'blunt instrument'. Western public and political appetite is staunchly set against the use of 'dumb' weapons, resulting in a near-total reliance on precision weapons, which are not always the best weapons to use against all targets. Invariably, our adversaries will target this fault line to weaken the resolve to employ air power. Corum argues that if the adversary cannot win in the air, they are more likely to '*conduct information campaigns that categorise the use of air power as an inhumane means of waging conflict*…'[25] Consequently, the physical battlespace has ceded much of its importance to the information domain, where our adversaries exploit our own-goals to sap our resolve and stoke negative sentiment among those whom we seek to support. For instance, former President Karzai's outspoken criticism of air strikes in Afghanistan did much to undermine the Coalition's credibility as a 'force for good' in that country, all to the Taliban's benefit. In 2008 and again in 2009, the use of kinetic air power in Afghanistan was progressively constrained by the rules of engagement in order to redress the perception among the Afghan population that air operations were resulting in excessive casualties. While these constraints potentially increased the risk to ISAF[26] ground forces, it also sought to weaken and undermine the Taliban's means to 'attack' ISAF though the 'hearts and minds' of the Afghan population.[27]

In the West too, given the celebrated accuracy of modern weapons systems, the public can be confused when accidents occur. Russia, by contrast, appears not to be afflicted by a similar level of squeamishness, and, as has been demonstrated in Syria, has no compunction in the wholesale use of dumb weaponry in urban areas. That is not to argue that we in the West should not aspire to perfection in the application of air power, but the acceptance in Russia that war is a bloody business in which tragedies are inevitable makes them relatively resilient to the attempts of their enemies to undermine their resolve on humanitarian grounds. Russia makes no bones about the ruthlessness with which it exercises its military instrument – it does whatever it believes is in Russia's national interests, and the tightly controlled media and public in Russia remain supportive.

Russia's attitude does not get the West off the hook, and it is inconceivable that there will be a loosening of constraints on the application of air power, which would debase the moral standing of our strategic case. As a result, we need to get better at persuading the public, politicians and media to understand the advantages and shortcomings of such systems. The notion, as cultivated during the first Gulf War, that precision weapons are a 'silver bullet', continues to carry political currency. Arguably, the UK Government's success in 2015 in persuading Parliament to extend air strikes into Syria was seductively swung in its favour by the touted unparalleled abilities of the Brimstone missile, a capability uniquely offered by RAF Tornados.

Short of a war of national survival, Western appetite for the use of offensive air power is unlikely to become more relaxed, but greater pragmatism needs to be shown in the way in which the subject is dealt with. Perfection is expected, and is rarely newsworthy. By contrast, rare tragic failure risks undermining our strategy. The UK's armed forces have an enviable reputation for accuracy and target discrimination, but it has to realise that some future catastrophe involving UK air-delivered weapons is more likely than not. If we are to withstand such an event, we should do well to have communicated beforehand a credible narrative that there is always risk that something could go wrong and, where high explosives are concerned, the consequences can be tragic. It can be argued that successes are overhyped and this further lowers resilience to disasters when they happen. Silver bullets simply do not exist beyond the realms of fiction, and we would do well to help insure air power's reputation by communicating a narrative that although smart weapons are in many ways exceptionally capable, they are not without risk.

Remotely Piloted Air Systems

Another area in which our adversaries have sought to undermine our moral authority concerns the use of Remotely Piloted Air Systems (RPAS), or 'drones'. 'Drone' has become the common shorthand for such systems, implying that they operate autonomously beyond the hand and mind of humans, a notion that our enemies (and anti-war lobbyists at home) have sought to promote. Indeed, the same rationale is used in their arguments against the use of air strikes more generally – that is to say that drones are unethical and cowardly. Added to this is a view that because human operators are not at risk, the threshold for the employment of lethal force from drones is lowered. But arguably the biggest issue concerning drones is the perception by some commentators that they have been used for extra-judicial activity in third-party states. In the UK, anti-drone lobbyists project a similar narrative. The fact that drones are used by conventional military forces (including the RAF) hardly discourages this perception, nor does the name of the most widely used drone: 'Reaper' (a name inherited from the US). Prime Minister Cameron's pre-SDSR announcement that the RAF's next generation of armed RPAS would be called 'Protector' redresses this public relations own-goal.[28]

As the words 'Reaper' and 'drone' demonstrate, nomenclature matters, but they are but a part of a much greater need to wrest the narrative back from our adversaries and detractors closer to home. At the MOD's first RPAS-focused media event held at RAF Waddington in December 2013, the then Defence Secretary, Philip Hammond MP, observed that '*Much of the criticism of unmanned aerial systems is based on misunderstanding. This event provides a great opportunity to better inform people about these life-saving assets and their variety of purposes*.'[29] However the fight for public opinion is not straightforward.

In 2013, a YouGov poll indicated that the UK public was divided on the use of drones and that attitudes change depending on the way they are used.[30] A certain amount has since been achieved in the UK in demonstrating the utility and efficacy of RPAS, and even the politically controversial strikes against British jihadists in Syria in August 2015 met with a generally enthusiastic response from the media and public. Radio and TV has been used to good effect

in promoting the case, with a greater readiness of ministers and senior military officers to converse on the subject. But an air of mystique continues to pervade the RAF's operations and embellishes negative perceptions. More recently, the House of Commons' Joint Committee on Human Rights called for clarification on the legal basis for strikes against British jihadists in Syria and raised wider concerns about 'drone' use in other parts of the world where Daesh is active.[31] While the Committee focused on the use of 'drones' to deliver lethal force in a counter-terrorism scenario, there is more to be done if the RAF is to address not only the arguments of our detractors, but to exorcise the perception that there is something underhand going on. The arguments at our disposal are concrete and largely indisputable, but we have to be more determined in making them over the long-term in order to promote the morality, legality and accountability on which such arguments are founded.

Conclusion

The nature and character of communications is transforming rapidly in a world where instant perception is the new currency in the battle of ideas, values and identities. Arguably, we have been slow to adapt and continue to view our communications effort as a supporting process rather than supported activity. We have become overly comfortable in communicating our actions rather than communicating why we act, and we have yet to make the conceptual shift that considers communications activity as part of the wider strategic toolkit. At the heart of communications is the audience – their needs, perceptions, values and ideas – and audience analysis needs to be incorporated into our planning with as much detail, deliberation and discrimination as we would with more traditional kinetic targeting.

The delivery of air power has not been immune from treating communications as a discretionary adjunct rather than as an integral element, which is critical to strategic success. To address adverse criticism and comment on the offensive use of air power and the use of RPAS, our combined moral, conceptual and physical approach needs to adapt accordingly. The case for air power needs to be made with a credible, consistent and enduring narrative, both at home and abroad and to allies and adversaries. Abroad, our adversaries have already recognised the potential effect of the 'Potent Narrative' and we need to recognise that warfare, conflict and competition now come with a very large and influential digital component. At home, informing parliamentary debate and securing public understanding and support are also critical.

To address these challenges successfully requires a professionalised cadre of personnel with the necessary communication skills, experience and training to operate in the digital environment. Combined with a greater understanding of foreign cultures, traditions and political affairs, the result is enhanced capability, capacity and credibility of output. We are not 'match fit' and we need to be. Above all, there has to be a better understanding and appreciation of the role of communications in the current digital space across the many 'undecided' who have yet to be convinced about its overall utility. This will take time and training and education interventions need to adapt accordingly. Only then can we fully meet

the challenge to communicate what air power does, and also why, with confidence, clarity and credibility. In doing so, we will be able to lever our tactical advantages into strategic success: in short, communicating to win.

Notes

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