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CENTRE FOR MEDIA AND INFORMATION WARFARE STUDIES

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The Media and Information Environments Ten Years After 9/11[1]

Gary D. Rawnsley
University of Leeds

> 'Cameras are now in places where cameras never used to be' (Mark Lukasiewicz, NBC News Vice-President, 2007)[2]
>
> 'almost by definition … a war waged on live television is a war in which political and public relations considerations become inextricably bound up with military tactics and strategy… how victory is won is almost important as victory itself' (Washington Post, 24 March 2003).

On 17 January 1991, war erupted in the Middle East. As Operation Desert Storm began, television audiences around the world tuned into CNN to watch the 'live' coverage from a hotel in Baghdad … only they did not see very much at all. In fact, the opening hours of the war were in sound only as the three CNN reporters described the bombs falling on Iraq's capital city while audiences saw only their photos superimposed on maps of Baghdad and Iraq. The first conflict not only of the New World Order but also of the 'new' media age, characterised by 24/7 electronic news gathering and live satellite broadcasting, was reported as if on radio (Taylor, 1992).

Ten years later, audiences were again led to believe they watched the horror of 9/11 unfold live on their television screens. However, it is only by sheer luck that we have footage of the first hijacked plane hitting the North Tower of the World Trade Centre (WTC) at 8:46 am local time. In the neighbourhood were filmmakers James Hanlon and the Naudet brothers making a documentary about a probationary New York fireman. When American Airlines Flight 11 flew by, Jules Naudet turned his camera to follow the plane and taped only one of three known recordings of the first plane hitting the WTC (the others being a video postcard by

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Pavel Hlava filming a visit to New York to send home to family in the Czech republic, and a sequence of still frame CCTV photographs by artist Wolfgang Staehle). In this way, the biggest and most momentous news event of recent decades was captured and recorded by 'accidental journalists' who just happened to be in the right place at the right time.

Seventeen minutes later at 9:03 am, a second plane hit the WTC's South Tower. This time, the collision was broadcast live on television, captured by professional camera crews circulating the burning North Tower in helicopters. Given the level of media literacy within Al-Qaeda, it is plausible that the organisers of the hijackings knew that the first collision would not be reported live, so delayed the second attack to generate media interest and coverage.

The events of 9/11 confirmed that the media, communications and information landscapes had changed beyond recognition, and they continue to change. Communications technologies develop at such a pace that all users, including governments, militaries and the media themselves, struggle to keep pace with the latest trends.[3] Where once we could only 'download', we are all now encouraged to 'upload'; just as soon as we got used to talking about 'blogs', along come 'tweets'; YouTube users are now able to integrate their films with their Facebook accounts; and now we are learning a brand new jargon of 3G, 'apps' and 'android technology'.

These developments in the information sphere help shape both events and responses to them; more than at any time in the past, governments and militaries are learning that winning 'hearts and minds' must be central to any strategy to wage wars, or when militaries are called upon to engage in operations 'other than wars' and 'interventions', they know only too well that communication and information perception can make the difference between success and failure. This is particularly true in the so-called War on Terror which has largely been a war of ideas, and in which the battles for hearts and minds occur as much on our own doorsteps as they do in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Terrorists have long understood the importance of information, as they require what British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once called 'the oxygen of publicity'. Media coverage of their activities, and especially the consequences of their actions, is perhaps their greatest weapon, particularly such coverage succeeds in generating fear and paranoia and results in state-imposed counter-measures which restrict civil liberties. However, the days of 'minimum casualties, maximum publicity' were swept away on 9/11 when terrorists sought maximum

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casualties for maximum media coverage. And in creating fear, paranoia and the severe curtailment of civil liberties by states across the democratic world, Al-Qaeda's attacks on 9/11 were doubly successful.

