

**Toward a Strategic Communication Plan for the
Afghanistan Humanitarian Intervention Mission**

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Abstract

Strategic communication planning and its requirements have evolved considerably over the past 20 years as a reflection of the needs of our changing world; people, technology and the requirement for military and civilian actors to work together. Nowhere has this change been more pronounced than with the development of international humanitarian intervention missions that necessarily involve military and international aid actors working in mutual dependence in areas of natural and man-made crises. Using the 2007-2011 period of the combined war and humanitarian intervention mission in Afghanistan, this study develops the requirements for a strategic communication plan for the humanitarian aspects of that mission with implications for practical reach to all long-term crises. It establishes the real from the ideal practices by the international community (military, humanitarian aid, international bodies) and, based on recommendations from the expert literature, presents a strategic communication planning format that guides both the practitioner and theoretician.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Immediately following the September 9th terrorist attacks in New York City in 2001, the United States determined that the source of the attacks came from Al Qaeda terrorist organizations, hosted by the Taliban government in Afghanistan. The US immediately engaged in combat operations against both organizations in Afghanistan to remove the Taliban from political power and to attack Al Qaeda. As a result, the Western world has since preoccupied itself with the war between the US-led West and the Taliban in southern Afghanistan. One of the most unfortunate side effects of any war is the resulting humanitarian crisis, which gives rise to civilian suffering. In response to this outcome the international community has over time developed the concept of international humanitarian intervention missions, the role of which is to employ military and civilian aid actors to relieve the suffering of the population.

Not restricted to war, this approach has also been used in peacekeeping and various crises such as hurricanes, tsunamis and other natural and man-made disasters, where a combination of military and aid assistance is required. The success of such missions is dependent upon their being well organized, a considerable challenge when dealing with a multitude of non-government organizations, tens of military partners and international politics. My thesis will explore the role of strategic communication planning and implementation in the success of humanitarian missions.

Early in the Afghanistan mission, Kiehl (2003) identified the need for strategic communication planning in Afghanistan in the following way: “The UN’s engagement in Afghanistan thus far can be characterized as an operation in search of a strategy” (p. 52).

“Please do not write another report telling us how disorganized we are. We know that. The last thing we need is another academic telling us what everybody knows and then leaving. Tell us something constructive; tell us what you would do,” said a senior NATO military official in speaking about strategic communication in Afghanistan (Betz, 2011, p. 624).

The above quotes identify the need for strategic communication planning in a country where conditions are dire. Most Afghans subsist on less than one dollar a day (Jones & Pickering, 2008); and according to the United Nations Development Programme 2007-2008 Human Development Index, Afghanistan ranks as the second lowest country in the world, sitting with the bottom five countries in the world for life expectancy (42.9 years). Additionally, it is assessed that two-thirds of Afghans suffer from mental illness as a result of war, domestic violence, poverty and more than a generation of instability in the country (IRIN, 2009). In 2007, Afghanistan was in its 32nd year of continuous conflict (Foxley, 2007).

In responding to this challenge, this thesis will establish the overall communication and cultural landscape in Afghanistan, the contemporary communication structure in Afghanistan and relevant concepts from the literature. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the humanitarian intervention mission in Afghanistan with the intent of arriving at a strategic communication planning framework aimed at maximizing its effectiveness. Given the lack of academic research specific to this area of study, this research has clear potential significance for the field of strategic communication planning in humanitarian intervention missions generally and in Afghanistan in particular. This thesis sets out to identify critical elements for a strategic communication planning

framework focused on the population at risk rather than on repairs to organizational reputation—the most typical approach in strategic and crisis management efforts. The study aims to contribute insights that can enhance the future communication work of international actors in humanitarian intervention missions.

I will answer the question “What essential components should inform a strategic communication plan for the Afghanistan humanitarian intervention mission?” Thus, the study aims to “give the practitioner a conceptual tool with which to guide practice” (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 113).

Why Afghanistan?

I chose Afghanistan as my focus because of my experience serving in the capital, Kabul, as a Canadian Forces’ strategic communication advisor to the government of Afghanistan in 2007-08 and again in June 2009. During this time, I observed repeated failures of the international community to communicate with Afghans in a meaningful and credible way. Although I did not have the answers, I believed that there must be a better way to communicate as the Western constructs—the dominant means of attempting to achieve goals, were not effective. As Erin (2006) pointed out, the United States government, as the dominant actor in the country, has undertaken a considerable “information intervention.” Unfortunately this initiative has not yielded the desired results of winning the hearts and minds of the Afghan people, even with a \$200 million dollar communication annual budget.

Additionally, I was witness to considerable interagency competition among the international players, a phenomenon that is substantiated by Van Gorp’s (2005) identification of “clashing social and political values” (p. 2). There were also cultural

inconsistencies in the way that players in international relationships communicated, resulting in a decreased overall effectiveness. These shortcomings—combined with competition for organizational dominance, which erodes effectiveness (Griffith, 2002)—lead to the conclusion that Westerners tend to bring cultural baggage rather than objective professionalism (Liu, Chang, Zhao, 2009).

Certainly the situation in Afghanistan calls for a better understanding of how best to employ the full spectrum of communication planning and strategy options in an environment that is complex and multilayered. It is at once a humanitarian intervention mission, a failed state, a war zone and a situation that annually experiences predictable natural and man-made disasters and crises. The situation in Afghanistan is characterized by literally hundreds of international aid and development agencies competing between themselves, with the US, and with the multinational military force under the command of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As noted by Crow (2010), “improving methods for strategic communication” (p. 215) is the pillar upon which eventual success in Afghanistan rests. Bell (2010) added that the approach must be Afghan-specific because it is difficult to arrive at general principles or best practices in strategic communication, as success relies on an appreciation of the individuality of each situation.

Humanitarian Intervention

Humanitarian crises, resulting from war and natural or manmade disasters are becoming not only more frequent but also more complex (Van Gorp, 2005). The world is faced with an increased exposure to risk and the need to apprise populations of the risks (Beck, 1986; Galloway, 2007; Pratt & Bloom, 1997). Egnell (2009) claimed that “military operations with the political aims of stability, democratization, economic

development, and respect for human rights have been the most prominent since the end of the Cold War and are likely to continue to be so in the near future” (p. 3). In 2010 an estimated 263 million people were affected by disasters. It is predicted that by 2015 climate-related disasters alone are likely to affect more than 375 million people per year. An average of 1,052 people die in a disaster in a less developed country compared to 23 in developed one (DIFID, 2011). One out of every 115 citizens is displaced by war (Weiss, 1997); and in the period between 1989-1997, the UN Security Council approved twice as many military missions as in the previous 40 years. During roughly the same period (1989-1998), the number of non-government organizations (NGOs) focusing on aid and humanitarian assistance registered with the United Nations rose from 48 to a staggering 1,500.

In response to the increasing need for humanitarian assistance—combined with military involvement to promote stability, democratization and aid (Boettcher, 2004; Egnell, 2009; Hynes, 1993; Swiss Peace, 2002)—the international community has established the integration of military and aid actors working together in international missions. This phenomenon is generally referred to as *international humanitarian intervention missions (IHIM)*, the intent of which is to relieve grave human suffering. The first IHIM was undertaken by NATO in response to the abuse of civilians during the 1995 Kosovo war (Thussu, 2000; Garrett, 1999; Van Gorp, 2005). Duffield (1994) defines humanitarian intervention missions as responses to complex emergencies, including systemic and protracted crises that are characterized by conflict (war), political insecurity and sometimes natural disasters. Kelly (1996) promotes the use of military

resources as being able to make a contribution to information distribution and reconstruction efforts.

The need for IHIM has been so firmly established that the United States Army developed a new doctrine recognizing the role of the Army in humanitarian intervention missions, incorporating military and civilian agencies working together (Himelfarb, 2009; Tyson, 2008) to seize and manage the messaging to civilians. The Army doctrine recognizes the need to respond to public perception and to create favourable impressions by manipulating messages that address the psychological motivations of the public and how they comprehend and act on information (Himelfarb, 2009).

The fundamental concept of humanitarian intervention is that there is a moral obligation to assist while maintaining neutrality (Main, 2009; Merle, 2005; Udombana, 2005). Dijkzeul and Moke (2005) found, however, that US NGO leaders were told by then President George Bush that they were considered an arm of the United States government and, as such, were expected to contribute to foreign policy objectives. In spite of the hoped-for neutrality, it seems that humanitarianism is often politically driven (Lischer, 2003). The objective of neutrality can be even further compromised as a result of humanitarian actors who have turned it into an ideology and profession that employs thousands of people. The unfortunate result is that it also creates additional risk to the mission by those who seek employment in it as an outlet for disaster tourism (Donini, 2010).

Frosh and Wolfsfeld (2007) pose a critical question, which points to the need for developing better approaches to communication to populations at risk:

What happens, however, when national crisis itself is the norm, when lack of confidence in individual and collective continuity is the context and horizon of everyday life? What happens when one's physical, legal, social and emotional situation within a nation...is felt to be chronically insecure? (p. 106)

Humanitarian intervention has its critics (Donini, 2010; Lischer, 2003; Shen, 2001; Van Gorp, 2005), who have claimed that such missions can actually amplify the conflict. At the same time the military engagement in these interventions can also be problematic because they are typically not trained for humanitarian roles but nonetheless assume that aid agencies will follow their advice (Kashdan, Morina, & Priebe, 2009). Additional challenges for the military are that, while they can be quite effective in tactical propaganda, they are “not equipped to work at the strategic or political level” (Main, 2009) and have difficulty facilitating the free flow of information with mission partners (Clarke & Dewey, 2006).

Despite these issues, it is clear that the military seek to dominate the information landscape and the strategic communication planning and implementation in humanitarian interventions generally and in Afghanistan specifically. As a consequence of the failure of the military to get it right in Afghanistan, that mission has become “an operation in search of a strategy” (Kiehl, 2003, p. 51). The absence of a coordinated information campaign is not only counter-productive but likely working at cross-purposes, resulting in the population receiving potentially different and competing messages on the same day, thus rendering the communications as useless. International aid agencies do not have the same access to resources, and they have not professionalized the communication

function; nor have they created synergies between their general activities and what communication they do produce (Cioppa, 2009).

Strategic Communication

At this juncture it is important to establish that over the last decade, primarily driven by the war in Afghanistan, the concept of strategic communication planning has expanded beyond the traditional academic model to a military one defined by Tatham (2008) as “a systematic series of sustained and coherent activities conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables understanding of targeted audiences, identifies effective conduits, and develops and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behavior” (p. 3). The United States Defense Science Board (2004) defines strategic communication as requiring “a sophisticated method that maps perceptions and influence networks, identifies policy priorities, formulates objectives, focuses on ‘doable tasks,’ develops themes and messages, employs relevant channels, leverages new strategic and tactical dynamics, and monitors success.” Dimitrui (2012) defines strategic communication from an academic perspective, where it refers (with the aim of obtaining legitimacy and support) to the consistency of strategy, activities, themes and messages. The strategic narrative—a compelling storyline that can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn—lies at the heart of a communication strategy. At the same time, it is not quite clear as Galloway (2007) concludes that crisis, risk, health communication and strategic planning are merging under one umbrella in response to the complexities of modern-day realities.

Several authors (e.g., Dimitri, 2012; Goodall, Trethewey & McDonald, 2007) agree that regardless of the content of the strategic communication plan, there is a fundamental requirement for the co-ordination of strategic communication planning among the various governments, aid and military actors. Indeed there is a need to better understand culture and audience orientation in strategic communication (Bell, 2010; Dijkzeul & Moke, 2005). This need continues to grow in importance, along with the need to substitute independent communication strategies for more cooperative ones (Winslow, 2002; McEntire, 1997). This finding is especially pertinent with the requirement for the United Nations to take the lead (DFID, 2011) and for more focus to be put on professionalized strategic planning (DFID, 2011; Loewenberg, 2006).

Despite the preference for the UN to lead the strategic communication function and their acknowledgement that this leadership is the ideal, most humanitarian actors are already ‘on the ground’ well ahead of the UN (Maiers, Reynolds & Haskelkorn, 2005). The challenge is great, as there is also no coordination among the various UN agencies on the same mission (Servaes, 2007). Nonetheless, both humanitarian and military actors have begun to acknowledge the need for, and benefits of, enhancing cooperation with respect to communication. The trouble is that neither group wants to be managed by the other (Lischer, 2003; Maiers, Reynolds & Haskelkorn, 2005; Van Gorp, 2005; Winslow, 2002).

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1 has introduced the topic of the thesis and the major research question: “What should be the essential component parts of a strategic communication plan for the Afghanistan humanitarian intervention mission?” In introducing the thesis, I have

examined definitions of humanitarian intervention, and strategic communication. I have also looked at the nature of humanitarian organizations and some of the implications and by-products of military involvement in that theatre.

Chapter 2 will establish the communication landscape in Afghanistan, as well as the cultural environment in which the military and aid actors must operate. This chapter will identify the requirements for successful communication with the Afghan population, based on historical experiences and the best available insights from those who are familiar with this situation.

The literature review in Chapter 3 will present recommendations from the strategic and crisis planning literature on ideal approaches for communicating with populations at risk.

Chapter 4 will analyze five strategic communication plans for Afghanistan. Held in the public domain, these plans were located through a web search. These plans represent a cross-section of the communication plans of the key players in Afghanistan.

Chapter 5 will present the research findings and conclusions. It will integrate what experts on the Afghan conflict suggest as ideal approaches for communicating with populations at risk with the insights of scholars in the field of strategic and crisis communication. These findings will be examined against current practices identified in Chapter 4. On that basis, I will propose recommendations for change and identify the answer to the main research question: “What essential component parts should inform a strategic communication plan for Afghanistan humanitarian intervention mission?”

Chapter Two

The Communication Landscape in Afghanistan

Hendricks (2010) claimed that strategic communication in Afghanistan has been more focused on trying to influence Afghans instead of developing a strategy that is culturally focused. This chapter provides historical and cultural contexts for the examination of communication in Afghanistan and demonstrates that understanding these cultural influences is essential to effective communication. Answering the question “What is the contemporary communication landscape in Afghanistan?” this chapter establishes the communication landscape of key stakeholder groups, specifically the Afghan population and Taliban, the international military forces, and the international development and aid community.

Afghan Population

The Afghan population is composed of 34 different tribes, with each having its own culture, language, mores and processes for communication (Saikal, 2004). Interestingly, Betz (2011) tells us that “scholars studying the country agree unanimously that Afghans do not identify themselves primarily along lines of tribal affiliation or make decisions (like whether to join the insurgency) on the basis of tribe” (p. 622). This would seem to suggest that it might be possible to create a single message with mass appeal, but Betz claimed it is “very difficult to construct a single resonant and mutually supportive message for each audience because all have their own priorities, particular historical beliefs, ideals, and strategic circumstances” (p. 615). To add a further layer of complexity, Afghans have a literacy rate of only about 15%. This deficit is aggravated by the fact that most of the population suffers from various levels of post-traumatic stress

disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety and other conditions that affect their ability to cognate, process and act on information. People in crisis are motivated to preserve their current framework of meaning-making (Corman, Trethewey, & Goodall, 2007). This means that they tend to interpret information to make it fit their constructs or beliefs, even if this means misinterpreting the information. Hendricks (2010) contends that culturally ingrained perceptions about the US or “US-influenced actions and communications” (p. 3) necessarily limit any inroads that they—and by extension, the entire international community—can make in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is an inward-looking, generally illiterate society of self-sufficient villagers who reject all social reforms introduced from the outside world (Noorzai, 2006), particularly when they have not been involved in the decision-making process. The international community has failed, in part, in Afghanistan because of its centralized, authoritarian approach (Noorzai, 2006).

