

# STRATCOM vs PROPAGANDA AND THE IMPORTANCE OF KPIs FOR EFFECTIVE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

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*Words are one of the simplest and most readily available instruments for influencing and educating the masses. Good communication always maximizes the likelihood of effectively attaining organizational objectives by creating understanding and support of the relevant audiences. However, communication effectiveness cannot be achieved unless clear objectives and appropriate KPIs are established. In this paper we shall try to discuss similarities and differences between propaganda and StratCom, as well as the importance of using the appropriate key performance indicators (KPIs) for a successful communication process.*

***Key words:** StratCom, propaganda, communication, objective, audience, effectiveness, key performance indicators*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Human communication is an instinctual activity, an exchange of information with the purpose of carrying out daily activities, which happens without much analysis or preparation beforehand. However, there is also the reverse when it is a well-conceived, conscious and deliberate act especially, when it is done in support of something considered important. Unlike instinctual and spontaneous forms,

refined forms of communication play a huge role in everyday life because words are one of the simplest and most readily available "weapons" for influencing and educating the masses, and good communication maximizes its effectiveness. The more effective the communication, the faster the (organizational) goals can be achieved, resulting in performance at all levels. Information brings power and influence, and the exchange of information cannot be achieved

without communication. It is one of the most important forms of interaction between an organization and its environment and it is also key to the success of the relationship between an organization and its audience, it is the means to mobilize, to enthuse the masses or to demoralize them. Political science experts and sociologists call this aspect of communication propaganda, words which are used to influence, to persuade masses towards one or another direction. In this paper we shall try to discuss whether propaganda is something inherently negative or not, the differences between propaganda and StratCom and the importance of identifying the appropriate key performance indicators (KPIs) in order to attain communicational effectiveness.

Propaganda is a concept with deep negative connotations. However, etymologically, the word propaganda does not contain such nuances, the noun is of Latin origin and it derives from the verb *propagare* which simply means to spread, to propagate. Therefore, what changed its aspect from neutral to positive or to negative and turned its inherent significance towards something negative is the nature of the actions performed by those propagating the information and the consequences described and associated with the actions and with

those orchestrating the communications. Frequently, entities standing at opposite ends and having antithetical interests will label each other's (strategic) communication as propaganda with the obvious purpose of discrediting the opposing side's communication.

When analyzing its connotations we should also take into considerations the fact that there is a difference between propaganda in the domain of foreign policy or advertising, and what happens during wartime and conflicts. According to Andrew Scott, propaganda in foreign policy is a polite way of engaging in political discourse with the purpose of achieving aims without resorting to war and its attendant ramifications [1].

## 2. PROPAGANDA

So, what is propaganda? Propaganda has been part of human social lives for centuries, even if it has not always been classified as propaganda. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, it is the "dissemination of information — facts, arguments, rumours, half-truths, or lies—to influence public opinion" [2]. This activity has been practiced by rulers, warriors, politicians, basically, people in power, and it can be traced back as far as we can find recorded history. For example, Arthashastra, the Indian Sanskrit Treaty, a work about statecraft written by multiple authors

between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE, approaches the topic of propaganda, but without naming it so [3]. The term was introduced in use with the printing of *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (Congregation for Propagation of the Faith), which is the product of an organization of Roman Catholic cardinals founded in 1622 to carry on missionary work [3]. Based on the book intended, the meaning of the word propaganda did not include lying or distorting the truth, it was just the idea of spreading the faith with some nuances of persuasion.

According to J. MacPherson of The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, the term acquired a political nuance in 1790 with reference to an obscure alleged revolutionary organisation based in France, reference that can be found in A. Aspinall "The correspondence of George, Prince of Wales, Volume II: 1789-1794", "All Kings have a new race of Pretenders to contend with, the disciples of the propaganda at Paris or, as they call themselves, Les Ambassadeurs de genre humain" [4]. It was also used in the United States as a slogan-word to refer to the pro-slavery campaign after the Mexican war in the 1850s [6]. Napoleon as well, relied heavily on propaganda to win his wars. According to P. Taylor, before 1914 it referred to the process by which "the converted attempted to

persuade the unconverted" [7]. The procedure was perfected during the First World War and all the conflicts that followed, and the concept got discredited even more and acquired a lot of negative nuances due to the common perception that it was used to cover the terrible things that were happening during the war [8].