Long before the attacks on New York and the Pentagon, we were aware that terrorist networks and insurgents have adapted to this new information environment, and they have often acclimatised to it much quicker than their adversaries. Early in its life, Al-Qaeda embraced information as an asymmetric weapon against powerful nation-states, especially the US, and identified its potential for disseminating propaganda and recruiting new members. In fact, since 9/11 Al-Qaeda has become a formidable, sophisticated and prolific multi-media communications machine, with ready access to the As-Sahab ('The Cloud') Institute for Media Productions and its huge media library allowing the creation and dissemination of information and propaganda to a global audience. As-Sahab continues to produce high quality news releases, documentary films and now even iPod files and videos available on mobile telephones. As-Sahab's production expertise combined with Al-Qaeda's enthusiastic use of the internet means the terrorists are able to converse persistently, securely and in multiple audiences with members, sympathisers and potential recruits across the world, especially among younger generations who may be most attracted and therefore susceptible to the message. This ability to communicate is essential for Al-Qaeda which is not really a formal organisation, but exists as a loose international network of cells and affiliate groups who can remain in contact with each other via the internet. This is demonstrated most clearly in the creation of the al-Fajr ('Dawn') Media Centre, an elaborate network of local terrorist units and dozens of anonymous webmasters around the world (each webmaster is unaware of the others' true identities), with Al-Qaeda functioning as a an umbrella propaganda organisation that gives guidance to local movements. Computer-literate sympathisers using internet cafes, codes and special software to circumvent detection, to help maintain the flow of information through the network. Gone are the days when Al-Qaeda had to depend on dead-letter drops of propaganda video tapes to Al-Jazeera and hope that the station would broadcast them; now the films are uploaded and distributed around the world on the internet, often with subtitles in English, German, Italian, Pashto, French and Turkish. This not only gains them a wider audience and bypasses the media, but should television stations so wish, they can download the films as ready-packaged products, thus enhancing their appeal.[4]

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The power of information in this asymmetrical war has not been overlooked by political elites at the highest levels in Washington: In 2007 US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, noted 'It is just plain embarrassing that Al-Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the Internet than America. Speed, agility, and cultural relevance are not terms that come readily to mind when discussing US strategic communications'. Gates recalled how one US diplomat had asked him, 'How has one man in a cave managed to out-communicate the world's greatest communication society?' Four years later, Washington's political elite were still pondering the US's incapacity to compete in the communications landscape: In March 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton admitted in testimony to the Senate's Foreign Affairs Committee that 'We are in an information war and we are losing that war'.

The coalition has spent ten years playing catch-up. The initial communications response to the terrorist information networks after 9/11 was the creation of the Al-Hurrah ('The Free One') Arabic language television channel at a cost of $60 million per year (it is now officially the least watched station in the Middle East). The US also created Radio Free Afghanistan, Radio Farda for Iran and Radio Sawa ('Together'), the latter broadcasting a diet of popular music and some news in a deliberate effort to target younger audiences. Yet, these stations, clearly created by Americans, had little or no credibility and could compete with neither the media the terrorists were using (the internet) nor the message (which identified themes which resonate with disaffected Muslim audiences). One former director of the Voice of America, Robert Reilly, was particularly scathing about such programming on US-created stations: 'We do not teach civics to American teenagers by asking them to listen to pop music so why should we expect Arabs and Persians to learn about America or democracy this way? The condescension implicit in this nearly all-music format is not lost on the audience that we should wish to influence most – those who think'. Similarly Al-Hurrah has been criticised by US diplomat William Rugh (2005) for 'looking much more like the old-style TV channels that were totally controlled by authoritarian governments and that served primarily as propaganda arms of those governments'. Whenever possible, Arab audiences will turn to Arab media, like Al-Jazeera, providing news and information *by* Arabs and *for* Arabs.

Moreover, the distinct communications culture in the Arab world was overlooked, most notably in Iraq: 'In the Iraqi culture in which word of mouth and the messages spread by imams in the mosque were more

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important than print or television media, the need to "get the word out on the street" was vital. US forces did not excel at that skill' (Wright & Reese, 2010: 285). In the maelstrom of multi-media platforms and whizz-bang communications technologies, we often lose sight of the fact that often the most effective form of communication and *persuasion* happens *face-to-face* in conversation with people; but it must be a conversation that demonstrates both respect for and sensitivity to the others' interests and cultural context, and as a conversation it is essential that it involve *listening* as much as talking. When President Bush felt moved after 9/11 to ask: 'Why do they hate us', did it occur to him to ask 'them'?

