
The Crawl, Walk, Run Progression for the Integration and Conduct of Efforts to Inform, Influence, and Persuade

By

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Editor's Notes: Dr. Paul's keen insight on inform, influence, and persuade methodologies have great cross-community potential. The current state of strategic communication make this a timely and highly relevant discussion.

As I have noted elsewhere, strategic communication suffers from ambiguity in both discussion and in practice.¹ I am not alone in this observation; many contributors to *IO Sphere* have reported misunderstandings, false starts, confused processes, and divergent recommendations for ways ahead in this area.² In fact, the term "strategic communication" itself is now passé in many parts of the Department of Defense, but the need for better planning, coordination, and integration of communication efforts and other actions (all of which communicate) remains.

The policy space is full of proposals and recommendations for reform in this area. In my 2009 *Whither Strategic Communication? An Inventory of Current Proposals and Recommendations*, I summarize the central recommendations of no fewer than 36 reports, monographs, white papers, or opinions.³ There are many good ideas and significant areas of consensus, but broad differences remain in terms of the priorities for and the details of the various things recommended to make improvements.

We all agree that this is important, and that we want US Government and Department of Defense efforts in this area to be better, to be more robust, and to be more effective. We cannot, however, seem to agree specifically what we want strategic communication to be, if we even want to call it that, and what specific steps we should take (and in what order) to begin to do it better. What are we to do?

Solutions

In this short article, I offer two solutions. The first concerns clarity in our discussions, and echoes a suggestion I have offered elsewhere.⁴ The solution is simple: when you use the phrase strategic communication, or any other synonym or euphemism, *say what you mean*. That is, add a qualifier that makes clear what aspect, element, component, or dimension of efforts to inform, influence, or persuade or their coordination or integration you intend to address. That will assure listeners (or readers) immediately gain shared understanding of what part of the much larger problem you intend to talk about. I propose five different aspects of this topic that are often left implicit in discussions. They are

- the enterprise level,
- communication planning, integration, and synchronization processes,
- communication strategies and themes,
- communication, information, and influence capabilities, and

- knowledge of human dynamics and analysis or assessment capabilities.

This list is not exhaustive. If you want to discuss some aspect that is not captured in these five elements, by all means go ahead; just make some kind of clear statement of what it is that you wish to discuss. To take my own medicine, let me be explicit that this article is about *enterprise-level strategic communication*, and how we intend to grow and develop this enterprise.

The second solution I offer addresses the lack of consensus regarding priorities for development in this area, and comes from my book, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates*.⁵ In the book I argue that, while some of the divergence in recommendations in this area comes from genuine disagreement, most of it comes from differences of emphasis and a failure to consider desired capabilities as part of a logical progression.

Consider, for example, that for some, strategic communication focuses on just getting to a minimal level of deconfliction between our different modes of broadcast and avoiding information fratricide. For others, the emphasis is on long-term partnerships and engagements, and the necessary enabling cultural and contextual knowledge. For others still, strategic communication should emphasize leveraging the private sector for a variety of resources and capabilities that are not organic to the government. I believe that all of these things have a place in the broader enterprise, but that some things have to come before other things, either because they are logically prior, or just easier to develop from the current existing baseline. The solution is one that will be familiar to military audiences: development in this area should follow a "crawl, walk, run" progression.

The Crawl, Walk, Run progression for strategic communication

As we try to get better at strategic communication, we need to remember that Rome wasn't built in a day. There are many gaps between what we currently do well in this arena and all the things we'd like to do well. It follows from this insight that there should be a logical progression toward closing gaps and building capabilities. To propose such a progression, I borrow from an often used military training metaphor: the crawl, walk, run progression. Before you walk, crawl; before you run, walk. When we consider all of things that could go into strategic communication, rather than getting into an argument about which ones are most important, I propose instead we ask: Which ones are easiest and which ones are foundational for, or logically prior to, the others? In short, which do we need to develop to progress to the crawl level, and which should be considered part of the higher walk level, or the highest run level?