Nowadays, based on the circumstances under which propaganda has been used for so many centuries, it can be defined as "statements or ideas that are often exaggerated or false, and are spread in order to help a leader, a cause, a government, etc." [9]. In other words, under the term of propaganda we encounter biased and often misleading information that is continuously and persistently served to a specific audience. Thus, the concept transformed from what it started as, a means of popularizing specific information, and started being perceived as including misinformation and disinformation. However, propaganda is not exclusively manipulative, it can also be positive if it is used to help people and promote positive change in the society. Positive propaganda can be utilized to stir up strong feelings of patriotism, as well as to mobilize people to collectively support good causes [10]. Unfortunately, when the limits of persuasion are pushed too much and get mixed with a lot of

disinformation the effects are nocive [11].

### 3. STRATCOM VS PROPAGANDA

Currently, governments and organizations have included communication on the list of essential organizational activities and have developed communication strategies. The new domain is named StratCom and it basically focusses on explaining and promoting the organizational or governmental, values, objectives, mission. Still and all, should official communication be only informative or should it also try to persuade, and how? The main purpose of effective communication is creating understanding and behavior change which quite frequently is actually a consequence of understanding a topic which is done through a lot of information and persuasion [12].

The UK Defence definition of StratCom sees all Defence's assets as potential tools of communication. The proposed definition is therefore now: advancing national interests by using Defence as a means of communication to influence the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of audiences [13].

The USA used to have a different approach on strategic communication, considering it to be only about information while

influence could be used only if it were part of an operational plan "information operations activities focused on influence and counter command [...] may only take place as part of an OPLAN [Operation Plan] and thus with NAC approval, including definition by the NAC of adversaries and potential adversaries" [14]. The situation changed after 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea when Russia used disinformation so much that it affected the the NATO countries so, NATO changed the informing approach to desired effects and "inform and influence audiences through actions and words" [15]. Communication became an instrument used to shape the environment with the aim of gaining support and changing behavior of the audiences. "The integration of communication capabilities and information staff function with other military activities, in order to understand and shape the information Environment (IE), in support of NATO aims and objectives." [16].

Communication is meant to be informative, but also persuasive, especially StratCom which is developed in support of organizational goals. Whatever an organization says or does, it is done with a purpose in view. Even if such communication respects the truthful and factual principles it is still

subjective in the sense that it needs to comply with and support the organizational objectives however, it will not propagate misleading or bended information.

Propaganda and Strategic Communication (StratCom) are two distinct concepts, although they both involve the use of communication to influence audiences. Here are the key differences between propaganda and StratCom:

**Objectives:** Propaganda typically aims to manipulate information and shape public opinion to advance a specific agenda or ideology. It often involves the deliberate dissemination of biased or misleading content. On the other hand, StratCom focuses on achieving specific objectives by building understanding, trust, and cooperation among target audiences. The goals of StratCom can include promoting public safety, fostering cooperation, managing crises, or enhancing an organization's reputation.

**Ethical Considerations:** Propaganda is often associated with the manipulation of information, distortion of facts, and the suppression of dissenting views. It can disregard ethical considerations, such as truthfulness, transparency, and respect for individual autonomy. StratCom, on the other hand, generally adheres to ethical standards, emphasizing honesty, accuracy, and a two-way dialogue

with the target audience. StratCom aims to build credibility and maintain a positive reputation over the long term [17].

**Audience Relationship:** Propaganda often assumes a passive audience that is meant to be influenced or persuaded without active engagement. It tends to rely on one-way communication, where the propagandist controls the message. In contrast, StratCom recognizes the importance of engaging the target audience in a dialogue, building relationships, and fostering mutual understanding. StratCom encourages feedback, interaction, and the exchange of ideas between the communicator and the audience.