Most problematic from a communications point of view, however, is not information *capacity*, but the *credibility of the message* and equally the credibility of the policies being sold. That message is taking its time getting through: Back in 2007, US Marine Corps Commander General Charles C. Krulak warned that every soldier had to be aware that his actions and behaviour could have both immediate and long-term strategic consequences because of the power of the 'new' media (Wright & Reese, 2010: 290). While Al-Qaeda continues to develop as a sophisticated media organisation, its efforts have been aided by a series of clear 'own goals' by the coalition forces: the initial determination to project the War on Terror as a crusade, a word that resonates with particular meaning for Muslim audiences and underscored Al-Qaeda propaganda about US intentions in a 'clash of civilisation'; soldiers distributing footballs made of pig leather to Muslim children; the stage management of Private Jessica Lynch's rescue from an Iraqi hospital; the whole disarray over Saddam Hussein and Weapons of Mass Destruction; the attempt to link Iraq with 9/11. Wikileaks revealed how an Apache helicopter had gunned down civilians in Iraq, including two journalists and seriously injured two children in a van; while in 2011 the publication of so-called 'trophy photos' of soldiers posing with dead Iraqis continued to undermine the credibility of coalition operations to win 'hearts and minds' in much the same way that photos of torture and humiliation inside Abu Ghraib damaged US policy and presentation. Most importantly, credibility is not just lost in theatres of military operations; in a long war of ideas and perception serious damage is caused by the signals such policies send to unemployed, impoverished, alienated and mistreated Muslim youth across the world, including those in the US and UK.

A final own goal demonstrated not only the absence of consistency between policy and message, but also the suggestion to audiences that a policy was being made on an ad hoc basis with little fore-thought: In

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2009, the 'Small Unit Ops in Afghanistan Handbook', published by the Centre for Army Lessons Learned, encouraged military leaders to use positive talking points about the American presence in Afghanistan when speaking 'spontaneously' with locals, including: 'We will stay here as long as it takes'. Commenting on the Handbook, Walter Pincus of the *Washington Post* (2011) noted that this was 'obviously written long before the 2014 date was set for the departure of US combat troops'.

New communications technologies have likewise exercised a profound impact on traditional news gathering processes, especially as journalists enter into new and often closer relationships with their sources and confront the challenges of converging media platforms (Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston, 2007). As they become part of a new ecology in wartime, represented by the 'press pools' or the system of 'embedding', the media are forced to question their role and responsibilities, their ideals, norms and routines: Are they mere observers of war, or are they (willing or unwilling) participants in the events they record? This new ecology has moved the relationship between the military and journalists beyond that of symbiosis to one that is more complicated, with the lines of communications and responsibility between them increasingly blurred. Certainly the new information environment has made it more difficult than ever before for militaries to control the media. Journalists have become much more mobile and therefore less manageable as laptops, the internet and cell phones have made their job much easier. The old three-man news crews of the Vietnam War have been replaced by the lone journalist with a small satellite dish squeezed into a briefcase. The dilemma, however, is that this mobility has made the journalist more vulnerable to risk, and at the same time more willing to take risks. The demands of 24/7 rolling news coverage and competition from rivals have increased the pressures to be first with the story; and not only to be first with the story, but also to be the first with exciting and arresting visuals which will capture audience attention. It is instructive that more reporters have died in Iraq than in any other conflict since World War Two. In part this may be due to the numbers of journalists reporting the Iraq war: during the 2003 invasion, around 700 journalists from all over the world were embedded with the military; in World War Two, just 600 journalists covered the entire South Pacific theatre of operations, and only 30 covered D-Day (Wright & Reese, 2010: 292). More journalists reporting the war in Iraq means more journalists for the military to protect; and it also means more journalists who have no experience of, and possibly no training to survive in a combat zone. According to Reporters