All change in Afghan culture must involve the Jurga or local council (Rubin, 2002), as it acts as both an information and decision-making structure in which every adult male participates. Importantly, the Jurga is a “channel for spreading information and persuading the population” Noorzai (2004, p. 38). Noorzai identifies trade, religion and government as the three pillars that shape how mass communication functions in Afghanistan and she points out that of these three, the religious pillar is the most influential.

The nature of trust in the Middle East is based on “pre-modern” oral communication, which implies trusted centres of influence. This type of communication is dominant in mosques, bazaars and other social platforms (Wilkins, 2004). Both the

mosque and the Mullah (religious scholar) play highly influential roles in communication (Noorzai, 2006). Poetry also plays a particularly significant role; however, Ferguson (1999) cautions that while poetry is one of the most “ambiguous of verbal codes” (p. 147), this ambiguity can have a role to play when it allows communication to bridge differences.

Technologically, Afghans rely mostly on radio and cell phones. There is an extensive, locally-based, radio broadcast infrastructure that has been established by most of the key players (Americans, the UK, NATO/ISAF, UN), including the Taliban (Wilkins, 2004). Approximately half of all Afghans own a cell phone (Murphy, 2008), which is an important mode of communication, relied on by all stakeholders. After examining the impact of cell phones on how individuals see themselves in society (as purveyors or centres of information or influence, for example), Garcia-Montes, Caballero-Munoz and Perez-Alvarez (2006) concluded that this activity allows individuals to be an influencing node in a network of relationships.

Most Afghans do not own a television, let alone a personal computer nor do most Afghans have access to the Internet. Thus, they rely on cell phones and word of mouth as the primary means of communication. As Erin (2006) points out, societies in a state of post-conflict often have their media infrastructure destroyed; and this is indeed the case in Afghanistan. The Afghan government has consistently turned down offers from the international community to help democratize and develop the state-owned television station (that only broadcasts in Kabul, as there is little to no electricity in most provinces). It is clear the president’s office wanted to keep these broadcasts as its own “propaganda tool” (Williston, 2012). Spurk (2002) tells us, however, that although media

have played a destructive role in many conflicts, there are opportunities for media organizations to contribute by “providing non-partisan, balanced information and accountability through direct conflict-related programmes” (p. 1).

Jihadi and Taliban Groups

It is becoming common knowledge that the Taliban is beating NATO hands down in the information campaign. Donald Rumsfeld (former secretary of defense in the United States) acknowledged this reality in a 2006 speech to the Council on Foreign Relations, and his successor Robert Gates reiterated the point in 2008. That same year, the UK Chief of the Defense Staff reached a similar conclusion: “They’ve beaten us to the punch on numerous occasions and by doing so they’ve magnified the sense of difficulty and diminished the sense of progress. This is down in part to their skill and in part to our own failings” (Betz, 2011, p. 622).

The success of Jihadhi/Taliban communication strategies derives from their legitimating their position and activities, propagating their ideology, intimidating and scaring their opponents, adapting their messages to their target audiences, and using face-to-face communication as the preferred vehicle for reaching these audiences. They conduct disinformation operations to propagate rumors (which in turn are almost impossible to disprove), coordinate their communication with their activities, and manage the “say-do” gap so that political and information activities are combined (Corman & Scheifelbein, 2006).

Nissen (2007) points out that there are major differences in message focus between NATO’s International Security Assistance Force and the Taliban. The ISAF, as a subset of NATO, must present messaging that is politically-focused (the key focus of

communication in NATO is Alliance cohesion) and that speaks primarily to the 26 member states in a global context. The Taliban messaging, on the other hand, has only to speak to local Afghans. Furthermore, the Taliban can issue a statement in an hour or less in response to an event. In contrast, the ISAF response lags in immediacy, creating the perception that ISAF is hiding something. The Taliban understand that messaging and communicative action work in symbiosis. Additionally, most of the Imams in the southern provinces are on the Taliban payroll. This engagement ensures that the Taliban messaging makes it into the Friday sermons at the mosques, perhaps the most influential platform available.

Nissen (2007) highlights that the ISAF have an “exit strategy,” whereas the Taliban have a “staying strategy” (p. 9), which frustrates the ISAF’s attempts to win the “hearts and minds” of Afghans. It is only recently that the ISAF has acknowledged that the “information war” is equal to, if not more important than, the physical battle. Nissen points out that the Taliban are far more effective than the ISAF at leveraging religious and cultural differences. Goodall, Trethewey, and McDonald (2006) underscore how Jihadist media and strategy influence local cultural interpretations of failed US objectives.

As discussed by the International Crisis Group (2008), “communications lie at the core of the insurgents’ actions. They use “all available networks—political, social, economic and military—to convince the enemy’s political decision-makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefits” (p. 1). The Taliban’s success has also come as a result of the United States’ own actions, which have resulted in a “perceived failure to provide effective security and reconstruction” (Foxley,

2007, p. 1). This perceived failure resulted in a loss of public support. Making matters worse, the United States refocused their attention on the war in Iraq, resulting in a worsening security situation (Orwin, 2006). As a result, the Taliban were able to regain control in some areas, leading to an increase in lawlessness and the illicit drug trade. Santiso (2002) confirms that the build-up of vulnerabilities helped to propagate and aggravate the crisis.

Military Stakeholders

The military stakeholders are constituted of two dominant groups: the United States military and NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The US military has its primary focus on the southern provinces, where much of the war fighting goes on, while the ISAF (headquartered in Kabul) has a national presence in all provinces. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that the ISAF is typically commanded by an American general, thereby further entrenching American influence on the communication landscape in Afghanistan. For the first half of the war/humanitarian mission, communication was not much of a priority (Dimitrui, 2012) for either party. From 2001-2003, US communication efforts were focused on discouraging the Taliban. During the period from 2003-2006, psychological operations were used to communicate with the public to discourage them from becoming involved in the fighting. It was during this same period that Afghans were starting to believe that NATO was not respecting their cultural norms and values. In 2005, 90 national and international organizations in Afghanistan had to develop a code of conduct for NGOs operating in Afghanistan (*Peace Operations Monitor*). This initiative resulted from accusations of misused funds from the international community, funds given for reconstruction. The need for the code of

conduct further eroded Afghan confidence in the international community and reinforced Afghan perceptions of Westerners as corrupt. From 2006-2010, NATO and the United States changed their focus to strategic communication; and in 2009-2010, they allocated an annual budget of \$200 million to the ISAF communication effort. Both the US and NATO strategic communication functions attempt to work as an orchestrated whole. However, they are at times competitive; and the international humanitarian aid community has yet to be fully integrated into the planning and implementation process. Unfortunately, the introduction of strategic communication has not provided the hoped-for solution.

Overcoming these unsuccessful communication efforts has continued to pose a great challenge. It certainly did not help that the Pentagon's initial public relations campaign was focused on liberating Afghanistan from Taliban rule and Afghan women from discrimination (Louw, 2003). Further compromising the communication efforts were the civilian casualties caused by US military operations. Wilkins (2004) argues that the US approach was to combine (and most likely confuse) military and development/aid initiatives. Additionally, efforts to persuade audiences to induce or reinforce foreign attitudes such as increasing women's rights have placed a heavy reliance on psychological operations such as radio broadcasts and dropping information pamphlets from the air (Nissen, 2007). These practices have resulted in a clash of Western/Afghan symbols and served to reaffirm that the US did not understand how to communicate with Afghans on what was important to them (Betz, 2011; Crow, 2010). Hendricks (2010) makes the point that, to be successful in Afghanistan, the strategic communication process needs to have greater focus on internalizing socio-cultural norms and mores.

Betz's (2011) research on the response to the conflict in Afghanistan reveals a lack of integrated communication planning. Much of it is "stove-piped . . . uncoordinated with other efforts, producing unexploited "one-offs" which may cause more exasperation in Afghans than anything else as promises made (or intimated) fail to be kept and initiatives announced with great fanfare fail to materialize or be sustained" (p. 616).

In his analysis of psychological operations' support to strategic communications in Afghanistan, Main (2009) concludes that the (US) military is neither organized, trained or equipped to analyze, plan, coordinate and integrate the spectrum of information capabilities in the present information environment. Main goes on to say that the US military's efforts towards "more deliberate and well-developed strategic communication processes" (p. 1) has had a decreased impact since 2003.

Noting that they use communication as both a process and a weapon, Crow (2010) supports the need for increasing the understanding of strategic communication by the military. Louw (2003) discusses communication from the Taliban perspective, which employs terrorism as "propaganda of the deed" (p. 211) for effective symbolic impact. Their communication strategies have elevated the situation in Afghanistan into a battle over symbolism.

In discussing strategic communication as an element of power to shape the environment, Murphy (2008) identifies the biggest challenge in finding a way to respond to visual information such as that employed by the Taliban is that it is based on either inaccuracies or misinformation. The power of visual information is that it bypasses traditional media and has the power to mobilize the public in a previously unimaginably effective way. The strategic communication challenge becomes, in part, how to fight

propaganda without using propaganda because of its “baggage” or negative implications and misunderstanding in Western democracies.

In discussing why NATO’s efforts to introduce a comprehensive approach to the mission in Afghanistan will fail, Jakobsen (2010) places key among them the inability to effectively cooperate with international organizations and local actors. He argues that the NATO-NGO relationship is the least developed; however, the NGOs do not have the same access to resources (financial and personnel) as NATO. This lack of access results in frustrating attempts at cooperation and coordination and promotes an image of NATO riding roughshod over the NGOs.

Crow (2010) provides a comprehensive checklist that includes not only a master narrative for strategic communication in Afghanistan but also articulates the need for (a) a credible strategic communication capability, (b) an information strategy that encompasses all levels and information activities, (c) following words up with deeds, d) the use of humanitarian aid workers and civilian Afghans in delivering messages, e) a focus on generating the population’s support for the project/mission, f) the creation of Afghan ownership by using local interlocutors, and (g) decreasing the focus on promoting NATO and the US and increasing the focus on the Afghan government.

Non-Government Organizations

The third largest international stakeholder in Afghanistan (collectively) is the United Nations and the hundreds of non-government organizations, which (although not involved militarily) play a key role in development and aid but have no strategic communication function or approach to accompany their programs. By 2005 there were an estimated 2,400 NGOs operating in Afghanistan, resulting in what could best be

described as a “cacophony of voices” (Ferguson, 2002) and what Van Gorp’s (2005) research into humanitarian crises at the inter-organizational level identified as resulting in the different and often competing organizational needs among the various participating organizations. What further adds to the challenge is that these humanitarian organizations seldom welcome either extensive interaction or interdependence, which in turn often introduces an element of competition. At the end of the day, this kind of competitive mindset can undermine the attempt to provide humanitarian relief. International humanitarian missions, by their very nature, entail the creation of a multinational headquarters, which results in the organizational culture becoming a hybrid of the various partners. In such a situation, inevitably there will be a dominant player with a dominant culture (Griffith, 2002). Nonetheless, the cultural differences also translate into differences in perspectives in strategic communication aspects such as cultural misunderstandings on messaging and mediums, developing appropriate and effective communication strategies and auditing performance effectiveness, along with creating ownership.

The issue of international staff turnover (both military and civilian) has a significant impact when considering the Afghanistan communication landscape. The situation with aid workers demonstrates very high rates of turnover of up to 80% annually (Maiers, Reynolds, & Haselkorn, 2005), which all but removes any “long term strategic initiatives” (p. 87) but at the same time makes clear the value and need of coordinating activities and information. The lack of communication competencies is a significant issue in international communication (Griffith, 2002) from an operational perspective, but also in the cognitive/affective realms or the way the affected public perceives and feels about

the situation at hand. The fact is that most NGOs have not institutionalized the communication function, which results in non-communicators doing communication work. The lack of a professionalized or institutionalized communication function is the case with most NGOs, including the UN. Busek's (2008) findings substantiate this deficit in professionalism and training; the frequency with which contract staff are rotated through positions makes it difficult for them to have any real ownership of the file or any situational awareness in the country. Moreover, "specialists with a real interest in the region are often passed over" (p. 198).

Conclusion

This chapter has established the contemporary communication landscape in Afghanistan among the major players: Afghans, the Taliban, the military, and, the NGO community. Its essence is perhaps best illustrated by Sparks and colleagues (2005), who identify the key strategic communication considerations during times of terrorism as having "(1) uncertainty; (2) intense emotion; (3) disparate target audience; (4) time is of the essence; and, (5) communication of appropriate and effective strategic message is urgent" (p. 3) which (when combined) creates a new kind communication challenge. The literature demonstrated that there is very little published research on communication planning for humanitarian intervention missions. As already noted, the concept of international humanitarian intervention missions itself is barely more than 20 years old, and academic research has not yet focused on it as an area of study. At the same time, Chapter 2 provides significant guidance on the cultural requirements for strategic communication in Afghanistan.

The findings demonstrate that the problem with a Western approach to communicating in Afghanistan are many; it is conducted by Westerners through a Western cultural construct, it has a focus on self-promotion, it is not culturally sensitive, it generally employs a 20th century monologic approach with a reliance on various traditional rhetorical strategies. It does not reflect the most current research findings, it does not respond to individuals' emotional and cognitive needs, and it does not suggest how to empower their sense of control. Critically, however, the results tell us that the least credible organizations for undertaking strategic communication (in this case the military) are the dominant and often singular source for the entire country. Those who should be doing it, namely independent non-government organizations, are not doing it. Frustrating this situation is the fact that neither category of organization has a professionalized strategic communication staff.

There are a few dominant themes that have emerged from the research in answering the question "What is the communication landscape in Afghanistan"? First is the issue of the absence of a shared communication strategy and a lack of coordination within and among the different military actors and the international aid organizations. Second is the lack of governance or authority to implement a master plan, were one to exist. Third is the absence of a truly culturally sensitive approach. Fourth is the confusion of tactics over strategy, and fifth is the need to consider the importance cognitive/emotional aspects of communicating with Afghans. More specific to the situation in Afghanistan, history and those most familiar with the Afghan situation tell us that Afghanistan is an impoverished, mostly illiterate fundamentalist Islamic state. The dominant communication construct can be found in 'tradcomm' or traditional word of

mouth communication that is facilitated by the use of poetry, radio, text messaging and audio cassettes, a reliance on a combination of the authority of religious leadership, and the broad-based participatory construct of the Jurga. The latter acts as a channel of information dissemination and persuasion. Afghans typically deconstruct Western messages and reframe them so that the message fits within pre-existing frames. The government typically employs a diversion strategy during crisis.

The lack of infrastructure in Afghanistan, coupled with individual poverty, precludes the use of traditional mass media such as television and print media or the internet (2% penetration). The most reliable forms of mass communication lie within a well-established radio broadcasting infrastructure and SMS texting on cell phones (50% penetration). The Afghan coping mechanism in situations of crisis is diversion. Given the participatory decision-making culture, Afghans do not respond well to being directed what to do. It is estimated that two-thirds of the population suffer from various forms of post-traumatic stress disorder and/or mental illness.