In what follows I give a provisional set of answers, the capabilities I'd like to see developed for or in support of

strategic communication and the crawl, walk, run level with which I think they are best aligned. I fully recognize that others may disagree with my prioritization, and may want to see some capabilities emphasized earlier or later. I take no umbrage at this and urge proponents to get their favored capabilities, structures, or processes funded and fielded when they feel the time is right, recognizing that some things really are logically prior to others but that there is no penalty for concurrent development.

The crawl level of strategic communication

The things I'd like to see developed at the crawl level are foundational, not necessarily easy. I include only three steps in the crawl level, but they are big steps:

- Align actions and messages
- Establish formal advocacy/advisory roles
- Create imperatives for thinking about strategic communication

I discuss each below.

Align actions and messages

The need to align actions and messages follows directly from the fact that actions communicate and the need to coordinate and deconflict messages to avoid information fratricide. In order to align actions and messages, processes need to be in place to coordinate messages and also coordinate actions for their messaging, imagery, and signaling content. These processes need to be present at all levels of the government capable of producing actions or messages.

If someone proposed that aligning messages belonged at the crawl level, but that aligning actions was higher level, I would not strongly disagree. I think, however, it is easier to design coordination processes to include everything you want to coordinate (actions and messages) from the outset, rather than trying to expand their embrace later.

Establish formal advocacy/advisory roles

Informing, influencing, or persuading is often an afterthought in pursuit of other sorts of goals. Further, the expertise necessary to be thoughtful about the information implications of a planned activity or proposed course of action is often not resident in the group making such plans. At the crawl stage, we need to have information and influence professionals available to decision-makers and commanders, and embedded in relevant staff processes. All planning cells should have a formal inform, influence, and persuade "devil's advocate" who constantly (though, hopefully, not annoyingly) asks: what message will that send? Ideally, this individual will also have (or at least have access to) the necessary expertise to help planners figure out what message would be sent, and further to figure out how to plan actions, events, or messages that send desired messages.

While such advisors or advocates are needed now and are part of the crawl level, they may not be necessary in the far future or at the run level. Once all policymakers, commanders, and other authorities within the government have truly embraced a communication mindset, they won't need an outside expert to remind them to think about the messages and signals that their actions and policies produce; they'll do it themselves as a natural part of their decision-making and planning processes. Communication expertise will still be necessary, but it can reside at subordinate positions in an organization, secure in the knowledge that they will be sought out when needed, rather than ignored or marginalized.

Create imperatives for thinking about strategic communication

If informing, influencing, and persuading is important, and effective influence requires clear objectives, then commanders and decision-makers must be made to think about and establish objectives for these activities. While the presence of a communication advisor should encourage such thinking, some kind of forcing function or structural imperative would be even better.

In the military context, I have just the thing in mind. Army War College Professor Dennis Murphy proposes that all statements of commander's intent be required to include the commander's desired information endstate.⁶ If commanders think about, and are explicit about, communication and information endstates, their subordinates will have no choice but to do so as well.

The walk level of strategic communication

Once foundational processes and structures are in place, it becomes possible to expand the scope. Progressing to the crawl level should leave us coordinating our actions and messages so that they don't directly conflict with each other, and with some kind of individual reminding us, or planning requirement forcing us, to think about and plan for messages and signals in pursuit of identified goals.

The walk level, then, is where things really come together and the true potential starts to be realized. I identify ten steps that could be part of the progression at the walk level:

- Conduct evaluation and assessment
- Nest goals from top to bottom
- Improve coordination
- Engage in "listening"
- Understand culture
- Understand human dynamics
- Understand media environments
- Conduct media monitoring and counter-propaganda
- Employ knowledge management solutions
- Leverage civil society

I discuss each in turn.

Conduct evaluation and assessment

Once you've accepted the idea that you can meet important objectives through informing, influencing, and persuading and started trying to do it, you need to know whether or not you are succeeding. Assessment is essential to improving efforts and campaigns. If you know what is working and what isn't, you can make adjustments, corrections, and improvements. At the other end of the planning process, if you can demonstrate effectiveness, it will be easier to gain funding and support for further efforts.