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Without Borders 223 journalists and media assistants were killed between 2003 and 2008, compared to just 55 killed during the whole of the 'unmanaged' Vietnam War; and journalists killed in Iraq were not all 'unilaterals' who, determined to remain independent and objective, remained outside the military's official media management strategies. Indeed, being embedded with, and therefore 'protected' by the military has not guaranteed the safety of correspondents as one third of those listed as killed in 2003 were actually embedded with US forces. Some, such as the ITN reporter Terry Lloyd, were killed by so-called 'friendly fire'. We should also recall that the media have themselves become deliberate military targets. The calculated targeting by US missiles of Al-Jazeera offices, first in Kabul in 2001 and in Baghdad in 2003, killing journalist Tareq Ayyoub (and after the station had disclosed their location to US forces), raises the spectre of 'shooting the messenger'.

In the same way that the 1991 Gulf War brought CNN to the world's attention, 9/11 and its aftermath is the story of Al-Jazeera. Ten years on, it has evolved into a major media player with global audiences, especially after it launched English-language programming in 2006. Al-Jazeera has been criticised by the US, the UK and by various governments in the Middle East as 'biased'; during the 2003 war in Iraq, even the Iraqi Information Minister – known in the UK as 'Comical Ali' because of his wild exaggerations about Iraq's impending victory in the war – asked viewers not to believe the propaganda broadcast by Al-Jazeera. As the BBC has learned throughout its turbulent history with the British political establishment, criticisms from all sides mean that the station must be doing something right; and what it is doing is providing an alternative voice and perspective for Arab audiences about issues that are most relevant to them, challenging the dominance of narratives broadcast by CNN and the BBC. As Philip Seib has noted in his study of what he calls *The Al Jazeera Effect* (2008: 143): 'Rather than judging the news product they receive according to standards prescribed by outsiders, most of Al-Jazeera's viewers want news that is gathered independently for Arabs by Arabs that see events through *their eyes*'. At the end of Operation Desert Storm in 1991, President George H.W. Bush declared, 'By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all'. Not only does the Vietnam syndrome refer to America's technologically-superior military forces suffering defeat at the hands of a far less resourced guerrilla army, but also alludes to the prevailing belief that the media somehow contributed to America's defeat in Southeast Asia.[5] Yet following set-backs during the first battle for Fallujah in April 2004, the US military claimed 'We

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were defeated by Al-Jazeera'.[6] This suggests not only the power of prevailing mythologies – that media, communications and presentation can somehow compensate for policy and operational capacity – but also that Al-Jazeera is a serious challenge to military strength.

Satellite broadcasting, the rise of pan-regional media organisations like Al-Jazeera, citizen journalism, tweets, blogs, Facebook and social networking have all transformed the way governments and militaries speak to journalists and audiences, and how publics speak to each other.[7] Many commentators have asserted that the 2011 revolutions in the Middle East would not have happened, nor would they have been successful in Egypt and Tunisia, without Facebook and other social networking sites (a more sober assessment of the impact of the internet is, or isn't having on politics is provided by Morozov, 2011).[8] Indeed Facebook has become a site of contestation between competing users seeking to use the new media for political objectives. In March 2011, a pro-Palestine group, Third *Intifada*, used Facebook to spread its message, mobilise support and call for a march to 'liberate' Palestine. The page had acquired almost half a million 'fans' before it was removed from Facebook following protests by the Israeli government, but it was soon replaced. Similarly, in 2007 YouTube removed some, but not all Al-Qaeda propaganda films from its website, claiming that they were not all violent or engaged in 'hate speech' as Senator Joseph Lieberman, chairman of the Senate Homeland Security Committee, had suggested. The new information environment has clearly become a location not only of political mobilisation and for the distribution of information, but is also a new arena in which long-standing political and diplomatic disputes may be played out. Again, the battle for hearts and minds is inseparable from the policy-making process.