The overall communication landscape is dominated by the United States military, who use a 20th century monologic, message influence model as their communication approach. Communication is ineffective because of a lack of cultural sensitivity, and is negatively influenced by an inability to respond with immediacy to Taliban communication. The West has been unable to engage in communication that is ‘meaning-making’ and hence has no relevance. The overall communication landscape is defined by a lack of co-ordination/co-operation, organizational competition and lack of professionalized communicators. Despite considerable investment in communication

programs and infrastructure, it is accepted that the Taliban are winning the war for hearts and minds and are beating the Americans at their own game in information operations.

The literature provides a list of approaches that are required for successful communication in Afghanistan. These include that (a) convey meaningful messages; (b) employ cultural symbols; (c) focus messages on culturally centered, 'receiver-oriented'/participatory, and based on needs; (d) deliver messages face-to-face; (e) use communication that is action- rather than rhetoric-oriented (i.e., actions that support a compelling narrative); (f) delegate authority to a group other than the military; (g) integrate plans that draw their strength from co-operative relationships among the various communication players; (j) develop response to visual information; (k) leverage cell phones and poetry, and (l) use cultural drivers.

In sum, Chapter 2 has established the need for a strategic communication planning reset for the Afghanistan international humanitarian intervention mission through the development of a new approach and it offers direction for what is needed in the development of that approach. Chapter 2 has underscored the need for this thesis and the answer to the research question.

Chapter Three Literature Review

In a quest to answer the main research question “What should be the essential components of a strategic communication plan for the Afghanistan humanitarian intervention mission?” we looked in Chapter 2 at the communication environment in Afghanistan and which established the complexity of the situation in that country. Chapter 3 will present the literature review with a view to determining what the literature tells us will work in communicating with populations at risk in crisis situations. The literature review will have three main foci: perspectives on organizational legitimacy and message strategies; strategic and crisis communication planning; and cognitive-emotional considerations. These three “groupings” were established once all of the literature was collected and thereafter “grouped” according to larger themes that would bring them together for ease of reference.

Literature Review

Given the above discussion we will now turn our attention to the literature review. The review will present highlights in the literature on (1) organizational legitimacy and message strategies, (2) strategic and crisis communication planning, and (3) cognitive/emotional considerations in strategic planning. This review of expert findings should allow us to identify important considerations when designing communication aimed at populations at risk, as well as providing a foundation for later analysis. But first, I will define and identify basic differences between risk and crisis communication.

Galloway (2007) promotes the thinking that there is a need to reconfigure the “public relations landscape” so that it better reflects the scope of “risk anxieties and attempts to influence them through communication” (p. 15). The intent is to move from

promoting the interests of the risk producers to a more democratic approach to risk. He says that risk is used by society as an organizing construct to make sense of an environment of complexity, uncertainty and uncontrollability and as a consequence communication is essential if risk management is to be successful. In discussing the seeming preponderance of risk in our society (both nationally and internationally) he notes that risk communication has to not only transcend the preoccupation with corporate reputations, but also must try to alter the sense of vulnerability that people feel because risk introduces the possibility of personal danger. Consequently, publics expect to be involved in assessing the nature and level of risk and sharing in the response strategy. He defines risk communication in the following way: “Risk communication is simply about organizations . . . engaging publics about hazard and risk information with a view to influencing their attitudes to risk and, often, their behavior . . . providing the information they need to help protect themselves from danger” (p. 24).

Lachlan and Spence (2007) make a distinction between risk and crisis communication when they say that risk communication is undertaken in advance of an event, with the role being to “provide information to interested parties concerning the nature, significance, probability and possible prevention of a risk” (p. 112). Directed toward situations of personal danger, risk communication focuses on what could happen. Crisis communication, on the other hand, happens in response to an event, with the communication focused on preventing or lessening the negative outcomes that can result from the event. In the same way as risk communication, crisis communication serves an information function. It provides information on the current state of the crisis and suggests actions to be taken in situations such as war, hurricanes, floods and epidemics.

Crisis communication planning can also take the form of contingency planning for future events.

Perspectives on Organizational Legitimacy and Message Strategies

This section of the literature review will begin with perspectives on organizational legitimacy and message strategies. As we saw in Chapter 2 the legitimacy that the public give organizations is a direct reflection of how their messages are received by the public. Therefore one must understand the public perception of organizational legitimacy and what message strategies should be employed to either overcoming or enhancing that legitimacy.

Organizational Legitimacy

Organizational responses to issues and crisis management traditionally revolve around protecting “corporate reputations” (whether those of corporations, governments, international bodies, non-profit or non-governmental organizations) by seeking to establish and reinforce organizational legitimacy and reputation through traditional one-way (monologic) message models strategies, rhetoric and narrative. The implications in the research findings in Chapter 2 suggest that this approach may be outdated and that it does not respond to the requirements of communication in international humanitarian intervention missions. The following discussion will explore this idea in more depth.

Galloway (2007) proposes that public relations, as an integrative discipline, has a role to play in going beyond protecting corporate reputations to incorporating democratic approaches that empower the population at risk through a tradition of building stakeholder relations, consultation and crisis communication. He proposes that risk

communication now encompasses public relations, risk management, psychology, rhetoric, environmental and health communication.

Massey's (2001) work on corporate/organizational legitimacy draws on the work of Dutton and Dukerich (1999) and Suchman (1995) in establishing two categories of organizational legitimacy: the strategic approach and the institutional approach. The strategic approach involves the way that organizations manipulate symbols, whereas the institutional approach focuses on the cultural environment in which organizations function. The strategic approach links to organizational legitimacy, where Meyer and Scott (1983) demonstrate that legitimacy is "the degree of cultural support for an organization" (p. 201). As noted in Chapter 2, the legitimacy of international aid and military coalitions is a key determinant of both the perceived and actual success of their endeavours. Massey (2001) goes on to note that a "dialogic approach to legitimacy management requires ongoing communication between the organization and its stakeholders, not one-way transmission of information from the organization to stakeholders" (p. 155). His recommendation requires that organizations engage in dialogue with the affected public in order to create a message feedback loop which will help to ensure that the organization is aware of, and responding to, the affected publics' concerns. Hwang and Cameron (2008) call for the communication plan to develop an understanding of how publics will expect an organization to perform during a crisis, with a view to ameliorating conflicts with them in times of actual crisis.

Massey's (2001) communication strategies for managing organizational legitimacy demonstrate that "(a) consistent response strategies are more effective than inconsistent ones for legitimacy management; (b) generalist organizations are perceived

as being more legitimate than specialist organizations; and (c) both generalist and specialist organizations that produce consistent responses are perceived as being more legitimate than generalist or specialist organizations that produce inconsistent ones” (p. 168). Sethi (1977) previously referred to this disparity as the legitimacy gap. As noted by Waymer and Heath (2007), “threats to organizational legitimacy occur when perceived responsibility and response are not congruent” (p. 92). An important component of the legitimacy gap is to understand the needs and interests of the organizations’ and mission’s stakeholders and getting the messaging right.

Taylor and Kent (2007) looked at organizations involved in long, chronic crises. Based on these studies, they recommend creating different web pages for different stakeholders. They observe that traditional public relations approaches continue to rely on practices such as issuing press releases; however, these approaches are ineffective when dealing with multiple stakeholders. Ferguson (1999) earlier underscored that the greater the number of stakeholders, the greater the complexity in managing the issue.

Stephens and colleagues (2005) discuss Ray’s (1999) definition of a stakeholder as “any group or public affected by the organization’s operation” where stakeholders can be “any person, group or organization that can affect an organization’s performance or attainment of its goals” (p. 393). Stephens and his team further elaborate upon this definition, developing the idea of normative publics (those who have an affiliation with the organization) and diffused publics (those who normally have an indirect link). They argue, however, that that the definition should also encompass the idea of stakeholder salience. In this discussion, I will draw upon the more inclusive definition developed by Stephens and colleagues. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the issue of stakeholder

saliency requires an understanding of message development if we are to ensure message relevance.

Servaes (2007) explores the chronic difficulties that international organizations, including the UN, have in developing common approaches and communication strategies, even though they all recognize the importance and potential of such coordinated approaches. Where such strategies do exist, they tend to focus on promoting the particular project and asking the public to support their efforts rather than to center on being truly strategic.

Servaes (2007) defines communication strategies as the verbal and nonverbal responses by an organization to a crisis and, in that vein, recommends a more targeted utilization of the organization's website in protracted crises to speak to different stakeholders. He also recommends that when it comes to whether or not the receiver will adopt the proposed change, interpersonal communication is the most influential medium. Servaes argues that radio and television (which use a one-way diffusion model of communication) have little impact on behavioural change: "More is learned from interpersonal contacts than from mass communication techniques" (p. 488). The interpersonal or participatory model, however, is based on the important role that cultural identity and democratization play when issues of living conditions are discussed and debated in local settings.

For Western organizations accustomed to the diffusion model, the participatory model threatens existing hierarchies within those organizations (Servaes, 2007). Furthermore, communication focused on creating behavioural change by using mass communication and/or advocacy communication is not successful in creating sustainable

development. Interpersonal communication, accompanied by communication for structural and social change, is better suited to long-term, sustainable, community change.

Additional recommendations that would support and enhance the influence of interpersonal communication is to “feed” it by using social marketing techniques that inform, motivate, and sustain active involvement through the use of multiple channels. Other means of engagement include educational efforts aimed at stimulating discussion. Examples of such educational efforts would be producing television programming that informs while it entertains. These efforts recognize that communication is a process rather than a product, which can include formal and informal and direct or indirect communication. Servaes (2007) concludes that neither theory nor strategy has been able to produce explanatory dominance; however, he concludes with the following practical inferences: (1) communication is a process of interaction in a social network that involves the reception, evaluation and use of messages; (2) communication is a mixed system of mass communication and interpersonal channels, mutually reinforcing and impacting one another; and (3) inter-sectoral and inter-agency issues of integration and coordination can impede success. Hwang and Cameron (2008) pick up on this last point, concluding that the heads of the various agencies will have different expectations and public positions, which can compromise attempts to introduce integration.

Message Development Approaches

Lachlan and Spence (2007) note that the effectiveness of messages relies on the recognition (among other things) of the public’s need for control. Otherwise, one runs the risk of amplifying levels of fear, creating an inability to respond appropriately,

aggravating feelings of hopelessness and ultimately countering the intended effect. These scholars take the position that previous communication models such as Reynolds and Seeger's (1995) *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communications Model (CERC)* and Coombs and Holladay's (2002) situational crisis communication theory were based primarily on fear, whereas the risk/hazard/outrage model developed by Lachlan and Spence allows for accommodating cultural and demographic considerations so that different messages can be developed for diverse audiences. The latter model also takes into consideration the role of public emotions of hazard, fear, and alarm, as well as perception of magnitude and probability of risk in message development. They conclude that situations of either natural or human-induced disasters call for intersections in the planning of crisis communication and risk communication, the combination of which can increase the public's perception of how they see and understand the level of personal hazard and the level of "outrage" that the hazard engenders in them. The key factor in organizational response is the legitimacy accorded by the population at risk and the various stakeholders to the organization.

Contrary to the one-size-fits-all approach, identified in military communication planning (as seen in Chapter 2), Stephens, Malone, and Bailey (2005) find that different crisis-message strategies are required to communicate to different stakeholders. This idea is further underscored when one considers that the purpose of communication during crisis is to reduce uncertainty "around questions of cause, blame, response, public perception, resolution and consequences" (p. 393). These qualities will determine the various stakeholders at the time, and stakeholders will vary throughout the life of the issue; this concept has been labeled *stakeholder salience*. And according to Mitchel, Agle

and Wood (1997), the relative importance of stakeholders can vary from day to day. In turn, these changes can complicate an organization's ability to respond to the new stakeholder(s).

Penrose (2000) finds that managing communication is an exercise in managing meaning, and the "practitioner must realize the importance of a balanced perception throughout the crisis life-cycle" (p. 168). Wilson (2007) explores the contribution of Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which describes how arguments are formed and shaped. Wilson concludes that the acceptability of the message and whether it leads to long-term attitude change is dependent upon the source. The ELM breaks down motivation and the ability to process information into two streams: those that rely on (1) peripheral cues and simple decision rules or (2) central processing, where the receiver focuses on message quality and scrutinizes the arguments. The latter results in enduring action that is resistant to change over time, whereas the former is temporary and easily susceptible to change. In fact, according to this theory, the audience focuses more on the message when the source is unknown. In this case, the likeability of the source has less bearing on credibility.

Corman & Dooley (2008) promote the need to develop a new approach for message development, as a search for the right message is now (in their view) outdated, much as is the thinking that communicators can control delivery of messages. They recommend that control is impossible, trying to resist complexity is futile, and communicators should instead focus their efforts on experimentation and random variation in message development, with the expectation that failure is the norm. Following this course of action could ultimately lead to success. In revisiting the role of

the apology as the overall panacea to crisis management, Coombs and Holladay (2008) found that it is in fact not the best strategy. Their study found that respondents are equally likely to respond to sympathy or compensation as to apology-based strategies.

Inhlen's (2005) work underscores the superiority of "visual rhetoric" over verbal rhetoric. Inhlen explores the power of visual rhetoric in the creation of receiver emotions. He looks in particular at emotions generated by media images of terrorist attacks—attacks typically undertaken as a form of a communicative action (Habermas, 1984). In this context, communicative action on the part of the terrorists involves taking steps designed to spread fear, communicate discontent, garner media attention, and influence the dominant power brokers. These ideas have particular salience for humanitarian intervention communication strategies and responses.

Inhlen (2005) also defines communication as being more than a transfer of message. Instead, he says that communication is a "process whereby actors are participants that share a message and negotiate its meaning" (p. 4); and the most powerful medium for negotiating this meaning is visual rhetoric. The significance of visual rhetoric is founded in its ability to contribute to (1) attention, (2) *evidentia* (how it gives realism, presence, immediacy, impact), and (3) co-creation (allowing the audience to draw immediate conclusions, responses and meaning). Taking, for example, the 9/11 attacks, Inhlen notes that the "attack itself had the important rhetorical functions to create attention, present *evidentia* and induce processes of co-creation" (p. 16). Visual rhetoric thus has tremendous symbolic (especially in a cultural context) value in creating "extra meaning" that would be extremely difficult to generate through either verbal or print communications.

Corman, Trethewey and Goodall (2007) pose what could be a foundational question for the development of a strategic communication approach to humanitarian intervention missions: “The question is not ‘how can we construct a more persuasive message?’” Rather it is ‘What kind of reality has this particular system (that we are trying to influence) constructed for itself?’” (p. 2). The premise of their research is that choice of message influence strategies developed in the West, as the dominant approach in public affairs, public diplomacy, information operations and media strategy have failed, particularly in the “war on terror.” As a result, communication that continues to use this American approach will fail because it does not respond to the “complexities of communication as a meaning-making process” (Corman, et al., p. 7). They posit that meaning cannot be transferred from one person to another in different cultures because listeners interpret the message through their own cultural, religious, and personal filters, using frames and symbols that fit with these perspectives. In essence, it means that the sender and receiver are not in interpretive alignment. This lack of alignment is further complicated by the fact that once a social reality exists, it seeks to sustain itself, even in the face of contradictory evidence. As a consequence, receivers of communication interpret messages in a way that fits with their existing reality, with the result that no message has its intended effect. This research supports the ideas related to social reality, which were discussed in Chapter 2.