Nest goals from top to bottom

If crawl-level imperatives have forced agencies and commands to have stated strategic communication objectives (as commander's information endstates or otherwise), then the next level of progress is to connect those objectives to levels above and below, and to adjacent organizations. Rather than happening piecemeal or from the middle-levels out as the previous sentence might be taken to imply, this works best from

top to bottom. Clear information and influence goals should be articulated at the national level, with clear supporting and subordinate objectives. Various government agencies could then make sure to align and connect their communication objectives with those broader national goals, while making sure their objectives are articulated such that subordinate elements in that agency can nest within them.

Improve coordination

At the walk level, it is time to start moving coordination and integration from “not conflicting” toward “mutually supporting and reinforcing” or maybe even “integrated.” Here, communication goals are pursued not just through individual messages and signaling actions that don’t conflict with each other, but as part of coordinated campaigns. This is a blanket statement meant to include a range of efforts to better leverage coordinated capabilities for specific goals. Synergies should appear, as themes are shared and reinforced by different sources.

Engage in “listening”

Another significant opportunity at the walk level is a first chance to be mindful of the other participants in the information environment. Everything at the crawl level emphasizes activities internal to the government: making sure we don’t send mixed signals or broadcast conflicting messages, making sure we are aware of and intentional with the signals we’re sending, etc. Once we’ve started to get our own house in order, it is time to turn to audiences and other players.

If this enterprise is really about communication, communication implies a two-way exchange. The crawl level focused only on the messages and signals being sent, and not at all on the receiving. To progress to the walk level, we need to get better at “listening.” Listening involves not just engagement, but research and monitoring of audiences, their perceptions, and their preferences. “The United States should know in advance the likely reaction and level of resistance to its policies and how America can best communicate them.”⁷⁷

Understand culture

If we’re paying attention to others at the walk level, an important part of that should include attention to culture. For messages to be really effective, not only do they have to not contradict each other, but they need to be comprehensible to and resonate within a cultural context. For listening to be really effective, you have to understand where the other parties to your dialogue “are coming from” both figuratively and literally.

Cultural knowledge can make important contributions to many aspects of this enterprise. The most obvious contribution is in the details of message and signal design and transmission, where closing the gap between what you intend to say or signal and what those signals actually mean to recipients is so important. Cultural knowledge is also foundational for effective listening and for effective measurement, assessment, and evaluation. Efforts to use (or compete with) narratives should be mindful of existing cultural narratives and likely interpretations of different descriptions of events.

Understand human dynamics

Of course, to effectively influence people you need to understand more than just their culture. You need a baseline appreciation for how people react and interact, and what the core tenets of effective influence are. A lot of the complexity is cultural, but a lot of the complexity is just human. “Understanding human dynamics is an essential aspect of planning for success across

the full spectrum of military and national security operations.”⁷⁸ In addition to the cultural expertise that is required to progress to the walk level, we also need communication expertise, and influence expertise, to include strong foundational social science resources for understanding human dynamics.

Understand media environments

Matching message to appropriate media and understanding the dynamics of a specific media environment is a walk level activity. Once messages and signals are intentional and coordinated, an emphasis on getting the messages and signals out more robustly becomes worthwhile. There is little point, for example, to buying AM radio airtime for messaging if no one in the target audience uses AM radios.

While understanding media environments starts with segmented media use patterns in a target context, it can be considerably more complex. Knowing not just what information media people in an area use, but which ones they trust, can be valuable, as can patterns of frequency of use, or times of day of use. Identifying popular local media personalities, which population segments cleave to which of those personalities, and whether they are popular because they are funny or because they are a trusted authority (for example), is also very useful information when planning or adjusting an information campaign.

Conduct media monitoring and counter-propaganda

The others in the information environment include not only those with whom we wish to engage or communicate, but other sources of messages and signals. The vast majority of these other participants are neutral or indifferent to the United States and her goals, but some are adversaries. Further, whether the source is adversarial or not, the messages and signals of others can work against our efforts, can support our efforts, or can compete with our messages and signals for bandwidth and attention.

One of the possible goals in this arena is the countering of adversary efforts in the information environment, and competition with unfavorable narratives more generally. The pursuit of that goal begins at the walk level, and starts with efforts to stay abreast of what is actually being said. This requires media monitoring. Done right, this is a massive undertaking, as big as the information environment itself. The number of different languages and channels of information flow is simply staggering.