**Transparency:** Propaganda often operates covertly, disguising the true source of the information or the intentions behind it. It may employ deceptive tactics or use misinformation to achieve its objectives. StratCom, on the other hand, emphasizes transparency and open communication. It seeks to establish trust with the audience by providing accurate and reliable information, disclosing the communicator's identity and intentions, and being accountable for the messages conveyed.

**Long-term Focus:** Propaganda often focuses on short-term gains and immediate results, aiming to influence public opinion or behavior

in the short run. StratCom takes a more long-term perspective, aiming to build relationships, foster understanding, and achieve sustained cooperation over time. StratCom initiatives often involve ongoing communication efforts and maintaining consistent messaging to build trust and credibility.

#### 4. EFFECTIVE KPIS

Propaganda, as well as StratCom, works only if the messages have been developed after a thorough analysis of the information environment, of the audience and of course, after identifying what communication objectives need to be attained. Effectiveness cannot happen without a good set of KPIS, which should be objective and measurable, and an established baseline [18], [19].

In order to assess the effectiveness of StratCom we need metrics and a baseline to start from. Key Performance Indicators (KPIS) for StratCom can help assess the effectiveness of communication efforts and their impact on achieving strategic goals. Here are some potential KPIS for StratCom:

*Message penetration:* Measuring the extent to which the intended messages are reaching the target audience through various channels, such as media coverage, social

media engagement, website traffic, or email opens.

*Audience perception:* Surveys or sentiment analysis are necessary to determine whether there are changes and to what scale in the audience perceptions, attitudes, or understanding related to the organization's goals or values.

*Behavior change:* Assessing whether the StratCom initiatives have influenced desired behaviors or actions among the target audience, such as increased support, engagement, or compliance.

*Engagement and interaction:* Measurements of audience engagement and interaction with StratCom content, such as likes, comments, shares, or participation in events or discussions.

*Reach and exposure:* Evaluation of the extent to which the StratCom efforts have reached the target audience and expanded the organization's visibility or influence through metrics like reach, impressions, or media mentions.

*Reputation and trust:* Assessments of the organization's reputation and the levels of trust among the target audience through surveys, reputation indices, or feedback mechanisms.

*Feedback and sentiment analysis:* Analysis of feedback, comments, or sentiments expressed by the target audience to understand their perceptions, concerns, and needs,

and adjusting StratCom efforts accordingly.

*Alignment with objectives:* Continuously assess whether the StratCom initiatives are aligned with the organization's broader strategic goals and objectives.

*Cost-effectiveness:* Evaluation of the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of StratCom activities by measuring the return on investment (ROI) or comparing the cost of reaching the target audience with the achieved outcomes.

These KPIs should be customized according to the specific objectives, target audience, and context of the StratCom initiative. Regular monitoring and evaluation can help refine communication strategies, optimize resource allocation, and ensure that communication efforts are effectively contributing to the organization's goals [20], [21].

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

While there are differences between propaganda and StratCom, it's important to note that the boundaries can sometimes blur, and the intentions behind communication initiatives can vary in practice. The ethical use of communication to inform, engage, and build relationships is a fundamental principle of StratCom, distinguishing it from the manipulative nature often associated

with propaganda. Strategic Communication refers to the planned and coordinated use of communication to achieve specific objectives in the context of an organization, government, or military. Unlike propaganda, which focuses on manipulating information for a specific agenda, StratCom aims to build understanding, trust, and cooperation among target audiences.

Nevertheless, for effective results we need appropriate KPIs to help assess the impact of communication efforts, identify areas for improvement, and demonstrate the value of communication in support of the organizational goals.

In summary, StratCom encompasses a broader and more neutral concept of communication planning and execution, often employed by military and political entities to achieve objectives through effective communication. On the other hand, propaganda is a narrower term that refers to the dissemination of biased or misleading information with the intent of manipulating public opinion and advancing a specific agenda, often through unethical means.

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