

The Art of Perception Management in Information Warfare Today

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Introduction

According to Alvin Toffler, “The full implications of what we termed ‘Third wave knowledge warfare’ have not yet been digested. The wars of the future will increasingly be prevented, won or lost based on information superiority and dominance. Cyber-war involves everything from strategic deception and perception management down to tactical disruption of an adversary’s information systems.”

In the Iraq War 2003 journalists were ‘embedded’ in the American Forces as combat cameramen. The purpose was not to give the world a ringside view of the war but to give it the ‘American’ view. As the Washington Post of 24 March, 2003 put it, “Almost by definition...a war waged on live television is a war in which political and public relations considerations become inextricably bound up with military tactics and strategy...How victory is won is almost as important as victory itself.”

Another significant event, the toppling of Saddam’s Statue in Baghdad, made great news with extensive TV coverage. However, as Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber wrote in In These Times on 8 April 2003, “As US tanks stormed into Baghdad on April 9, television viewers in the United States got their first feel-good moment of the war - a chance to witness the toppling of a giant statue of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. The problem is that the images of toppling statues and exulting Iraqis, to which American audiences were repeatedly exposed, obscured a larger reality. A Reuters long-shot photo of Firdous Square showed that it was nearly empty, ringed by the US tanks and marines who had moved in to seal off the square before admitting the Iraqis.” 2

These instances were a very powerful demonstration of the use of Perception Management in international affairs. Simply defined : Perception Management is ‘Information’ operations that aim to affect perception of others to influence their emotions, reasoning, decisions, or actions.

Information Warfare

Nations, corporations, and individuals seek to increase and protect their information while trying to limit and penetrate the adversary’s. Since early Seventies, there have been extraordinary improvements in the technical means of collecting, storing, analysing and transmitting information. Information-related technologies concentrate data, vastly increase the rate at which we process and transmit data, and penetrate the results into every aspect of our lives. Modern means of handling information give it much added vulnerability through direct access and manipulation. Modern technology now permits an adversary to change or create information without relying on observation and interpretation. Some of the system characteristics creating this vulnerability are: concentrated storage, access speed, widespread information transmission, and the increased capacity for information systems to direct actions autonomously.

Intelligent security measures can reduce, but not eliminate, this vulnerability; but their absence makes it glaring. Traditional means of conducting information warfare include psychological operations, electronic warfare, military deception, physical destruction, and security measures. Some others are information manipulation, information disturbance, degradation and denial.

Information Warfare and Perception Management

Talking of ‘Information Warfare and Global War on Terrorism’, Professor Phil Taylor of University of Leeds says, “The lesson of ‘victory’ in the cold war and the information explosion have shown that power can no longer speak for itself in the global perceptual environment; it needs to be explained.” He denotes the major national policy objectives of any nation as economic, political, diplomatic and military; military objectives encompass psychological operations and civil-military affairs. Professor Taylor’s vision of the 21st Century environment shows this to be an era of Weapons of Mass Destruction, Terrorism, Asymmetric Warfare, and Information Warfare.

Information Warfare is : ‘information operations conducted during a time of crisis or conflict to achieve or promote specific objectives over a specific adversary or adversaries’, whereas, Information operations are, ‘Actions taken to affect adversary’s information and information systems while defending one’s own information and information systems.’ Information operations are integral to the successful execution of military operations. Information operations consist of Influencing operations and Cyber operations; Influencing operations and Cyber operations include Psychological operations and Deception.’

Perception Management

‘Perception Management’ is a term originated by the US military. The US Department of Defence defines it as : ‘Actions to convey and/or deny selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives and objective reasoning, as well as to intelligence systems and leaders at all levels, to influence

official estimates, ultimately resulting in foreign behaviours and official actions favourable to the originator's objectives. In various ways, perception management combines truth projection, operations' security, cover and deception, and psychological operations.'

Although perception management operations are typically carried out within the international arena, use of perception management techniques have become part of mainstream information management systems. As Stan Moore has written, "Just because truth has been omitted, does not mean that truth is not true. Just because reality has not been perceived, does not mean that it is not real." In their book *War and Anti-War*, Alvin and Heidi Toffler list the following as tools for perception management:-

- (a) Atrocity accusations
- (b) Hyperbolic inflations
- (c) Demonisation and/or dehumanisation
- (d) Polarisation
- (e) Claim of divine sanction
- (f) Meta-propaganda

The History of Perception Management in USA

Although perception management is specifically aimed at foreign audiences, there are many instances of the USA engaging in domestic perception management. A recent example is the prohibition of viewing or photographing the flag draped caskets of dead military as they are unloaded in bulk upon arrival in the US. During the Vietnam War, the Pentagon exaggerated communist threats to the US in order to gain more public support for an increasingly bloody war. More recently, the US government has used perception management techniques to promote the belief that weapons of mass destruction were indeed being manufactured in Iraq, and that Iraq had aided and assisted the Al Qaeda terrorists responsible for the September 11, 2001 attacks upon the World Trade Centre. These "facts" were, in part, the government's justification for invading Iraq and beginning the war.