At the walk level, media monitoring should encompass channels and languages relevant to current military operations or new policy initiatives. To get some use out of media monitoring, it should feed back into planning loops, and also connect to some rapid response capability able to refute or contest erroneous stories, narratives, or messages as rapidly as possible. We already have some fledging capability to do just that. To move to the run level, media monitoring will require robust machine translation and perhaps some further technological improvements.

Employ knowledge management solutions

The sheer potential volume of media monitoring “take” highlights another important barrier to progress toward “walking”—knowledge management. Just because “we” know something about an audience, have listened to and translated an important piece of adversary disinformation, or have a relevant cultural expert on tap, that doesn’t mean that the person in the government who needs to act on or access that information can do so.

The examples above are just a smattering of the levels and types of information needing to be shared as part of this enterprise. Some is fairly straightforward: vertical integration, the sharing of nested goals up and down, should just be part of the existing policy and planning processes. Information sharing for horizontal integration, however, be it within or between agencies, is non-trivial. Then there is the whole host of facilitating information: the data from the surveys, polls, focus groups, media use analyses, and other forms of collection that might be useful beyond the original data collector; the cultural expertise or specific contextual conclusions reached through exploitation of cultural knowledge; the take from media monitoring and the translation and analyses thereof; the products from all the listening and engagement. This is a big problem. At the walk level, solutions can be incremental and partial. To progress to the run level, however, really impressive knowledge management solutions will be required.

Leverage civil society

Several advocates encourage better leveraging civil society in support of strategic communication and public diplomacy. This is in part because “much of the expertise needed for effective public diplomacy is outside government.”⁹ By better leveraging civil society, run-level capabilities in cultural awareness or other areas might not need to reside inside of government, and might begin to become accessible at the walk level of overall development.

The run level of strategic communication

At the run level, we should be ready to fully leverage information as a focused element of national power. Strategic communication is second nature, and fully capable. Much of what happens at the run level involves elements added at the crawl or walk level but developing and integrating them to such a degree that they reach their full potential. I discuss four specific elements as being at the run level:

- Analyze and preempt adversary participation in the information environment
- Make counterpropaganda more sophisticated
- Integrate with allies
- Institutionalize communication awareness and skills

Each is discussed in turn below.

Analyze and preempt adversary participation in the information environment

As far as counter-propaganda goes, media monitoring can only take you so far. Once an adversary has put adverse content into the information environment, you have already lost the initiative and are forced to react to the adversary’s play. You can be very good at reacting, and can get to the point where you launch a refutation, a correction, or a counter-narrative or counter-story in a matter of minutes. But you are still reacting.

At the run level, we need to find ways to preempt adverse adversary information. There are several ways we might begin to do this, but further approaches may need to be invented.

One way to get ahead of adversary propaganda is to deny them opportunities. This can be done through carefully monitoring and documenting our own actions, so that when we accidentally do something that might make us look bad, we break the story first, denying the adversary any surprise or “gotcha” value, and preventing them from adding spin to the facts. Similarly, taking media monitoring into full-up content analysis and in

the presence of sufficient cultural expertise (and a little red-team creativity) might make it possible to anticipate what narratives adversaries will try to create or connect with. When these are identified, it becomes possible to either pre-plan responses to efforts to mobilize such narratives, or perhaps even preemptively mobilize alternative narratives that would make adverse narratives less likely to gain traction.

Make counterpropaganda more sophisticated

In a similar vein, countering propaganda after the fact can become more sophisticated, too. Adversary efforts in the information environment are already being monitored, and inaccuracies are attacked. Alternative narratives are being offered. At the run level, we have the necessary understanding of cultural and psychological nuances to engage adversary propaganda. This might take the form of debating philosophical or religious assumptions implicit in inflammatory or extreme messages, such as what one scholar advocates as “highlighting extremist contradictions” or otherwise seeking to derail adversary narratives based on flaws intrinsic in those narratives.¹⁰ While it might seem attractive to do these things at the crawl or walk level, such direct engagement requires strong and well-developed support from sufficient cultural, historical, religious, and social science knowledge in order to avoid backfiring or generating unwanted second- or third-order consequences.