At the same time, Facebook and other social networking sites are also fora where we might test the boundaries of what is and is not permissible in this new ecology: What do we mean by 'freedom of speech'? Who has responsibility for what is posted on the internet and the consequences of doing so? How is it possible to manage information in cyberspace? Who decides what is and is not acceptable, why and by what criteria?

Therefore the transformation of communications has been most pronounced in two dimensions. First, the level of interactivity has increased: the old style of broadcasting – 'we speak, you listen' – gave way first to niche or narrow-casting ('we speak, you listen … if you are interested in the subject we are talking about') and then to most recently the possibility of a more dialogical form of communication based on peer to peer technologies and platforms.

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The second change is a consequence of the first. The information environment today is far less mediated than at any time in the past, meaning that because of the convergence of communications tools we all have the opportunity to be participants in the recording of history, rather than experiencing it second-hand through the media. This presents serious challenges to militaries that are used to being able to control both civilians and journalists in wartime. They must now understand that they can no longer just pool or embed journalists to manage their movements and to influence what they report and how. Now when we talk of reporters we must also include ordinary members of the public with access to communications technologies that allow them to share information with others around the world almost instantaneously. So-called 'citizen journalism' has transformed the way wars and crises are reported. This means the military are no longer in sole control of the narrative. Their command of the story and the pictures that go with it can be challenged on an almost minute-by-minute basis by the media, bloggers (both military and civilian), tweeters – in fact by anyone with a mobile phone, a laptop and an internet connection. Mobile phones with cameras, fast internet connections and information sharing sites like Youtube have rendered obsolete and irrelevant debates about what is and is not appropriate for audiences to see. Anyone wishing to see full coverage of Saddam Hussein's execution in 2006 would not watch the BBC, CNN or even Al-Jazeera; they would go to any one of a dozen internet sites offering the complete and unedited film of his death.[9] Then the publication in 2004 of a photograph of coffins draped by the Stars and Stripes and loaded in the back of an aeroplane on its way from Kuwait to the US (contravening Pentagon policy in place since 1991 which prevents the media from taking pictures of caskets returning home) confirmed that the military had lost control over the image of war.[10]

The challenge for political and military elites operating in this environment is to learn how to re-orientate the information space to reflect the official agenda; while militaries, audiences and the media must acknowledge that the convergence of communications platforms means that it may be very difficult to prevent Military Deception operations (MILDEC) and Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) from penetrating (intentionally or otherwise) media processes. In the age of new media, understanding and distinguishing fact from fiction, propaganda from information, verified from unconfirmed news is more difficult than ever before. Moreover, in the age of the internet, where does 'domestic' end and 'international' begin? Is a government sufficiently appreciative of

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the fact that it can now speak to multiple constituencies across the world simultaneously, amplifying the need to make sure that all its voices speak with consistency? In Iraq, insurgents 'often had a cameraman at the site of a car-bombing, and within minutes of the explosion, the images appeared on the internet without having to be vetted in any approval process and with little regard for the distinction between news and propaganda. Countering this type of instant "news" … was almost impossible' (Wright & Reese, 2010: 288).

Stories circulate that the US forces themselves are prepared to blur reality and fiction in cyberspace, and use the internet as a method of disseminating 'black' propaganda whereby the true source of the message is concealed behind a false identity: Units are reported to be developing methods of secretly manipulating conversations on social media sites via 'persona management software'. This involves military officers controlling up to ten separate personas – or 'sock puppets' as they are known – on social network sites in Arabic, Farsi, Pahsto and Urdu. These virtual personalities would be 'replete with background, history, supporting details and cyber presences that are technically and geographically consistent'. Moreover, they would be untraceable and 'must be able to appear to originate in nearly any part of the world and can interact through conventional online services and social media platforms'.[11] The idea is to 'create a false consciousness in online conversations, crowd out unwelcome opinions and smother commentaries or reports that do not correspond with [US military] objectives' (Fielding & Cobain, 2011). This is launched as part of Operation Earnest Voice (OEV) that aims to synchronise all of the US military's Information Operations:

> OEV seeks to disrupt recruitment and training of suicide bombers; deny safe havens for our adversaries; and counter extremist ideology and propaganda. Full funding of OEV supports all activities associated with degrading the enemy narrative, including web engagement … to counter the adversary in the cyber domain.[12]

In short, General David Patraeus, former commander of Central Command, described OEV as an attempt to 'counter extremist ideology and propaganda and to ensure that credible voices in the region are heard', and he claimed the aim was to be 'first with the news' (Fielding & Cobain, 2011). It is difficult to reconcile such ideals as 'credibility' and providing 'news' with a deliberate attempt to conceal and deceive. The dilemma for democracies is how and when to use non-democratic

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methods of communications and propaganda without being tarred with the same brush as governments who control the media and information for their own political ends. There are many examples from the non-democratic world of governments intervening in internet discussions to try and steer them in the desired direction. The most documented is the so-called '50-cent party' in China, which refers to a group of young internet users who are paid 50-cents every time they intervene in a discussion on the internet and post a pro-government comment. The aim is to guide conversations in the 'correct' direction and 'neutralise' undesirable opinions. It is difficult to know where the distinctions actually are between the 50-Cent Party and the sock-puppets of Central Command, and it does make it ever harder for democracies to claim the moral high-ground in debates with their authoritarian counterparts.

I would suggest that part of the problem is a refusal to appreciate how today's communications environment in so fundamentally different from that of yesterday. In some ways the recognition that it is useful to combine both 'old' and 'new' media is encouraging, as when Hillary Clinton told the Senate's Foreign Affairs Committee in March 2011, '… while we're being active in online new media, we have to be active in the old media as well' (quoted in Pincus, 2011). In parts of Afghanistan where illiteracy levels still reach almost 95% and where there is low internet penetration, it is appropriate to develop information strategies centred on television and radio broadcasting.

However, this demonstrates that, ten years after 9/11, we are still persuaded to label communications technologies as 'old' and 'new' media, when rather the reality is that platforms have converged. It is now possible to watch TV, listen to the radio and read newspapers anywhere in the world and *from* anywhere in the world, on a computer; just as TV news encourages its viewers to engage with them via Facebook and Twitter, and send them photos of news stories happening in their locale. Moreover, the 'new' media are 'new' only for a generation born before the end of the 1980s; the principal targets of information, public diplomacy and propaganda in the War on Terror have grown up in a world of Google and YouTube and have no recollections of a time before email and the pressure to be 'online' dominated our daily lives. Until this is recognised and the supposed dichotomy between old and new media disappears, progress in communication will be limited. The situation is certainly not helped by stories that a Crown Court judge in the UK who, presiding over a trial of three young Muslims accused of distributing propaganda over the internet in support of Al-Qaeda, confessed during

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the proceedings: 'The trouble is I don't understand the language. I don't really understand what a website is'.[13]

New communications technologies blur the traditional boundaries between source, producer and consumer, and this is the frontier of a new information space in which governments and militaries must work and combat their enemies. The information sphere is a battleground that militaries ignore today at their peril. Official communications must compete with an ever proliferating range of new voices, and to succeed, they will only do so by being credible; image and reality must be consistent. Moreover, believing that how you are perceived is more important than what you do is the biggest mistake of all. The issue is not about presentation. It is about policy. Perhaps any measured reflection on information operations ten years after 9/11 would do well to begin with this admission.