Corman and colleagues (2007) recommend that, with strategic communication, less is more because a message has the potential to create not only understanding but also misunderstanding. They challenge traditional approaches such as the Message Influence Model. In this model “the message is to influence the receiver to understand the

information in the same way as the source, if not persuade him or her to change their attitudes or act in a particular way” (p. 2). They recommend developing an understanding of the dynamics at work and then using communication to perturb the established framework, so that the population begins to organize around new meaning-making frameworks. They conclude that the reason for doing so is that there is no passive audience sitting “out there,” waiting to be influenced; the complexity arises because the sender and receiver make attributions of the message based on each party’s thoughts, motivations and intentions behind the communication. Acceptance of this idea then means that they are “locked in a relationship of simultaneous, mutual interdependence” (Corman, et al. p. 10). They call this approach the *Pragmatic Complexity Model (PCOM)*. It is based on the premise that one must challenge and upset the communication framework in order to create a new framework that is receptive to the new communication.

In summary, the PCOM communication concept is based on interpretation and attribution of the actions of both “sides”; it is constrained by the double contingency of interdependence. Its principles are that control is impossible, less is more, there is a need to perturb stable system structures, and the expectation should be failure. The end goals of PCOM are (1) to de-emphasize control and embrace complexity, (2) replace repetition with variation, (3) consider disruptive moves, and, (4) expect and plan for failure. The ultimate conclusion is that “communicators are locked in simultaneous, mutual interdependence that reduces the value of grand strategy and makes failure the most likely outcome” (p. 15). This theory is provocative in light of the fact that narratives and

key messages, designed to achieve specific positive outcomes, have traditionally formed the basis of strategies.

Symbolic convergence theory postulates that by attending to messages and discussing the ideas, people in crisis situations tend to build a symbolic reality that furnishes meaning, emotion, and motives for action (Bormann, 1985). This symbolic reality reflects how the people in crisis make sense of the situation and cope with it; the implications for communication planners is to seek to identify and understand that reality in order to accommodate it in their strategies. This is further expanded upon where through their interaction the members of various groups (publics) create shared social realities that serve as fantasy themes and rhetorical visions (Cragan & Shields, 1992).

Summary

This section of the literature review has explored the research on traditional organizational responses to issues and crisis, which typically involve organizational legitimacy and message strategies. This review tells us that organizational legitimacy is still one of the most critical factors in communication during issues and crisis. It calls for a dialogic-based approach focused on creating two-way communication with affected stakeholders, rather than the more traditional one-way message approach. It also requires an accommodation of emotional and psychological factors that manifest in the receiver. This literature suggests that legitimacy can be advanced by understanding the strategic versus the institutional environment, in concert with using symbols and visual rhetoric.

The literature is clear on the point that message strategies must similarly evolve to meet the public's need for control and to develop a thorough understanding of the various stakeholders. In order to ensure salience, communicators must adjust messaging for each

stakeholder to ensure the messaging addresses the emotional considerations of the affected population. Furthermore, current approaches suggest that communication and messaging should be more about creating and managing meaning—or what is called *meaning-making*—the most powerful approach, which suggests the need to put greater emphasis on visual as opposed to verbal rhetoric when communicating in foreign cultures such as Afghanistan. Taking these points into consideration when designing messages may lessen the risk of misunderstanding the intent of the communicator.

Strategic and Crisis Communication Planning

This section of the literature review will cover both strategic and crisis communication models, as the complexity of modern day issues blurs the lines of distinction between the two. The discussion will also explore the idea of integrated planning, which requires incorporating theoretical components into strategic planning.

Pauchant and Mitroff (1992) established that every disaster (whether human-made or natural) has its own threats and communication planning requirements. Regardless of the specifics of the situation, the anticipation of a crisis commonly requires plans that include warnings, risk messages, evacuation notifications, and messages regarding self-efficacy and action.

In developing a crisis-engagement strategy for South Africa, Pratt and Bloom (1997) introduced a strategically managed Integrated Communication Campaign (ICC), which encompassed a traditional corporate-based marketing communications mix of advertising, public relations, sales, promotions and direct marketing. They characterized this combination as an emerging strategy intended to bring a coherent structure to the “creative use of a variety of communication activities” (p. 315) and as a way to promote

attitude change and behaviour modification that brings about social change. They identified five normative implications, which include the need for issues management, a crisis communication plan, a crisis-management centre, a company representative/spokesperson and external consultancies.

Williams and Olaniran (1998) call for traditional image repair strategies of denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, correcting action, and mortification. They expanded crisis planning from guidelines and procedures to a more theoretically-based construct based on a compilation of the work of Benoit (1997), Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1996), Grunig (1992), and Heath and Abel (1996). Williams and Olaniran (1998) also reinforce the need for crisis diagnosis and checklists that are theory-based. They call for a merging of the situational theory of publics, issues management, and two-way symmetrical communication that can together be used to create a crisis life-cycle, accompanied by a matrix of response strategies. Williams and Olaniran rely on Heath and Abel's (1996) concept of risk as a situation whereby "the public evaluates an activity or technology as more risky if it is involuntary, unknown, uncontrollable, controlled by others, unfair, memorable, dreaded, acute, focused in time and space, fatal, delayed, artificial, and undetectable as well as if individual mitigation is impossible" (p. 392). They conclude by saying that "culture, values, attributions or responsibility, and self-interests employed in risk interpretations may be more important than technical data" (p. 393).

Heath's (1998) *Crisis Management Shell Structure* is a process-driven management application to managing a crisis, with attention paid to ensuring the successful implementation of strategy. He details the requirements for an effective

management structure during crisis that consists of (1) a simplified structure; (2) flat management that reduces loss of time in giving information and commands; (3) centralized decision making; (4) the ability to delegate task management and associated decision making; (5) a focus on coordination more than command; (6) a dedicated ability to collect, evaluate and distribute information; and (7) ability to communicate effectively among groups inside and outside of the crisis situation. An effective management structure also allows for integrating the coordination of multiple crisis situations and locations, “providing advice on crisis issues and on how the crisis response is perceived by those outside the crisis situation” (pp. 149-150) based on task function. Heath’s approach makes it clear why a hierarchical military bureaucracy should not lead the strategic communication function.

One of the pioneers of holistic strategic communication planning was Ferguson (1999), who introduced the concept of integrated strategic communication planning and emphasized the importance of a research-based approach to strategic issues management. She also placed a strong focus on cooperative strategies that engage stakeholders who operate both within and outside the organization. Drawing upon a bank of extensive experience with the Canadian government, Ferguson identified the importance of creating an annual or multi-year strategic communication plan, which then becomes the basis for all subsequent planning efforts (with the exception of crisis communication planning). Operational plans flow from—and link back to—the annual or multi-year strategic plan for communication. These plans bring the annual plan to life by suggesting implementation strategies. The support plans, in turn, flow from the operational planning

process. The support plans explain how the organization will deal, on strategic and tactical levels, with individual issues and activities that appear in the operational plans.

According to Ferguson (1999), the annual or multi-year strategic plan includes (1) a background statement, (2) broad organizational or corporate objectives, (3) policy issues, and (4) the external environment and internal environments that can influence the ability of the organization to achieve its corporate objectives, (5) windows of opportunity, (6) communication objectives, (7) themes and messages, (8) communication priorities, and (9) strategic considerations. The partnerships and measurement components incorporate the following elements: (1) identifying the need for external consultation, (2) establishing the partnership and negotiation requirements with outside organizations, (3) creating performance indicators, and (4) determining the necessary financial resources.

Within this annual or multi-year strategic planning process, Ferguson (1999) underscores the importance of identifying who shares responsibility for managing the issue, identifying its characteristics, and helping the public to reach social judgment on the issue. With regard to her discussion of planning cooperative strategies, Ferguson highlights the need to partner, consult and negotiate with other key players in order to ensure success for all parties and that their respective plans do not conflict.

Ferguson (1999) also tells us that support plans are more specific in nature, including a background statement on a specific issue or planned activity, functional objectives, the positive and negative factors in the opinion environment related to the issue or activity, communication objectives, messages, target audiences, strategic considerations, tactical considerations, performance indicators, consultation, negotiation and partnership requirements, evaluation methodologies and budget. At the same time,

Ferguson recognizes the need to ensure the proper management structure is in place to effect the plan.

In addition to establishing these various layers of strategic communication planning, Ferguson (1999) provides a framework for contingency plans for crises. Although they contain some of the key components of her other plans, this form of planning differs in that it does not flow from the annual or multi-year strategic plan. Nonetheless, there is an important new emphasis on strategic elements in her crisis communication plan, including (for example) key decision points, triggering events, and crisis indicators. Coombs (2007) later introduced Ferguson's idea of triggering events as part of his situational crisis communication theory model.

Critical to all planning processes is the accommodation of how communication is generated. Norris, Morgan & Myers (2001) remind us that the communication plan should take communities into account as generators, transformers and users of information. Building on this idea, Farnworth, Malik and Rasouli (2007) propose an integrated communication strategy based on the principle that a communication strategy "involves more than dissemination of a message." It is an iterative, two-way, multi-directional process involving and recognizing the needs of a range of stakeholders. The communication strategy adopts the following practical steps: assessing the communication context, identifying participating stakeholders, identifying and understanding the target audience, identifying and collaborating with intermediate organizations, pre-testing the communication strategy, monitoring and evaluating communication activities, and monitoring and evaluating the overall integrated communication strategy.

Reynolds and Seeger (2005) also developed an integrated five-stage model known as *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC)*. This model integrates communication plans for health and risk communication with contingency planning for crisis and disaster communication. The authors note that when threats become politicized, this change adds further complexity to the picture. As noted in Chapter 2, this politicization often happens in multinational efforts involving member states of NATO, the various aid agencies and their agendas, and the highly politicized UN, among others. In the merging of risk and crisis communication responses, the CERC model addresses the need to anticipate uncertainty and to specify additional communication requirements by identifying the five stages of a crisis that a plan must address. These stages include the initial perception or awareness of risk, the event itself, the clean-up phase, the recovery and the evaluation. The risk and warning messages, coupled with the crisis communication activities, can be networked throughout so that the plan is all-encompassing. They also discuss the need to address situations where the threats become politicized, with the adding of another layer of complexity to the communication planning challenge.

Seeger (2006) lists ten best practices for addressing these kinds of threats: (1) identifying appropriate process approaches and policy development; (2) pre-event planning (risk reduction and response); (3) partnering with the public (a dialogic approach); (4) listening to the public's concerns and understanding the audience (taking them into account and responding accordingly); (5) responding with honesty, candor and openness (to foster credibility, albeit difficult to achieve in high-uncertainty crises); (6) collaborating and coordinating with credible resources (to increase credibility); (7)

meeting the needs of the media and remaining accessible; (8) communicating with compassion, concern and empathy; (9) accepting uncertainty and ambiguity; and (10) incorporating messages of self-efficacy (harm reduction and empowerment). His conclusion is that if any one of the best practices is not followed, implementing the others will be difficult. He also says that a generalized set of standards must acknowledge that every situation is different, and each has its own way of unfolding and evolving in typically unexpected ways.

Cormen and Scheffelbein (2006), in studying militant jihadist communication strategy, recommend six approaches to deconstructing their campaign. They define a communication strategy as “a plan that leads to a goal, and is distinct from tactics, which have to do with using resources to execute plans” (p. 2). Their six recommendations are based on delegitimizing jihadist rhetoric by (1) adopting a long term strategy to improve the West’s credibility, (2) degrading the jihadist’s ability to execute their communication strategy, (3) highlighting those jihadi actions that contradict Islam, (4) deconstructing their version of history, (5) increasing the number of new media campaigns, and (6) nurturing relationships with American Muslim diasporas.

Goodall, Trethewey and McDonald (2006) call for recognizing and embracing ambiguity in strategic communication. This recommendation comes from their assessment of the US’ reliance on a failed, outdated one-way model of influence, along with an inability to respond to jihadi media and message strategy. They call for “ambiguous but mindful” (p. 1) communication during uncertain times such as war and crisis, articulated in a coordinated strategic communication plan that appears within the context of a long-term strategy. The strategy should be based on “strategic ambiguity,”

which rests between monologic control and dialogic empowerment models and recognizes both the dialogic and symbolic value of language, coupled with multicultural influences on the interpretation of meaning. They propose five guidelines for strategic communication policy: (1) practice strategic engagement rather than salesmanship; (2) do not employ the same messages and spokespersons in the same communication channels and expect different results; (3) do not try to control the meaning of a message in a foreign culture; (4) understand that message clarity and meaning is not a function of the right words, but a function of relationships; and (5) seek “unified diversity” based on cooperation instead of focusing on “wrongness.”

Frosh and Wolfsfeld (2006) consider the situation where a nation in crisis begins to consider the protracted crisis as the norm. They propose that the “conspicuous display of seemingly autonomous, grassroots social affinities, independent of state initiative and control, is of paramount importance” (p. 107). The intent of this approach is to demonstrate the everyday resilience of the populace and position that resilience as part of a national value or identity and a “myth of national character” (p. 107). They promote the importance of creating and reinforcing the concept of community as a way of helping people cope with protracted crises such as war and suicide bombings, the latter of which are often targeted at public spaces rather than government institutions.

In discussing successful strategic communication approaches, Mozammel and Odugbemi (2005) highlight the importance of seeking the perspectives and input of the population at risk. In this way, communicators can more easily manage public expectations and create ownership of the program within the target population. At the same time, Mozammel and Odugbemi identify several strategic challenges, including the

lack of local information, an absence of trust in the process, the need for consultation and overall poor communication. Among their key recommendations for successful strategic communication are that it should be planned and long-term instead of (as is so often the case) ad-hoc and/or reactive. They also recommend promoting ownership of the aid program through open and inclusive national dialogue.

Summary

In reviewing the strategic and crisis communication planning literature, this section of the chapter highlighted some key research pertaining to the need for consultation, dialogic relationships, diagnosis and understanding of the issue, and the formulation of integrated plans. Although advancing organizational legitimacy remains important in these considerations, it should no longer be based solely on the traditional one-way message approach. Rather the acquisition of credibility requires both a coordinated strategic communication plan, along with a long-term strategy to address the issue or crisis. This section has also provided valuable ideas for planning templates, as well as insight into theoretical considerations in populating such a template.

Given the general recognition that dialogue is extremely important, we must expand our thinking with regard to the role that communities and individuals can play in devising message strategies. We must move beyond the focus on these groups and individuals as consumers of information to consider them also as generators and transformers of communication.

Cognitive-Emotional Considerations

To this point in the thesis, the literature review has introduced but not fully explored the need to respond to emotional and cognitive considerations in developing

strategic plans for communicating with populations at risk during crisis. For example, Chapter 2 described the impact of war on Afghans, who consequently suffer post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychological issues after living through over a quarter century of war, terrorism and revolution. However, the chapter did not explore potential solutions to this phenomenon. In response, the literature review will now embark on a survey of cognitive and emotional considerations in strategic communication planning.

Berger (1987) determined that an individual's perceived level of control of a situation affects his or her level of uncertainty; and Heath, Bradshaw and Lee (2002) discovered that cognitive uncertainty in times of crisis is high, creating the potential for panic. At the same time, people are very attentive to any information that helps reduce uncertainty (Driskill & Goldstein, 1986). If people feel a tolerable level of control, they are more likely to respond to directive communication (e.g., self-efficacy instructions), designed to give them instruction on how to respond.