The US military has demonstrated use of perception management multiple times in modern warfare, even though it has proven to take a hit to its credibility among the American people. The Los Angeles Times reported in an article that the Pentagon had secretly paid Iraqi journalists to publish stories written by the US soldiers. The report said that the one-sided stories were falsely presented as unbiased accounts produced by independent journalists.⁵ During the conduct of military campaign, novel measures of 'embedding' reporters with military units were adopted. The reporters who wanted to be embedded were forced to undergo a mandatory camp, which gave many their first appreciation of the challenges faced by an average soldier. This also created an inevitable bond between 'reporters' and the 'units' they covered.

A Case Study in Perception Management: The Rendon Group

James Bamford's profile of John Rendon ("The Man Who Sold the War, Bush's General in the Propaganda War")⁶ illustrates the genesis and development of the perception management strategy in the Iraq War. On 17 December 2001, in a room in Thailand, strapped to a polygraph machine was Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri, a forty-three-year-old Iraqi. Answering a series of questions, he insisted repeatedly that he was a civil engineer who had helped Saddam's men to secretly bury tons of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons in subterranean wells, hidden in private villas, even stashed beneath the Saddam Hussein Hospital in Baghdad. After a review of the polygraph chart, the intelligence officer concluded that al-Haideri had made up the entire story.

Al-Haideri was the product of a clandestine operation that had been set-up and funded by the CIA and the Pentagon for the purpose of selling the world a war. The man in charge of its marketing was John Rendon. Two months before al-Haideri took the lie-detector test, the Pentagon had secretly awarded him a \$16 million contract to target Iraq and other adversaries with propaganda. Rendon is a leader in the strategic field of perception management. Working under this extraordinary secret authority, Rendon assembled a group of anti-Saddam militants, the Iraqi National Congress (INC) and served as their media guru and 'senior adviser' as they set out to engineer an uprising against Saddam. The INC routinely coached defectors on their stories, prepping them for polygraph exams. According to Francis Brooke, the INC's man in Washington and himself a former Rendon employee, the goal of the al-Haideri operation was to pressure the US to attack Iraq and overthrow Saddam Hussein.

For the worldwide broadcast rights, they got Paul Moran, a former INC employee. Moran had also been on Rendon's payroll for years. The INC's choice for the worldwide print exclusive was Judith Miller of The New York Times. Her front-page story on 20 December 2001 was exactly the kind of exposure Rendon had been hired to provide. 'AN IRAQI DEFECTOR TELLS OF WORK ON AT LEAST 20 HIDDEN WEAPONS SITES', declared the headline. It was the first in a long line of hyped and fraudulent stories that would eventually propel the US into a war with Iraq - the first war based almost entirely on a covert propaganda campaign targeting the media.

A recent US Congressional report suggests that the Pentagon may be relying on "covert psychological operations affecting audiences within friendly nations." The report also concludes that military planners are shifting away from the Cold War view that power comes from superior weapons systems. Instead, the Pentagon now believes : 'combat power can be enhanced by communications networks and technologies that control access to and directly manipulate information.' As a result, information itself is now both a tool and a target of warfare. It is a belief John Rendon encapsulated in a speech to cadets at the US Air Force Academy in 1996. "I am not a national-security strategist or a military tactician," he declared. "I am a politician, a person who uses communication to meet public-policy or corporate-policy objectives. In fact, I am an information warrior and a perception manager."

In the opinion of global media, especially in the Arab world, the overt 2003 policy was actually about regime change in Iraq. It was an Anglo-USA invasion or conquest rather than liberation. This time there was total integration of perception management in the operations all the way and from top to bottom.

The media performance in the operations was though quite off the mark. Some examples are; Umm Qsar being reported having fallen eight times in the first week; the toppling of Saddam's statue; and the classic case of Private Jessica's rescue. "In the 14 days after her rescue, Private Jessica Lynch drew 919 references in major US papers, according to a Nexis search. OK... it was the first successful rescue of a US PW behind enemy lines since World War II ... BUT.. How awkward to have to tell them she was a truck crash victim saved by the enemy and not actually rescued by the same commando unit that did not actually find those elusive weapons of mass destruction."

Some conclusions that Professor Phil Taylor 8 draws from his incisive study are :-

- (a) Pro-war coverage in the US made the US media 'cheerleaders' in the eyes of a watching, more skeptical global media.
- (b) Issues about war's justness were debated more in nations not affected by '9/11'.
- (c) Non-US media simply didn't get the link between the 'war on terror' and the 'axis of evil'.
- (d) The US media became part of the Information Operations campaign but global media did not, and this damaged the US cause outside the US.

The Indian Context

Today, conflicts cannot remain localised but rapidly become internationalised. Every nation has to keep the global ramifications of any action against another nation in mind. With the global and instant reach of the media, and thanks to the all-pervasive technology, information warfare assumes great importance. Today, wars are not just fought on the battlefields but as much in the minds of the stakeholders. Wars are now increasingly network-centric

The Indian Armed Forces have attained sufficient capability in this regard. With its increasing influence as an emerging superpower, India would do well to learn and practice the art of perception management not only in the diplomatic sphere but also in its doctrines of handling of information warfare.

Conclusion

Disinformation has been a part of war since at least the days of Alexander the Great, who planted large breastplates of armour in the wake of his retreating troops to convince the enemy that his soldiers were giants. Perception management is now an accepted part of wielding international strategic influence. In affecting the perception of a foreign government, the goal is to change the foreign government's policy to support your political interest. The goal could also be to influence the foreign government's perceptions of elements of the foreign society.

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