Postscript

'*I am JUST a tweeter, awake at the time of the crash*'

(Sohaib Athar on realising that he had tweeted the assassination of Osama bin-Laden)

On Monday 2 May 2011, the world awoke again to the most extraordinary news, and the information war took an unexpected but important turn. Almost ten years after the attacks of 9/11 Osama bin-Laden was assassinated by elite US troops during a raid on his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Once more, the news was first released by an 'accidental journalist': an IT consultant living nearby tweeted news of foreign helicopters circling overhead and that one of them had crashed. He then awoke to news that there was a connection between what he had heard during the night and the death of bin-Laden: 'Uh oh', he tweeted, 'now I'm the guy who live blogged the Osama raid without knowing it'. However, he was not the only one to find himself acting as an 'accidental journalist' in the story. Keith Urbahan, a top aide to former defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld tweeted: 'So, I'm told by a reputable person they have killed Osama bin Laden. Hot damn'. Thinking his 'reputable person' was Rumsfeld (it was actually a TV news producer) the tweet went viral. Even before President Obama made his speech announcing the assassination, cable news channels in the US were already reporting the story. The information war had entered a crucial new stage, one

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that revolved around two priorities: (i) convincing audiences in an increasingly sceptical world that Osama bin-Laden really is dead; and (ii) seizing control of the narrative to define and control how bin-Laden would be remembered.

Nevertheless, this new phase in the information war was almost lost as soon as it had begun, as the credibility of US reports about the raid on bin-Laden's compound was challenged by a series of inconsistencies from various sources. At first, we were told that bin-Laden had been armed and had put up resistance during the raid, and that he had used his wife as a human shield. However, the story soon changed, contradicting these earlier accounts of events: bin-Laden was unarmed and had not sheltered behind his wife. There are two important issues to consider here. The first is that the early information – circulating, we are told, because of the inevitable 'fog of war' – seems to have been part of a deliberate strategy of perception management. If bin-Laden's followers thought he was unarmed and hiding behind a woman, would this turn him into a coward, thus undermining his warrior image? Or might it conversely raise questions about the legality of his death? In propaganda terms we might describe this decision as lose-lose for the Americans.

The second consideration is more difficult to understand given that it is a lesson the US should have learned a long time ago. The conflicting accounts seriously weakened the credibility of the narrative, and thus jeopardised the integrity of future information. Consistency and accuracy are essential in such operations, especially when talking to sceptical audiences who refuse to believe anything the US says.

This public scepticism is central to discussion of another decision taken in the week following the assassination, namely whether to publish photos of Osama bin-Laden's corpse. At first, there was no question that indeed this would happen in time. However, President Obama decided that publication would be unwise because such photos would be used for Al-Qaeda propaganda. Besides, 'That's not who we are, he said. 'We don't trot out this stuff as trophies'. If Secretary Clinton is correct that the US is losing the information war, it is possible to argue that the photos may have helped to counter narratives that challenge the veracity of claims that bin-Laden is dead. Of course, photos would never prevent the circulation of conspiracy theories and discussion of alternative narratives. After all, in the new media age it is easier than ever to manipulate photos and convince audiences that 'seeing is believing'. Nevertheless, the problem is that in the absence of officially-released photos as evidence – indeed without evidence of any kind - conspiracy theories will continue to circulate with

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escalating credibility. This is especially the case after the swift disposal of bin-Laden's body at sea. This may make it doubly difficult to verify the claims about his death, but this burial has clear symbolic value: it prevents his resting place becoming a shrine, and again allows the US to try to control how he will be remembered.

This strategy took a dramatic turn only one week after the assassination. On Saturday 7 May the US released 'home-made videos' of bin-Laden that they had found during the raid on his compound. Broadcast around the world and reproduced in newspapers, the footage showed the terrorist with an unkempt beard, wrapped in a blanket and rocking on the floor as he watched film of himself on television. This footage has clear propaganda value for it demonstrates the inconsistency between fact and fiction, the myth and the man. The image bin-Laden projected in the video messages we had seen over the past ten years was very different to the reality, and we 'discovered' that he dyed his hair and beard for his television appearances. The message is clear: bin-Laden was simply an old man, not the mythic and charismatic warrior Al-Qaeda liked to offer audiences. Moreover, the US released the footage without sound to prevent, they said, the further dissemination of his propaganda – they were determined not to give him the last word.