Although not part of the traditional communication planning literature, Lazarus (1991) developed an inventory of emotions felt during upheavals such as disasters and crisis (e.g., anger, fright, anxiety, shame and sadness). According to Lazarus, anger results from the perception of an offence against "me" or "mine," and it manifests most strongly when an individual's well-being is threatened. The organization becomes the object of blame when the public perceives that it has lost control over the situation. Fright occurs when the public does not understand how to cope with their loss or does not know how the organization will solve the situation. This uncertainty magnifies the perception that a threat exists. Anxiety is a core theme that can stem from facing an immediate, concrete, and overwhelming danger; the reaction to this anxiety may be avoidance and

escape (withdrawal); fright and anxiety tend to overlap. Sadness results from a sense of irrevocable loss, where survival is threatened and people are in a desperate need for relief and comfort. Sadness also results when we experience a threat to or loss of—esteem, ideals, well-being and important values.

While much of the communication literature on crisis and strategic communication planning (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 1999; Coombs, 2006; Coombs, 2007; Malone & Bailey, 2005; Rousseau, 2005), ignores the importance of addressing emotional and cognitive elements. Ferguson (1999) introduced the importance of the affective aspects of strategic planning as a consideration in integrated communication planning. She dedicated entire chapters in her textbook to the psychology of audiences (beliefs, attitudes, values and needs) and amplified the role of perception, cognition and information acquisition in message design. She concluded by applying theories of persuasion. These psychological considerations lay fairly dormant in the field of strategic communication planning literature until recently; but as the following discussion will confirm, they are now very much in vogue, with considerable attention being paid to understanding their role in these planning processes.

Using Sandman's (2003) conclusion that communicators should try to produce a level of outrage that corresponds to the level of risk, we can see that risk messages should address both outrage and hazard in order to yield the desired results. Hazard is the technical assessment of a risk (Sandman, 2003), while outrage is the cultural assessment or the perceived cultural seriousness of risk. Outrage can encompass both the conative (behavioural) and the emotional aspects, such as the need for control, trust and responsiveness.

Lachlan and Spence (2007) developed an instrument to measure hazard and outrage in the local population following the Hurricane Katrina crisis in New Orleans. Their findings from the study of the New Orleans population concluded that information circulated during a major natural disaster should address both the nature of the threat and the degree of risk involved. In this way, the communications can both alert and reassure the affected publics.

Similarly, Jin and Cameron (2004) suggest three primary roles that emotion plays in public relations: (1) it is a marker or indicator of the effectiveness of the campaign's persuasiveness; (2) it is a moderator of impact on the public's attitude toward the organization; and (3) finally, it is a key factor in organizational decision-making on how to handle the crisis. Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2006) thereafter called for research into the role of public emotions in perceptions of organizational competence.

Jin, Pang and Cameron (2007) argue for an emotion-based approach that responds to how an audience experiences, feels and evaluates the situation. If, at their core, communication strategies are meant to be influence strategies, then these considerations take on an increased salience. Jin and colleagues call for developing responses that are emotion-based and that focus on the perspective of the affected public. Yeomans (2007) goes so far as to say that the need to manage emotions is an imperative skill for public relations practitioners in crisis situations. This has been further developed in the work of Jin (2010), who highlights the need to consider the interplay between emotions and risk perception.

Jin, Pang and Cameron's (2007) Integrated Crisis Mapping was developed in response to the need for crisis communication strategies to manage key stakeholders and

mitigate unfounded anxieties. They suggest that primary publics are most affected by the crisis, have shared common interests and destiny in the crisis resolution, and have long-term interests in—and influence on—the organization’s reputation and operation. Using Lazarus’ inventory, Jin and colleagues developed a crisis matrix to map and coordinate the appropriate communication strategy with respect to the dominant emotions that they would evoke and to overlay on them the nature of the crisis most likely to elicit the emotional responses. (See Figure 3.1 below.)

On the X axis is the coping strategy, ranging from conative to cognitive coping. On the Y axis is the required level of organizational involvement, from high to low. Each quadrant contains crisis types, based on three criteria: (1) internal-external, (2) personal-public, and (3) unnatural-natural. Each quadrant also contains the dominant emotion, based on the confluence of the above factors.

Using this matrix allows the communication strategist to focus on the spectrum of the public’s conative (behavioural) and cognitive coping strategies in various situations and to plan strategies to address their emotional circumstances. More specifically, this matrix may help in framing an issue or crisis. Entman (1993) defines frame as involving the selection of “some aspects of a perceived reality [in order to] make them more salient in a communicating text” (p. 52), to help define a problem, to facilitate interpretation, to reach moral judgment and to identify how to proceed.

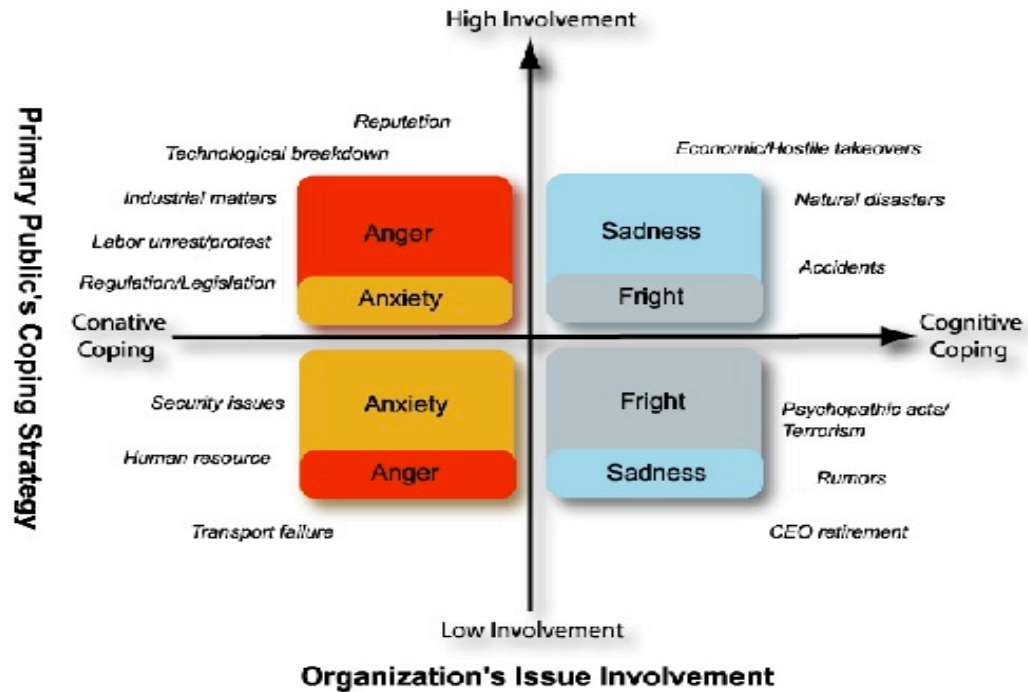


Figure 3.1 Crisis Matrix Map, Jin et al. 2007

Jin's (2009) research into the emotional responses of the population at risk calls for communication strategies to factor in the public's emotional responses because the way a situation is interpreted is based on individual perception. His research relied heavily on Lazarus (1991) but identified four emotional responses (anger, fright, anxiety and sadness) as being dominant for organizational understanding. He considered how these emotions impact both the public's coping strategy, as well as the acceptance of the organizational strategy. Specifically, he found that anxiety was the default emotion in all situations and that it is possible to categorize or segment audiences by their emotional response. For example, he proposes that when a situation is perceived as predictable but beyond control, sadness dominates. If the situation is perceived as unpredictable and beyond control, the emotion of fright is foremost. However, when the situation is perceived as both controllable and predictable, anger is the over-arching emotion. Jin

concludes that communicators play the role of facilitators for publics. Integral to this communication approach is developing an understanding of the public's emotional responses, needs and preferred coping strategies; these in turn should drive the development of communication plans.

Jin (2010) informs us that “sustained conflicts or crises can create anger, fear, and sadness” (p. 525), and he concludes that publics engage in a variety of coping strategies to “make sense of the crisis, emotionally comfort themselves, adjust their way of thinking to reduce the stress, or simply detach themselves from the stressful situation” (p. 545). As a result of these emotions and coping mechanisms, the population often draws conclusions about the situation that are likely to be different than intended. Jin goes on to recommend that organizations develop plans and strategies that close the gap between the organization and the affected public. Completion of this task requires understanding “publics’ emotional needs and coping strategy preferences” (p. 548) in order to increase the legitimacy of strategies and to respond effectively. In their study of attribution theory, Coombs and Holladay (2005) sought to understand public response to strategies. In the process, they identified sympathy, anger and *schadenfreude* (getting joy from the misfortune of others) as important emotions in developing communication planning and activities.

Beyond meeting the immediate needs of victims, the focus of much effort in humanitarian intervention missions is on “winning their hearts and minds” which has traditionally been understood to have the victims support the organization(s) involved. Lukaszewski (1999) puts forward a detailed approach to accomplishing this goal. He identifies the seven critical dimensions of crisis management as operations, victims,

trust/credibility, behaviour, professional expectations, ethics and lessons learned. He provides insight into the victim dimension, suggesting that their perception and behaviour is predictable. Moreover, he says that victims control the decision on when and for how long they will play this role. He identifies three cycles through which victims move, and he suggests the communication needs to be met at each stage. In summary, these are as follows. Cycle I (recognition of victims) calls for communication that expresses regret, shows involvement, shares information and recognizes suffering. Cycle II (seeking retribution) involves an information strategy that validates suffering, displays honesty, apologizes, communicates in a direct fashion, cites reasons for the crisis, shows compassion and allows closure to occur on the part of victims. Cycle III (severely distorted recollection) occurs when those affected need ongoing support that is beyond the normal organizational communication response.

In addition to identifying the three cycles, Lukaszewski (1999) discusses the need for seven key responses that involve trust-building and fear-reducing communication activities for organizations. These responses include providing advance information, asking for input, listening carefully, demonstrating your understanding by changing plans, staying in touch, speaking in plain language, and bringing victims into the decision-making process. He also offers six approaches for building credibility, which include being prepared to talk openly, to reveal information that goes beyond what is being asked for, to explain problems and changes quickly, to answer all questions (even the ones that are not asked), to cooperate with the media, and to respect and seek to work with the victims.

Summary

The above discussion suggests the need to include cognitive and emotional considerations in communication strategies. We are told that emotions are the filter through which all communication is processed, and the need to learn how to manage or respond to those emotions is critical. The key emotions that affect the ability to process and respond to information are anxiety, anger, sadness and fear. The emotions are a key factor in determining organizational response on how to handle an issue or crisis because, ultimately, victims determine when and for how long they will remain victims. The challenge is how best to close the gap between how the organization understands the situation and how the affected publics understand it. The cost of not doing so, as we have seen in the situation overview in Afghanistan in Chapter 2 is that if the plans do not respond to the emotional state of the key audience then the plans' effectiveness will be compromised, if not lost altogether and/or misunderstood.

Given the increasing emphasis on the trust-building and fear-reducing requirements in communication planning, the above research leads to the final section of this chapter, which includes exploration of the role of the media as generators of public emotion.

Media as Generators of Public Emotion

The media have always played a significant role in issues and crises, both from the perspective of their own corporate agenda and as a component of organizational response in communication planning. The media's motivation in covering crises is typically a balance between wanting to drive their own agenda of increasing viewership and ad revenues and incorporating a human interest component, along with providing information. In the past, the media relations function within organizations typically

involved interfacing with traditional journalists and media such as radio, television and newspapers; however, the very definition of media comes under question as a result of advances in 21st information technology. The literature review will now explore the media dimension in communication planning.

Benoit (1997) concluded that “perceptions are more important than reality,” firstly among journalists and thereafter the public. Spruk (2002) subsequently underscored the destructive role that media have played in many conflict situations when they have sensationalized the issue, appealing to Western audiences “at home” rather than taking the opportunity to make a productive contribution to the affected publics. Frosh and Wolfsfeld (2007) discuss protracted political and military crises, from which the media benefit by creating “grassroots social affinities” (p.107) and a “mediated civil nationhood” (p. 107). This evolution in the role of the media must now be factored into strategic planning, particularly given its significant influence on populations at risk. Stromback and Nord (2006) pursued this thinking in their discussion of the power and influence that media exercise through framing crises in particular ways.

Lowrey (2004) finds that, during severe social disruptions, there is an unusually high need for sense-making by those affected; and he recommends the employment of *Micro-Media Systems Dependency Theory* to meet that need. The basic assumption of this theory is that message effects will be significantly magnified in situations where people perceive themselves as being at increased risk. In these cases, the greater the threat, the greater the dependency on media and the greater the message influence will be, particularly among younger populations. He found that although there is still a significant role for interpersonal communication, reliance is greater on mass media for the young.

Given this focus, it is worth exploring the impact of the crisis on the journalist covering it and the influence of media coverage on the affected publics.

Riegert and Olsson (2007) identified the psychological impacts of crisis and disaster on journalists, who act as mediators between the public and the situation, as well as broadcasters of their own emotional responses. In addition to the informational aspects, they interpret the story, both from their own perspective and from the perspectives of the victims and viewers. This interpretation results in the creation of an emotional bond with the viewer and establishes an increased level of trust, superseding anything that the organization managing the situation could hope to replicate. We saw this phenomenon clearly with the coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the 9/11 terrorist attack on New York City in 2001, with journalists crying before live cameras (personal observation).

Riegert and Olsson (2007) go on to note that, in interviews, journalists define themselves as filling not just an information function, but also a psychological function. Journalists see themselves as providing comfort and “working through” the crisis with viewers, simultaneously fulfilling the role of “psychologist, comforter and co-mourner” (p. 155). Since the intent is to create a bond and empathy with the viewer; they “aspire to fulfill emotional needs, by providing understanding and taking part in the collective grieving process” (p. 154).

Much of the research has focused on traditional mass media outlets such as television, radio and newspapers; however, social media is now in the forefront of our consciousness, and we must also consider the role of this new technology and its capabilities. Gowling (2009) provides discussion of the influence that “information

doers” (members of the public who blog, text, tweet, post, video and photograph online) have had on disrupting traditional communication power structures and influencing the extent to which corporate, government and organizational attitudes remain in denial about their negative impact. Not only is the impact often negative on these institutions, but the volume and immediacy of online posts is both overwhelming and more effective than organizational responses. As a result, the challenge to the organization is to respond first, but how fast can or should they be in their responses and how flawed will this immediacy make their initial posts?

Gowling (2009) proposes that organizations need to respond first, to be consistently fast, and to tolerate and bear the risk of their communications being flawed or imperfect, much as the media operate. The challenge for organizations and governments is the need to strike a balance in the first, fast, and flawed approach to communication response, which Gowling calls the *F3 Model*. His concept of the information doer, on the other hand, is that his or her ability to communicate represents a completely democratic phenomenon, unrestrained by approval processes and politics. As such, the information doer “shed[s] light where it is often officially assumed that there will be darkness” (p. 9) which means that it is no longer possible to keep issues quiet that were previously understood to be able to be kept out of the public eye . Information doers can be farmers, villagers, university students, aid workers, soldiers, enemy combatants, diplomats or anyone wanting to provide perspectives, insight, experience or observation.

Gowling calls for an expanded definition of media that recognizes the role of information doers who have the same potential to influence crisis framing as any traditional media outlet. He identifies these information doers as a “burgeoning and

highly polemical commentariat” (p. 42). The challenge of this new reality is that once misinformation is broadcast, it can gain immediate credibility, be impossible to reverse and have disastrous consequences for the management of the situation. Although this problem is not restricted to social media, it is greatly aggravated because of the potential for instant dissemination in the new media. Earlier research by Stromback and Nord (2006) focused on the growing and insatiable demand for information—a situation in which public perception becomes more important than reality in influencing public confidence. This insatiable demand for information has removed traditional news cycles, is immune from time zones, and exists 24 hours a day. This is the new reality that communication planning must address.