Integrate with allies

At the run level, it goes without saying that US government messages and signals would be fully coordinated and integrated for maximum effect. Also at the run level should be some significant efforts at integration with allies. This is most important in military coalition contexts, where forces from allies and partners are operating alongside or adjacent to US forces. However, there is also benefit to be realized any time international policies or interests coincide.

International coordination and integration is a delicate matter, as there are important sovereignty and autonomy issues involved. Still, creating fora and structures for the discussion and sharing of strategic communication planning, without any efforts to force or coerce compliance, should be able to make important positive contributions. This may involve “listening” and compromising with allies and partners, providing them access to knowledge management systems, and very close inclusion in and sharing of strategic communication processes and practices.

It is worth noting that even at the run level, messages and signals, though fully integrated, are not totally pre-determined and controlled. Full integration is not equivalent to “speaking with one voice” but rather speaking with deconflicted voices that are mutually supporting. Run-level integration strikes just the right balance between centralization and control of theme and message, and autonomy and independence of individual speakers. This balance makes integration with allies possible. No ally is likely to sign up for a program of precisely controlled talking points, where every agent of both governments always says exactly the same thing; however, allies might well be willing to participate in a scheme of clearly defined and nested communication goals that provides effective fora for the discussion and planning of messages and signals and their contribution to larger, communal goals.

Institutionalize communication awareness and skills

At the run level, the kind of communication advocacy called for at the crawl level should give way to the broader institutionalization of strategic communication. Decision-

makers and staffers should know reflexively that they need to include consideration of signals and messages. Everyone should be communication minded, and relevant expertise in influence, assessment, and cultural knowledge should be present much more broadly throughout the government. Everyone should know the limits of their own relevant expertise, and know where in their respective organizations to go to access more.

Conclusions

There is broad consensus that strategic communication is important, but there are a host of different views about exactly what it is and an equally large stack of divergent proposals for improvement or development. As a community, we'll be better able to reach and stay within the consensus if we first are clear about exactly what aspect of enterprise we are talking about (say what you mean), and second if we recognize that strategic communication must follow a crawl, walk, run developmental progression and take pains to be clear about the level at which a proposed improvement contributes. 🌐

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Deconstructing Narratives: Using Primal Branding To Design Oppositional Narratives

By

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Editor’s Note: The underlying sociological premises of Primal Branding compose a unique perspective for accessing, analyzing, and ultimately influencing – or countering – any target audience. Intelligence analysts supporting the broader IO line of operation will find its structured methodology and rigor of great value in analyzing the information environment.

The mission of PSYOP is to influence the behavior of foreign target audiences (TA) to support US national objectives. PSYOP accomplish this by conveying selected information and/or advising on actions that influence the emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign audiences. Behavioral change is at the root of the PSYOP mission. Although concerned with the mental processes of the TA, it is the observable modification of TA behavior that determines the mission success of PSYOP (FM 3-05.30, Psychological Operations, April 2005).

Developing an influential narrative or counter-narrative is key to successful PSYOP. These narratives are the end result of detailed target audience analysis (TAA), the United States Army’s step-by-step methodology to profile groups and individuals. It is considered the cornerstone of effective PSYOP.

TAA is the process by which potential TAs are identified, refined, and analyzed. This analysis includes a comprehensive review of TA (“community” in Primal Branding-speak) conditions. “Conditions” are the existing elements that affect a TA’s behavior. They can be external, such as situations and events, or internal, such as attitudes, values, and beliefs. They also include relevant demographic (e.g., age, gender, religion, and socio-economics), psychographics (e.g., interests, opinions, and personality), and cultural information, as well as relationships with other groups and individuals.

The purpose of this analysis is to understand how a particular TA thinks, feels, and what motivates their behavior. From this analysis, narratives and counter-narratives are constructed to influence the group’s attitudes and behavior. While TAA helps understand a TA’s motivations, it’s not always easy to translate into an effective message.

We must understand that TAs, whether hostile or otherwise, are also vibrant communities, created and propelled by systems of belief. These belief systems are core constructs that, once created, attract others who share those beliefs. This creates community—whether that community is two individuals building a bomb, a larger group, village, city, movement, or nation.

Belief is designed around a “system” of seven key elements (the Primal Code) that propel the community, and make it vital, exciting, and meaningful to its members. The more pieces of code that exist, the stronger the belief system and the