Osama bin-Laden's assassination was a crucial part of the information war, and while the US mishandled it in some aspects, there is no denying that his death at the hands of elite Navy Seal operatives, helped the US regain some ground. Nevertheless, there are two further priorities that are perhaps the most important of all. The first is ensuring audiences around the world understand that the death of bin-Laden does not mean the end of Al-Qaeda or the war on terror. If anything, there is a stronger possibility of revenge attacks in the run up to the 10th anniversary of 9/11 than before. Thus the US must now pay more attention to managing the perception of American audiences.

The final priority is to maintain efforts in the battle for 'hearts and minds' of young Muslims around the world and prevent their radicalisation. This may be difficult depending on how Al-Qaeda spins bin-Laden's death in its propaganda, but most importantly it will depend on *communicating with* young Muslims and engaging them in conversation, rather than talking *to* them and trying to persuade or educate them. It may also mean attending to the social, economic and political problems that in some cases radicalise Muslims, demonstrating the need to think about policy as well as the *presentation* of policy. The information war continues.

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Notes

1 A version of this paper will be published in R. Utley (ed.), *9/11: Ten Years After* (London: Ashgate, 2012)

2 Quoted in 'Mobile Correspondents', *Washington Times*, 7th January 2007.

3 This was recognised by Ellen Goodman writing as part of the Washington Post Writers' Group (9 April 1999) about the war in Kosovo: 'Now the conflict in Kosovo is a chat-room war, an email war, a Website war, a war in which anyone with a PC and a phone line can quite literally become a correspondent, a war in which anyone with a netserver can log on to the war zone'.

4 The films no longer focus on the group's leaders as fighters, filmed holding weapons outdoors or in caves. Now, Al-Qaeda's leaders are often filmed at desks or in front of bookcases, and they frequently quote western authors to appeal to new audiences and establish their credibility and authority as scholars.

5 The best discussion of this is Daniel Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

6 I am grateful to Dr Stephen Badsey, University of Wolverhampton, for this insight.

7 The first pictures of the 2005 London bombings were taken on mobile phones, while the first officially-'tweeted' crisis was the November 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai.

8 Reporting on Syria, the *New York Times* (24 April 2011) said: 'For weeks now, the small number of activists, spanning the Middle East, Europe and the United States, have coordinated across almost every time zone and managed to smuggle hundreds of satellite and mobile phones, modems, laptops and cameras into Syria. There, compatriots elude surveillance with e-mailed software and upload videos on dial-up connections.' At the time of writing there is no evidence to support these claims, but if true it does demonstrate again the perceived power of information and the access to information technologies to shape events.

9 'Without the cell-phone video [of the execution], viewers were left to assume that the execution was carried out professionally. Instead the video revealed a chaotic scene that to many commentators symbolized everything that had gone wrong with the Iraq war and

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somehow made a brutal dictator a sympathetic figure'. 'Mobile Correspondents', *Washington Times*, 7 January 2007.

[10] Tami Silico took the photo with a digital camera and emailed it to her friend in the US who subsequently sent it to a local newspaper. Silicio was fired from her job at Kuwait International Airport, but not until after the photo was reproduced in media around the world and sparked a heated debate among politicians, four-star generals and journalists about the rights and wrongs of the incident.

[11] This quotation is available from Wikileaks News, http://wikileaksnews.livejournal.com/2011/02/22/, 22 February 2011

[12] Commander's Posture Statement: Statement of US Marine Corps General James N. Mattis, US Central Command Commander, before the Senate Armed Service Committee, on March 1, 2011. Available at http://www.centcom.mil/en/about-centcom/posture-statement/

[13] Mr Justice Openshaw at Woolwich Crown Court, May 2007. 'He paid close attention as Prof Tony Sams, a computer expert, explained in detail how the internet works.' 'What's a website, as judge at internet trial', *The Telegraph*, 18 May 2007. One of the accused was allegedly the author of 'The Encyclopedia of Hacking the Zionist and Crusader Websites', distributed by the Al-Qaeda affiliated Global Islamic Media Front.

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