Gowling (2009) concludes with a 16-point recommendation list, which recognizes the new realities of communication in the digital age, with the key ones being to overcome the fear of being wrong during initial communication, to devolve responsibility/authority for responding to those working on the ground, and to accept risk.

Summary

This final section of the chapter has presented a discussion on the traditional and new roles of the media in crisis communication. The “media” are no longer confined to national and international institutions; the public and anyone with a cell phone or computer can and does take the role of media journalist and broadcaster. This evolved situation presents a challenge, the response to which is yet undetermined. Furthermore, the question arises as to how to mitigate or support the role of traditional journalists who function as co-creators of emotion and who see themselves as emotionally bonding with viewers and filling a psychological role.

Conclusion

The literature review served two purposes. First, it examined the relevant literature with a view to identifying important considerations in designing communication aimed toward populations at risk. Second, it provides the foundation for identifying an appropriate methodology and for undertaking analysis. More specifically, this literature review has examined perspectives in three main areas: (1) organizational legitimacy and message strategies, (2) strategic and crisis communication planning, and (3) cognitive/emotional considerations in strategic planning.

We see in this chapter how significantly the requirements for communication planning have evolved over the last 20 years. The early literature recommended prescriptive approaches based on one-way communication, using apologia and rhetoric with a view to protecting institutional reputations. Later perspectives suggested that strategic communication planning must focus on those affected by the issue or crisis rather than solely on protecting and promoting organizational reputation.

The study of communication planning over the last two decades has become compartmentalized into disciplines such as strategic, risk, and crisis communication, but those lines have blurred during actual events. Given their interrelationship, there is a call to bring them all together into one comprehensive approach.

The current research trends focus on communication planning requirements that involve incorporating cultural perspectives, creating two-way dialogue with the populations of concern, and understanding the audiences' limited ability to process and act on messaging as a result of their compromised emotional and psychological state when struggling in the midst of the issue.

The literature clearly calls for an accommodation of the psychological aspects of communicating with populations at risk and those who have self-identified as victims. The required response to victims is a dialogic approach, which in turn requires a sophisticated understanding of cognitive and emotional considerations on the part of communication planners and operators.

The research has also recognized the role of the media as not only the broadcaster of information and opinion, but also as creators of emotions in the affected population. Finally, the multi-faceted role and impact of social media did not exist 20 years ago when strategic communication theories and planning first gained a foothold in the public relations literature.

Chapter 4

Analysis of Strategic Plans

The purpose of this study is to establish “What essential components should inform a strategic communication plan for the Afghanistan humanitarian intervention mission?” The communication landscape in Afghanistan was established in Chapter 2, with a focus on historical and cultural contexts, key stakeholders, and strategic challenges in communicating within these contexts. Chapter 3 identified and reviewed the literature on crisis and strategic communication planning. Chapter 4 will now examine five communication plans, generated by various agencies in the international community and aimed at addressing the crisis in Afghanistan.

The intent of Chapter 3 was to learn more about what experts in academia consider the ideal components in communication planning exercises. Taken together, Chapters 2 and 3 raise the question of what is an “essential component” in strategic communication planning? Is it the structure and component parts (or headings) in the strategy or, on the other hand, is it those theoretical components that inform the depth of the discussion and recommendations within the structure? This second question will provide greater depth and thoroughness in answering the research question; the analysis of strategic plans requires looking not only at component parts of a strategic communication plan as discussed in Chapter 3, but also identifying and including those strategic concepts that should inform the content of those components. It is not enough to say that a plan should include, for example, a heading of “messages”; rather we must also seek to identify what the research tells us should be included for consideration in developing those messages.

I have undertaken and will be presenting the results of an analysis of key points in five strategic communication plans: (1) United Nations Country Team Afghanistan Communications Strategy Blueprint, 2009; (2) Integrated Communication Strategy for the Research into Alternative Livelihoods Fund (RALF) Programme, 2007 (United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID)); (3) NATO Headquarters Strategic Communications Framework, 2011; (4) United States Department of Defense Strategic Communication Plan for Afghanistan, 2007; and (5) ISAF Theatre Strategic Communication Strategy, 2008.

The above data set provides access to plans originating with a cross section of the key players in Afghanistan, as identified in Chapter 2. The strategic plans were drawn from a web search for Afghanistan communication strategies in the 2007-2011 timeframe, identified in Chapter 2 as a period in which the concept of “stratcoms” took hold and came into vogue in Afghanistan. The results of the analysis of these strategies will then be judged against their present and past levels of success in Afghanistan (as identified in Chapter 2) and what the literature suggests to be the ideal (as identified in Chapter 3). In this way, I hope to arrive at the best means of communicating with the population at risk in the context of one war-ravaged country. To arrive at this end, I will analyze the plans against the recommendations on best practices in the literature from three perspectives: (1) recommended versus actual formats, (2) message delivery vehicles, and (3) strategic concepts.

The Procedure

The strategic plans identified for analysis were collected using a web search. Taking guidance from the discussion in Chapter 2 on the evolution of strategic communication planning in Afghanistan, I used the time period of 2007–2011 as it was during this period that the international stakeholders attempted to produce strategic communication plans. Consequently, the data gathering methodology could be categorized as purposive sampling.

The parameters for the web search were the time frame (2007-2011), applied in concert with combinations and permutations of various key phrases employing the words *Afghanistan, strategic, crisis, communication, plan, planning, humanitarian, and intervention*. Searches including the combination of words “*humanitarian*” and “*communication*” did not produce results in the form of communication plans.

I set a limit of a depth of 10 web pages for each of the searches in order to provide greater validity to the search results, to extend the likelihood of discovering strategies buried in older pages and to exhaust possibilities. In no instance did appropriate results emerge after the third page. Ultimately, however, the search generated 11 strategic plans for the defined time period in Afghanistan. Three of these plans were not considered useful, as they focused on the internal domestic audiences of participant countries rather than on stakeholders or the population at large in Afghanistan. The selection criterion applied to the remaining seven was that each of the five major groups doing strategic communication work in Afghanistan, as identified in Chapter 2, should be represented. This approach allowed for the inclusion of one strategic plan from each of the following groups: the United States Department of Defense, North American Treaty Organization

(NATO), the United Nations (UN), an international aid agency (represented by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development's (DFID) Research into Alternative Livelihoods Fund (RALF) program, and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). This approach thus provides a reasonable data set representing an overview of then-current practices in Afghanistan by each of the key players.

I undertook a thematic analysis of the five strategic communication plans drawn from the Internet to establish the strategic communication planning practices of the international groups who had a stake in humanitarian intervention mission in Afghanistan from 2007-2011. Thereafter, I compared the results against the recommendations from Chapter 2 that are specific to Afghanistan. I repeated the process using the recommendations from Chapter 3 for both the structure of the communication plan and those strategic concepts that should inform populating the structure. This was accomplished through a thematic analysis that allowed for a comparison of the real to the ideal. The thematic analysis was designed around (1) identifying salient features in communication strategies involving humanitarian interventions, (2) pinpointing key concepts in the academic literature that suggest what *should* work in communication planning for populations at risk, and (3) identifying the components of five strategic communication plans developed by the international community for Afghanistan.

Interpretation of Results

After thematically coding key points that emerge from the literature review, I will seek to identify what the research says will work in communicating with the population at risk. I will draw conclusions by referring back to Chapter 2 on the communication environment in Afghanistan. Then I will assess the application of each recommendation

suggested in the literature against current practices discovered from the plans' analysis. I will accomplish this task by using the constant comparative method. In order to capture the nuance of the review, I will engage in hand coding to identify the themes and to suggest their inter-relatedness. Given the iterative nature of this research, I am approaching it with no preconceived notions or outcomes. The findings and discussion will propose bridges to those gaps and identify additional areas for future research and inquiry.

Validity and Reliability

Validity was assured by documenting the procedure of the “memo-ing” and coding procedures, to establish a memo database. Following Creswell (2009), I incorporated validity strategies that included triangulation of the results from the analysis of Chapters 2 and 3 with the results of the analysis of current practices in the plans. This approach links to Creswell’s recommendation to include “thick, rich description” in presenting the findings. Reliability was established by monitoring to ensure that the meaning of the codes did not shift during the coding process. Where shifts occurred, I revised the codes or introduced additional codes.

Ethical Considerations

Since this research was based on a thematic analysis of a literature review and a thematic analysis of communication plans already in use and readily available in the public domain, there were no ethical considerations with regard to treatment of experimental subjects or funding.

Results

The results of the analysis are presented in three sections. The first section, “Recommended Formats,” compares and contrasts the plans against the recommendations of the literature review, which appear in the form of communication planning templates. The second section, “Recommended Message Delivery Vehicles,” compares the key message delivery vehicles recommended for Afghanistan against current practices. The third section, “Recommended Strategic Concepts,” presents a strategic concept analysis of the plans, which, taken with the first analysis, allows us to compare and contrast current against recommended strategic communication planning practices in the international community. These combined analyses will allow us to identify opportunities for the development of a more effective strategic communication planning framework, along with an identification of the strategic concepts that should inform it.

Recommended Format

The complexity of the Afghan mission as identified in Chapter 2 suggests that a strategic communication plan for the mission should reflect the results of a substantial analysis of the planning environment, including a clearly defined understanding of the culture and other background variables. Ferguson’s (1999) approach to strategic communication planning (described in Chapter 3) fits well with the demands for a complete analysis. She recommends not only the development of annual or multi-year strategic plans in communication, but also support plans that bring the longer-term plans to life. This approach would allow the respective organizations to identify and develop plans and strategies for overcoming the many issues identified in the communication landscape in Afghanistan.

Given that each of the five plans chosen for analysis contained elements that approximated at least part of Ferguson's support plan, I chose her plan template/format as the standard against which to assess the Afghanistan plans. A plan's format and headings/categories are important in strategic communication planning, as they provide a measure of rigour to help ensure that the plan considers and addresses key concepts and requirements to achieving objectives.

The analysis was conducted in two ways. First, by establishing the number of headings in each individual plan, the results allow one to assess each plan on its individual merit. The plans were then collectively analyzed by headings that allow us to survey and draw conclusions about the international community as a whole according to the plan structures. The analysis of the plans in Table 4.1 demonstrates that, of the 14 key concepts in Ferguson's support plan, only one (namely "communication objectives") appears in all five plans.

The majority of the plans (three or more) included "background," "messages," "target audiences," "communication objectives," "strategic considerations," "tactical considerations," and "partnerships." Although the plans included these key concepts, they were often embedded in the text rather than highlighted as headings. The analysis nonetheless recognized their inclusion. There was only one mention of "functional objectives" and "performance" indicators across plans and two mentions of "evaluation methodologies." None of the plans included an assessment of the "opinion environment," "consultation" on plan development, "negotiation" with partners/stakeholders or "budget." Annex A at the end of this thesis provides a table that provides operational definitions of Ferguson's headings and examples drawn from the various plans.

Table 4.1 Recommended Formats

Ferguson's Recommended Headings	UN Actual	DFID Actual	US Actual	NATO Actual	ISAF Actual	Total Number Yes
Background	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	4
Functional Objectives	N	N	N	N	Y	1
Opinion Environment	N	N	N	N	N	0
Communication Objectives	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	5
Messages	Y	N	Y	Y	N	3
Target Audiences	N	Y	Y	N	Y	3
Strategic Considerations	Y	Y	N	N	Y	3
Tactical Considerations	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	4
Performance Indicators	N	N	Y	N	N	1
Consultation	N	N	N	N	N	0
Negotiation	N	N	N	N	N	0
Partnership	N	Y	N	Y	Y	3
Evaluation Methodologies	N	Y	Y	N	N	2
Budget	N	N	N	N	N	0
Total Categories Included	4	7	7	4	7	

The UN and NATO plans included “communication objectives, messages and tactical considerations” but differed in other aspects. The DFID, US Department of Defense and ISAF plans were similar in their inclusion of “background, communication objectives, target audiences and tactical considerations.” Thus, the two military organizations (US and ISAF) did not stand apart from the international aid agency, DFID, when these categories. However, the US plan was missing the category of “strategic considerations,” which appeared in both the DFID and ISAF plans.

From the analysis in Table 4.1 that follows, we see that each of the plans contains very little depth, with no statement or identification of the communication strategy (please see the earlier discussion on tactics versus strategy for greater discussion) the plans will employ to achieve their objectives. A strategy is an approach to achieve a goal whereas a tactic is a tool (such as press releases, text messaging, videos, and billboards) employed to achieve the objective(s) defined within the plan. These findings support the observation that there is a tendency to confuse tactics with strategy; indeed the focus of the plans revolves around tactics rather than strategy. In addition, none of the plans provided cultural analysis of the environment in which the communication would take place. With the following example, we can see a reflection of both of the preceding two points. The strategy for furthering the cultural elements in a plan could be to encourage Afghan support for the mission through coordinating and leveraging cultural drivers such as cultural symbols and by employing messages that resonate with Afghans and to address their immediate concerns. This goal could be accomplished by employing communication channels such as religious leaders, distributing peace poetry cassettes to mosques and for use in minivan taxis, village and tribal councils, and schools.

Recommended Message Delivery Methods

The literature recommends a move away from the assumption that audiences in humanitarian intervention missions require access to Western communication technologies such as the Internet and all that that implies (social media, web pages and other outlets), and it identifies the most effective message delivery methods. This section establishes to what extent actual practices reflect recommended message delivery.

None of the plans captured the complete list of message delivery recommendations reflected in Table 4.2, which can be distilled into three categories: (1) technology-based, such as radio, posters, cassettes, cell phones and SMS; (2) cognition-based, such as visual rhetoric, poetry, narrative/messages, and cultural symbols; and (3) personal interaction-based, such as face-to-face communication, meetings with village councils, word of mouth, sermons from religious leaders, and the development and employment of Afghan individuals as centres of influence. Computers and television were not included in the list of recommended channels, given the poverty of Afghans and consequent lack of access to both television and the Internet, coupled with high levels of illiteracy. The analysis demonstrates that two of the plans incorporated the desired engagement of village councils, while only one mentioned religious leaders; nonetheless, four plans included some form of personal interaction as a message distribution channel. While each of the plans referenced either a narrative or message, none of them incorporated visual rhetoric, poetry or cultural symbols as the framework or channel for the narrative or message. When it comes to technology-based recommendations, current practices differ significantly from the recommendations that included cassettes, SMS/cell phones and radio. (Television was included only for major cities, but again Chapter 2 noted the general lack of access). Four of the five plans sought to employ technology-based channels such as Internet, television, and radio, but only the US Department of Defense identified SMS/cell phones as a message channel.

Contrasting and comparing the elements in Table 4.2 below clearly demonstrates that current practices in message delivery methods do not represent what the literature tells us is required for success. Although the majority of the plans incorporate face-to-

face communication, the majority also place a reliance on technology-based communication (Internet, television, and print). The latter are not recommended channels because of the high rates of illiteracy in Afghanistan and the lack of access to these delivery channels.

Table 4.2 Recommended Message Delivery Vehicles

Channels for Message Delivery	UN	DFID	US	NATO	ISAF	Total
Face-to-face	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	5
Cell phones/SMS	N	N	Y	N	N	1
Billboards and posters dominated by imagery (visual rhetoric)	N	N	N	N	N	0
Total recommended delivery methods	1	1	2	1	1	

At the same time each of the plans sought to use Afghan voices as senders of messages, Afghans were identified as a key audience and the approach was to use a one-way communication model. All of the plans either provided or included a reference to developing a narrative, but none identified the requirement for the narrative to speak to Afghans in an Afghan-specific and meaningful way or for the communication to be based on dialogue. For example, one of the UN plan messages was to encourage "local understanding and empathy for UN staff," and one of the US Department of Defense plan's message was that "Afghans can rely on the US/International Community." This latter message would be difficult to process, given the thousands of innocent Afghan civilians killed in operations by US and ISAF military forces as a result of wrongly identified targets. This example helps to situate earlier discussions in Chapters 2 and 3 on the need for communication that provides meaning and demonstrates that there was no planning to address the emotional or psychological needs of Afghan audiences that comes

from large scale loss of life among their citizenry. It is also an example of the need to close the “say/do gap,” wherein what actors say has to be compatible with what they are seen to be doing.

Recommended Strategic Content

Now that we have looked at recommended planning formats and message delivery methods, we will identify additional concepts to be taken into account in terms of message creation and strategic concepts that should inform both planning in general and message creation in particular.

The literature review compartmentalized the research findings on recommended strategic considerations into three key categories: *organizational legitimacy and reputation management theory*, *strategic and crisis communication planning* (both theory and practice), and *cognitive/emotional aspects of messages*. Of these, two are strictly conceptual (organizational legitimacy and the cognitive/emotional aspects) while the third (strategic and crisis communication planning) contains the theoretical. All three must be considered in tandem because of their mutually reinforcing influence on one another. We have already discussed media channels in the preceding section on delivery. We will now analyze the strategic plans against these categories to ascertain to what extent current practices reflect research-based best practices and theory.

Table 4.3, which follows this sub-section, compiles and compares the recommended strategic concepts, discussed in Chapter 3, against the reality of planning practices by the international community. The table is compartmentalized into the three key categories discussed above and then further dissected into the strategic concepts that

must inform those categories. As Table 4.3 demonstrates, there is little to no reflection of the recommended considerations in current practices.

The analysis of the first key category, *organizational legitimacy considerations*, demonstrates that only two of the plans reflected a need to understand stakeholders. Moreover, all of the plans missed the need to address the message considerations of dialogic, emotion/psychology, symbolism, visual rhetoric, variation, and meaningfulness, the importance and discussion of which appeared in Chapter 3. Given that the legitimacy with which an organization speaks to the issues is a critical foundation of effective communication, it is clear that actual practices have not kept up with the need to ensure that legitimacy is present. While all of the plans sought to advance their organization's agenda, none of them included an assessment of their legitimacy as organizations with their Afghan audiences.

Similarly, they did not consider the need to distinguish between the implications of the strategic versus institutional legitimacy considerations. Strategic legitimacy entails how an organization manipulates symbols to generate public support whereas institutional legitimacy comes from external cultural pressures that transcend the organization's control (organizational peer pressure within a sector, for example). They also did not consider the need to deploy Afghan cultural symbols, or to incorporate visual rhetoric or messages designed to meet the public's need for some level of personal control, all of which would have enhanced the organizations' legitimacy. The literature was also clear about the role that organizational legitimacy plays in message acceptability, but this critical determinant of credibility was missing in the plans. When

organizational legitimacy is non-existent, the message conveyed by the organization (regardless of spokesperson) suffers from a lack of credibility.

Similarly, as shown in Table 4.3, international planning practices have failed to incorporate the *strategic and crisis communication planning* concepts recommended in theory and essential to the planning development. It is telling that only two of the organizations developed plans that had a long-term strategy. All the plans failed to address the need for partner and stakeholder consultations, dialogic relationships, issue diagnosis, integrated planning, assessment of organizational legitimacy, and coordinated strategic planning considerations that the research identified as necessary in the 21st century.

Lastly, the findings related to *cognitive/psychological considerations* put considerable emphasis on the need to assess, respond to and manage the emotional/psychological state of the key audiences during humanitarian intervention missions.

The research identifies that it is critical to include major concepts such as of (1) identifying the dominant public emotion, (2) developing trust-building communication based on that understanding, and (3) including fear-reducing communication, the accomplishment of these steps then results in the creation of meaning for key stakeholders at risk. None of these was included in the examined plans, as summarized in the cognitive/emotional considerations section of Table 4.3.

Two key factors also need to inform this aspect of message development: (1) the need for communicators to plan around how emotional trauma compromises an individual's ability to process and act on information and (2) the need to adjust

messaging to identify and respond to the dominant emotions (anxiety, fear, anger and/or sadness) of the audience, with a view to improving the acceptability and resonance of the message.

The need for communication that provides meaning to populations at risk is essential, but it is impossible to provide meaning without understanding the cognitive/emotional needs of the target audience. None of the plans considered this critical concept that is required for effective planning and execution, and clearly this requirement has yet to make its way into international communication planning processes.

Finally, none of the plans were situated against—or proposed mitigating responses to—how their messages would accommodate the generalized levels of mental health issues or profound experiences of anger, fear, sadness and anxiety in the Afghan population.

Table 4.3 Strategic Considerations Derived from Literature on Organizational Legitimacy, Strategic and Crisis Communication Planning, and Cognitive/Emotional Considerations

	UN	DFID	US	NATO	ISAF	Total
Organizational Legitimacy Considerations						
Create Dialogue	N	N	N	N	N	0
Consider Emotional/Psychological Factors	N	N	N	N	N	0
Employ Cultural Symbols	N	N	N	N	N	0
Employ Visual Rhetoric	N	N	N	N	N	0
Create Stakeholder Understanding	N	Y	Y	N	N	2
Ensure Message Variation	N	N	N	N	N	0
Convey Meaningful Messages	Y	N	N	N	N	1
Strategic and Crisis Communication Planning Considerations						
Consult Partners and Stakeholders	N	N	N	N	N	0
Establish Dialogic Relationships	N	N	N	N	N	0
Diagnose Issue(s)	N	N	N	N	N	0
Integrate Plans	N	N	N	N	N	0
Establish Long-Term Strategy	N	N	Y	N	Y	2
Cognitive/Emotional Considerations						
Identify dominant emotion	N	N	N	N	N	0
Build trust	N	N	N	N	N	0
Reduce fear	N	N	N	N	N	0
TOTALS	2	1	2	0	1	

Overall the analysis demonstrates how the requirements for effective strategic communication planning differ from those employed by the international community who were operating in Afghanistan during the period under study. We will now embark on a

discussion of the strategic intent of the plans examined, achieving message resonance, the imposition of a Western construct on a non-Western culture, the failure to create meaning for audiences, and the failure to consult and integrate plans with partners.

Strategic Intent of the Plans Examined

The UN plan focused on furthering the best interests of the UN and encouraging Afghan support for UN employees; for example, they sought to promote the desire for Afghans in general to protect UN personnel (both internationals and Afghans) from the Taliban so that the UN employees “can do their important work.” This statement demonstrated a focus on UN workers, perhaps leaving the impression with Afghans that UN workers were somehow more important.

The focus of the DIFID program was unusual in that, while it sought to discourage Afghans from opium poppy cultivation and to encourage the propagation of alternative agricultural livelihoods, the program could not explicitly state this point out of fear of reprisals from the Taliban. The result was that opium poppy eradication, the goal of the strategy, was never mentioned in messaging. The impact of this is that the lack of clarity leaves it up to the audience to interpret the intent of the messages, thereby diluting the effectiveness of the message.

Although the ISAF plan stated that its objectives were security, governance and development, it was focused on creating support for both NATO and the Afghan government. It would have been easier to remove the NATO objective given its lack of legitimacy with the Afghan public and to delink NATO from the Afghan government as this approach would have provided a platform to create credibility for the government and help to overcome local criticism of it as simply an arm of Western power.

The intent of NATO's plan was to win the understanding and support of Afghans (although they were not identified as a target audience in the plan, there were references to garnering their support), mission partners and the international community. The plan also contained references aimed at demonstrating progress and countering Taliban propaganda that was eroding support for the mission. For example, the plan sought to counter eroding support for the mission among NATO member countries however, as discussed in Chapter 2, the Taliban could respond to events within one hour whereas the bureaucratic process of NATO Headquarters would sometimes require days to respond, thereby giving the Taliban the competitive edge.

The US Department of Defense plan was intended to advance US military strategic goals, as well as Afghan domestic security, stability, reconstruction and development. The plan incorporated references to the need for cultural sensitivity and identified the need to conduct public opinion polling in Afghanistan in order to identify "key Afghan messaging networks and Afghan perceptions."

Similarly, DFID's plan included its aim to "improve the overall quality of stakeholder relationships by promoting a listening and learning agenda." Its inclusion also demonstrated cultural sensitivity to the plight of farmers and women working in opium harvesting.

Achieving Message Resonance

All the strategic considerations outlined in Table 4.3 effectively relate to the approaches required for understanding and developing message framing, creation and delivery. Every aspect of the literature touches on this critical component of strategic communication planning. Whether the messages are verbal or nonverbal (actions,

symbols, imagery), interpersonal (face-to-face) or impersonal (employing technology, or any form of “media”), locally- or internationally-focused, culturally driven, conveyed by locals or foreigners, framed in ways that empower the population, demonstrate sensitivity to the emotional state of the population at risk, or leverage the legitimacy of the organization with the population, they can all be reduced to ensuring that the plan produces messages that effectively communicate with the population at risk. Regardless of whether the plan seeks to comfort those affected, empower them through instructing information, create ownership of the mission, engage them as partners, or deliver aid, the goals are accomplished by providing the appropriate messages, both verbal and non-verbal, that resonate with—and respond to--the needs of the population at risk.

Specific approaches, called for in Chapter 2 but not represented in the content of any of the plans analyzed, included (1) messaging that recognizes the nature of the audience and that provides meaning to Afghans (as opposed to focusing on organizational needs), (2) the use of cultural symbols, (3) communication that is action-oriented, (4) references to delegation of communication responsibilities to a non-military authority, (5) the use of religious and cultural drivers, (6) integrated plans that link the various communication actors, (7) leveraging the use of cell phones and poetry, and (8) increased use of imagery over verbal rhetoric. These recommendations reflect the needs of the communication and cultural landscape in Afghanistan as defined by extremely high illiteracy rates, profound poverty and a lack of a national telecommunication infrastructure. This understanding provides context to why, for example, there is no mention of the Internet, newspapers and other technology or print-based vehicles in the recommendations.

Imposition of a Western Construct on a Non-Western Culture

The analysis of the strategic content of the five plans corroborates the conclusion that the communication efforts of the international community tend to rely on a Western cultural construct, with a focus on self-promotion that is not culturally sensitive. The plans analyzed demonstrated the absence of a shared strategy, a general lack of consultation/coordination within and among the various communication actors, and a failure to address the need for central governance of the overall communication landscape into account. In fact few plans included the need to create cooperative relationships with the various international organizations which the literature in both Chapters two and three identified as necessary.

All plans fell short of employing Afghan cultural symbols or visual rhetoric that resonates with Afghans. For example, these concepts could have been used to inform a narrative and message strategy that creates a “myth of national character” based on the resilience of Afghans through their proud history, incorporating key cultural and religious symbols and operationalizing it through billboards that employ culturally informed visual rhetoric. The opportunity is to do so in a way that encapsulates these key concepts in order to create hope, resolve and a sense of self. None of the strategies considered the use of an exclusively visual message campaign, which research tells us is highly effective in cross-cultural communication.

Failure to Create Meaning for Audiences

All the strategies used what could be called “universal messages” for all audiences – both international and Afghan. The literature, however, recommends the creation of different messages for different audiences, as well as variation of the

messages over time and with different spokespeople. It is difficult to produce an effective strategic communication plan with two diverse key stakeholder groups: wealthy, technology-savvy Westerners and the impoverished, illiterate population of a war-torn country. Moreover, even within these two main audiences were diverse sub-audiences. One cannot expect the same message to resonate equally effectively with both groups. This is, however, what the five examined plans attempted to do. As a better approach, the plans could have distinguished between audiences living in the middle of combat operations and those in non-combat areas. People living in combat areas could have been provided with information on where to get medical aid or receive messaging on the timing of combat operations so they could take mitigating measures to minimize their exposure to the fighting and bombing. Those in non-combat areas, on the other hand, could be broadcast messages relating to their specific daily needs or messages on how to identify and report suspected suicide bombers (which would have helped create some feeling of personal control). Ultimately, for the Afghan audiences, the messages needed to provide concrete, tangible information about why the mission was of value to Afghans.

None of the messages intentionally sought to create and manage meaning for Afghans, which is a key concept in strategic communication planning for populations at risk. For example, the international community put significant effort into communicating the volume of aid and reconstruction effort that was deployed to Afghanistan. However, although the messaging told Afghans that they would all benefit from the international effort, the reality was very different. For example, the vast majority of the aid was expended in the southern part of the country where the Taliban were located. This was an attempt to encourage the locals to abandon support of Taliban. The actual message

received by the rest of the country, particularly in the relatively peaceful north, was “the way to receive aid is to have the Taliban in your area.” Although there was, relatively speaking, no Taliban presence in the northern half of the country in the first half of the mission, they were located throughout the country by 2010. The meaning of the message conveyed to poor Afghan farmers was directly contrary to the plan’s intent and, in fact, aggravated the overall security situation. The message could have been expressed differently, for example by indicating that aid was directly related to not harbouring the Taliban. Further, the point could have been driven home by putting the focus of aid and development in areas where there was no Taliban presence, thereby creating the conditions that would set an example for those provinces and Afghans who supported the Taliban. This example, which is based on personal experience, provides an illustration of the earlier discussions on the need to ensure that communicative action supports the communication messages laid out in the plan and which links tightly with the discussion on meaning-making.

Failure to Consult and Integrate with Partners

The literature tells us that strategic communication planning requires consultation with the various partners engaged in the mission during the development of the plan, requiring dialogic relationships with all stakeholders, incorporating a diagnosis and understanding of the issues and communication landscape and developing an integrated plan with partners. None of the plans demonstrated these important aspects. The literature review further highlighted the need for not only a coordinated strategic communication plan among partners, but also a long-term strategy to anticipate and

address issues and crises. Only the long-term strategy requirements were identified by two of the plans and the other considerations were missing throughout.

On the whole, the analysis summarized in Table 4.3 demonstrates that the strategic communication planning requirements for international humanitarian intervention missions, specifically Afghanistan, differ significantly from those that were developed in the last century to address reputation management requirements of business and government but yet which continue to be in vogue and used, inappropriately, by organizations engaged in humanitarian intervention missions.

Conclusions

This chapter presented three avenues of analysis that identified the key concepts required in strategic communication planning for the international humanitarian intervention mission in Afghanistan. The three avenues consisted of establishing recommended best practices from the expert literature in the areas of (1) recommended formats in planning templates, (2) recommended message delivery vehicles, and (3) recommended strategic concepts that should inform the key headings in a plan. The thesis has compared and contrasted existing practices against both what the research literature recommends specifically for Afghanistan and what experts recommend for crisis and strategic communication planning in general for populations at risk.

In summary, the study demonstrated that the strategic communication plans produced by the international community in Afghanistan in the 2007-2011 timeframe fall far short of both what is needed in Afghanistan and what communication scholars identify as the key concepts in strategic communication planning for populations at risk. In short, there is no indication that these planning efforts have evolved from a focus on

reputation management and one-way communication, practices that date back to the last century.

To be fair, this analysis is not meant in any way to judge the practices of the five organizations that produced plans, and they should be given credit for making them publicly available. Their availability has provided a valuable reference to developing the answer to the main research question and identifying the need for strategic communication planning that is focused on the population at risk.

Next Step – Develop a Template

Now that we have ascertained the gap between the real versus the ideal in strategic communication planning in Afghanistan specifically, and international humanitarian intervention missions generally, Chapter 5 will merge the three avenues of analysis to produce one master template that incorporates the findings and answer the main research question “What essential components should inform a strategic communication plan for the Afghanistan humanitarian intervention mission?”

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

This thesis undertook to answer the question “What essential components should inform a strategic communication plan for the Afghanistan humanitarian intervention mission?” In doing so, the discussion established the need for this particular area of research and examined the cultural landscape and the nature of communication taking place in Afghanistan. It presented a multi-disciplinary literature review that focused on legitimacy and reputation management, issues and crisis management, cognitive and psychological considerations, and new developments in media during crisis. It thereafter undertook a grounded theory methodology and provided three avenues of analysis: recommended plan templates, recommended message delivery vehicles and recommended strategic concepts. These three, taken together, answer the research question.

The analysis in Chapter 4 established that the international community falls far short of incorporating the ideal key concepts in strategic communication planning formats and strategic concepts that should inform the planning for communication during international humanitarian intervention missions.

Answering the Research Question

With regard to the essential components that should inform a strategic communication plan for the Afghanistan humanitarian intervention mission, we have seen that these components are: (1) format structure and headings, (2) the message delivery vehicles and (3) the strategic concepts that inform the development of the heading content. More specifically, this study has identified the importance of

organizational legitimacy as an essential precursor to successfully engaging in communication with populations at risk.

“Legitimacy” is the authority that the target audience gives the organization and its products. Legitimacy is required, not only by the organizations involved, but also in every aspect of the communication campaign: messaging, delivery vehicles and spokespeople. Otherwise, the target audience will filter out communication since it will not fit their preconceived ideas of the nature of the situation.

Once overall organizational legitimacy is established, the next step is to understand the emotional and psychological landscape of the population at risk with a view to producing messaging that has meaning for the audiences. This meaning can only be present when the messages are sensitive to, and seek to accommodate, the emotional trauma and/or the dominant emotions in play at any given time. The messages must also accommodate the fact that these emotions change over time and can be combined with other emotions. Thus, the communicating organization must continuously re-examine its messages and be willing to change these to ensure they are appropriate to the often-fluid situation at hand.

Collateral to meaningful messages are meaningful delivery vehicles used to communicate those messages, particularly given that many humanitarian intervention missions are carried out in areas of high illiteracy where local people lack access to technology. Those delivery vehicles include interpersonal such as face-to-face (one-to-one or one-to-many), new technologies such as cellphones that allow for verbal or nonverbal communication such as SMS texting, and traditional media such as billboards and posters that allow for strong visual input or poetry or sermons delivered orally. The

individuals who act as influencers to communicate the messages may do so through channels such as those mentioned above. Communication can be most effective and meaningful when it employs visual rhetoric and well-understood symbolism, is culturally sensitive and leaves room for interpretation. Again, the organization must constantly re-examine its delivery vehicles and spokespersons and demonstrate the flexibility to change them as required by the situation.

Furthermore, strategic planning must consider the role of television journalists (as discussed in Chapter 3) in acting as co-creator of viewer emotions, assuming the role of therapist, while simultaneously inflaming the coverage of the crisis by focusing on the negative aspects. This in turn can give television journalists a greater emotional connection with the population than the organizations trying to assist them. Key components of strategic communication planning must therefore include trust-building and fear-reducing messages that resonate with the audience and include a call to action to impart a sense of individual control over the situation. This component has as its goal the countering of negative television media influence over the population.

Expanding the Ferguson Plan

From this analysis, my thesis recommends that Ferguson's (1999) annual or multi-year strategic communication plan is the general standard to which planning templates should be held. There is room, however, to further expand her plan so that it formally incorporates what she originally suggested were *potential* strategic considerations (such as emotional consideration), as we have now established that these are, in fact, *essential* components. Her plan was not developed for use in humanitarian intervention missions, but this study has demonstrated that her strategic planning

template can make a greater contribution to the communication planning field if modified slightly, thereby allowing it to extend to humanitarian missions.

Following is an expanded version of the Ferguson plan that will permit its application to humanitarian aid missions. A note of caution must, however, be sounded at this point as the suggested expanded plan represents the “ideal” (as do all models). Until the international community resolves (if it does) the governance issues that prohibit the use of such a plan, it will remain in the realm of the theoretical. The resolution of this conundrum is far beyond the scope of this thesis; nevertheless the main governing body for communication in international humanitarian intervention missions could develop a workable plan by using this template. Thereafter each of the partner organizations would develop their individual support plans.

Taking into consideration these limitations, the following strategic communication planning template (Figure 4.1) and its essential components is now offered for international humanitarian intervention missions, both in Afghanistan and wherever the need arises.

Strategic Communication Plan Template
for International Humanitarian Intervention Missions

Background Statement. Identify historical, political, socio-cultural and other factors underlying the current issues.

Objectives. Identify mission statement and functional objectives

Policy Issues. Identify current and emerging policy debates

External Environment. Identify opinions and actions of stakeholders external to the organization on the policy issues or performance of the organization on issues.

- Identify positive factors in the planning environment.
- Identify negative factors in the planning environment.

Internal Environment. Identify opinions and actions of stakeholders internal to the organization on the policy issues and/or performance of the organization on issues.

- Identify positive factors in the planning environment.
- Identify negative factors in the planning environment.

Communication Objectives

- Identify objectives related to external audiences.
- Identify objectives related to internal audiences.

Messages

- Develop different messages for different stakeholder groups, with variation in spokespersons and delivery channels.
- Employ both verbal and non-verbal/visual communications/rhetoric.
- Employ cultural symbols.
- Determine message delivery vehicles.

Cognitive/Emotional Considerations

- Identify the dominant emotion(s) of the local population.
- Establish the psychological landscape (is there generalized PTSD, for example).
- Identify methods to build trust, reduce fear and allow empowerment.

Communication Priorities

- Identify areas of emphasis for the time periods in question.

Strategic Considerations

- Diagnose the issue(s).
- Integrate plans with other actors.
- Assess organization legitimacy.

Consultations and Partnerships

- Assess and establish (where possible) opportunities for partnerships with other mission actors
- Undertake consultations with mission partners and stakeholders, local institutions and members of the local population.
- Establish dialogic relationships.

Performance Indicators. Identify those key outcomes the plan is designed to accomplish and which will

be used to determine the success of its implementation.

Assessment

- Periodically assess success against performance indicators.
- Adjust plan as required.

Budget

Figure 5.1 Strategic Communication Plan Template for International Humanitarian Intervention Missions

Although this template was developed to respond to the humanitarian intervention mission in Afghanistan, its focus on increasing a strategy's effectiveness through understanding and responding to the public's emotions renders it applicable to natural and man-made humanitarian crises in all countries. The literature review canvassed research in North America, Europe, Africa and Asia on what is required to communicate with populations in crisis situations and the consolidated findings represented in this template are not limited to use in Afghanistan. While the nature of each individual crisis may vary, the fundamental nature of human emotions and responses to crisis are such that there is the potential for this template to be applied to any crisis where people are affected, and not isolated to humanitarian intervention missions. The need for sensitivity to cultural considerations is universal. Given that one can generally expect that the larger the crisis the greater the number of international aid actors who will be present underscores the need for negotiation, coordination, and integration. As one can see from the numerous natural disasters on the eastern seaboard of the United States, even in the most advanced western nations a reliance on satellite-based technology and battery powered cell phones becomes moot once access is compromised and communication is reverted 'back to basics' through radio, word of mouth, more traditional means that one may associate with the developing world.

There are other potential applications of this template in the humanitarian field generally; because it addresses the overall issue of communicating with populations at risk it has application not just to crisis situations but also to situations of humanitarian aid in general, international development and capacity building. It could be used in any cross-cultural, multi-organization international mission where the need is to focus on creating communication with meaning for the key audience and that is designed for their benefit.

At the same time this template poses a challenge in that it is designed to respond to a crisis with the best interests of those affected in mind rather than the more traditional reputation management approaches we saw at the beginning of this paper. It therefore raises an ethical question for practitioners; do they do what is right for the organization or what is right for the people affected? Is there a way to satisfactorily establish a middle ground where the interests of both are equally advanced? As we saw in Chapter 2, inter-agency competition in humanitarian crises is a significant issue where reputations and fund-raising are at risk and one could reasonably anticipate that it would be equally difficult to get competing corporations to negotiate and coordinate in domestic crises such as train derailments, nuclear leaks or other such industrial crises.

Limitations of the Study and Areas of Future Research

The shortage of both scholarship on and the practical application of strategic communication planning for humanitarian intervention missions presented a challenge in providing a background for responding to this area of research. Nonetheless, and as mentioned at the outset of this study, my research is a first step; it establishes the need for such study, now and going forward.

Another limitation comes from the fact that the majority of research in strategic communication planning has been conducted from a Western perspective. Given the importance of multicultural considerations and the requirement for sensitivity in communicating with populations at risk in other cultural settings, the problematic limitation has the potential to affect the success or failure of strategic communications from the outset of the planning process. The impact becomes even more apparent when one considers that most humanitarian missions are conducted in either developing or Third World nations.

Yet another limitation arose from the fact that only two of the five plans analyzed (the DFID and UN plans) were specifically produced to address the humanitarian aspects of the mission in Afghanistan. The NATO, US Department of Defense and ISAF plans were designed to support the overall combat mission, thereby underscoring the need for the research as well as the determination of this area as a new field of inquiry. This orientation toward the combat mission in the latter three plans meant that the communication was focused on generating public support for the war effort and its objectives. This orientation further reinforces the need for a greater focus on and development of strategic communication planning for populations at risk, particularly those involved in long-term crisis. Despite calls from the international community for the United Nations to take ownership of strategic communication in humanitarian missions, this goal has neither occurred nor has the humanitarian aid community undertaken the needed professionalization of its communication planning.

The subject of the thesis required a multidisciplinary literature review, as there is a paucity of research regarding strategic communication planning for humanitarian

intervention missions. As such, this is essentially a new area of inquiry with extensive scope for additional research.

Additional research recommendations include developing a strategy that relies solely on a combination of non-verbal and emotion-based communication. Other research opportunities include studying the extent to which communication practitioners have the skills required to “manage” emotions in the affected population and to identify what skills need to be developed. It would also be worthwhile to study a scenario in which a multinational organization such as the UN assumes responsibility for communication governance while simultaneously meeting the needs identified in my study. This includes, but is not limited to, conducting research “in the field,” that is, in the location where the aid mission is being carried out.

Conclusions

The international community’s biggest challenge in moving forward is to move away from organization-focused communication and planning to one that is client-focused. If this occurs, communication will be clear that the first priority is to relieve suffering of the population at risk. Transcending internal politics and interagency competition and developing a truly professionalized communication function will help to realize this goal.

The research was definitive in its call for the international humanitarian aid community, not the military, to lead strategic communication during missions. At the same time, however, the military tends to have the more mature and complete strategic communication planning capacity. The international humanitarian aid community has not taken up the challenge to professionalize its communication function.

From my own experience it is clear, however, that although the military have the more mature communication capability, they ignore the long-term requirements of communication and focus on achieving an immediate impact. Militaries tend to view communication as another “weapon” in their arsenal and to expect the same kind of instant effect. This, in turn, results in their failure to achieve communication success.

There is incredible opportunity for international humanitarian aid organizations to seize the strategic communication planning and implementation function and make an even greater difference in the lives of those affected by war and natural disasters. The “Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities” website (www.cdacnetwork.org) perhaps best sums up the importance and need for strategic communication planning for humanitarian missions and the need for my area of research, stating:

“Communication is Aid (sic). Communicating with and providing information to, people affected by crisis are two of the most important elements of humanitarian responses. They are also two of the most overlooked. Communicating with disaster affected communities is a growing field of humanitarian response that helps to meet the information and communication needs of people affected by crisis.”

I submit that aid organizations will not truly be “humanitarian” until they take advantage of the opportunity identified in this paper. This thesis is by no means a complete examination of the issue, but it offers a starting point for a critically important aspect of humanitarian intervention missions. Ultimately, it answered the research question and demonstrates that strategic communication planning by the international community requires a reset.

Annex A

Operationalized Coding Table

Ferguson’s Headings	Ferguson’s Operationalized Definition	Examples from the strategies assessed
Background	Provides the nature of the issue being addressed, its background and evolution	NATO: “...effective stratcom will play a vital role in the execution of all military and civilian activities. The 2010 narrative is improving from last year’s “the international community is losing an unwinnable war”...which is beginning to reverse the momentum.”
Functional Objectives	The overarching organizational objectives	UN: UN programmes are delivered entirely for the benefit of the Afghan people, at the request of the Government and in accordance with Afghan policies and priorities.
Opinion Environment	Based on data this should identify trends in public opinion and current landscape; suggest likely public reaction to the issue; identify stakeholder expectations	N/A
Communication Objectives	Very specific; listed by priority; they seek to create awareness, reinforce attitudes/behavior; convert or build relationships	US Army: Afghans and the International Community support US stabilization and reconstruction; create support for the Government of Afghanistan; that Afghans reject the Taliban.
Messages	Identifies the specific messages for stakeholders	NATO: “This mission is essential for our shared security, and we will succeed.” This key message was supplemented with a list of themes that include: “resolve, unity, clear strategy, realism and fresh momentum”
Target Audiences	Clearly identify awareness, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values and behavior of target audiences	ISAF: Target audiences include “the Afghan population, including refugees and Diasporas; Afghan Government elected and appointed leaders at all levels; domestic audiences within troop contributing nations and major donor nations and organizations”
Strategic Considerations	Suggests strategic approaches; identifies required collaboration, environment in which the issue exists, what works in the past and desired effects; types of appeals to be used in messaging; issues management approaches	DIFID: “Due to the need to protect the implementing partners of RALF against reprisals by drug barons, RALF cannot adopt a transparent communication strategy towards many of its stakeholders, including the general public...In sum, RALF has to adopt a veiled message...but needs to vigorously communicate the potential of alternative livelihoods...A careful balancing act is required.”
Tactical Considerations	Identifies the medium to be employed for messages, timing, requirement for support materials, briefing the media and implementation responsibilities	DIFID: Radio and TV programs, website, reports, minutes of meetings, posters, publications, seminars, press releases
Performance Indicators	A clear statement of criteria as to what constitutes success for the plan; lists specific outcomes; measures process, outputs, impact and ethics	US Army: Increases in the number of public statements of confidence and support of the US and NATO; increasing level of Afghan support for local and national government; decreasing level of support for the Taliban; increasing level of support for US and Allies and awareness of their mission; decreasing hostility toward Afghan government
Consultation	Identifying the requirement and reaching out to partners and constituencies to initiate discussion and build constituencies	N/A
Negotiation	Including the need to emphasize mutual persuasion processes, collaborating on the decision-making process	N/A
Partnership	Identify required partnerships and establish compatible objective and complimentary needs	NATO: Coordination between NATO and troop contributing nations and international organizations will be led by NATO headquarters
Evaluation Methodologies	Provides specific evaluation metrics and procedures for evaluating the plan’s implementation	DIFID: “RALF may wish to put measures in place to monitor and evaluate the strategy...were target audiences properly defined and understood; were communication skills available to the enterprise adequate; was the budget sufficient?”
Budget	Identifies the human and financial resources required to implement the plan	N/A

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