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ARTICLE

Operation Iraqi Freedom strategic communication analysis and assessment

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ABSTRACT

In support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Joint Campaign Plan describing purpose and objectives was revised in mid-2007 and designated strategic communication as an important enabler of operations. A flexible and responsive methodological approach was needed to monitor, measure, analyze, and assess strategic communication to ensure desired effects were being achieved. This article details the real-world application of strategic communication analysis by the Multi-National Force – Iraq (MNF–I) Communication Division to support MNF–I and United States Mission – Iraq (USM–I) senior leadership situational awareness and decision making. The seven critical methods used included an understanding of the Iraqi and Pan-Arab media; media penetration of key themes; alignment of key messages; understanding Iraqi perceptions; prevalence of misinformation and disinformation in media stories; resonance of press conferences and key themes and messages; and effect of embedded reporters. The goal was to assess the alignment among facts on the ground, media framing of events, and Iraqi perceptions, and to provide actionable recommendations to improve the alignment.

KEY WORDS • media • military • operations research • strategic communication • war

Introduction

The United States (US), as a member of the Coalition Forces, began Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) on 19 March 2003. These operations have continued for over five years, but an important thread remains – the requirement for strategic communication. Conveying the Coalition Forces story in a fair and balanced manner without distortion is essential. The purpose is straightforward – to provide the US and Pan-Arab audiences with a factual accounting and rationale for operations and progress in Iraq. This tenet for strategic communication remains a critical factor for OIF as well as for future military-related operations. This article details the real-world application of strategic

communication analysis using operations research to provide increased situational awareness to support decision making by the Multi-National Force – Iraq (MNF–I) and United States Mission – Iraq (USM–I) senior leadership by assessing the alignment of reality on the ground, media portrayal of events, and Iraqi perceptions, and to provide actionable recommendations to improve the alignment.

Communication research is a well-studied field having multiple analytical techniques, including content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004), semiotic analysis (Chandler, 2007), cultural analysis (McQuail, 1987), evaluative assertion analysis (Osgood, 1959), frame analysis (Miller, 1997), and discourse analysis (Potter, 1996). Although operations research methods have not been widely applied to media analysis, these methods were essential in developing the methodology and illustrating the fertile area of research that partners operations research and strategic communication. The classic definition of operations research defines it as a 'scientific method of providing executive departments with a quantitative basis for decisions regarding the operations under their control' (Morse and Kimball, 2003: 1). This partnership produced seven critical efforts used to ensure that strategic communication was achieving the desired effects. These included: an understanding of the Iraqi and Pan-Arab media; media penetration of key themes; alignment of key messages; Iraqi perceptions; prevalence of misinformation and disinformation in media stories; resonance of press conferences and key themes and messages; and effect of embedded reporters.

The September 2004 Defense Science Board (DSB) report noted that strategic communication consists of four core instruments including public diplomacy, public affairs, international broadcasting services, and information operations (Vitto, 2004: 10). The DSB report highlighted that strategic communication is an important component of US national security and required transformation. In addition, the DSB report states that:

> strategic communication requires 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.

Although the DSB report was primarily directed at the highest level of the government, MNF–I is an important implementer of strategic communication. As the highest headquarters for military operations supporting OIF, MNF–I was a key conduit of the four core instruments of strategic communication, and required the development and application of a methodology to achieve the objectives stated in the DSB report.

Strategic communication can be defined as a comprehensive orchestration of actions, words, and images and requires monitoring, measuring, analyzing, and assessing. A methodological approach that is adaptable, flexible, and responsive is required to ensure desired effects are being achieved. MNF–I has a Strategic Effects (STRATEFF) Communication Division that developed and oversaw this methodology. Its mission is to promote Iraqi security, political and economic progress, refute inaccurate and misleading reporting, and develop Government of Iraq (GoI) strategic communication capability to do the same, in order to minimize the effects of sectarianism and advance political reconciliation in Iraq. The Communication Division has a dedicated analysis and assessment branch that provides the MNF–I and USM–I senior leadership with continuous feedback on how well this mission is accomplished, the associated impact, and the effectiveness of the strategic communication efforts.

When General David Petraeus assumed command of MNF-I on 10 February 2007, strategic communication became a more focal part of the war fighting effort. MNF-I considers strategic communication as an important support effort for the four primary lines of operation: political, economic, diplomatic, and security. After the change of command, General Petraeus gathered the commanders together for an initial opportunity to provide guidance to his subordinate commanders. In the area of communication, he stressed that approximately 60 percent of the fight was information. In this regard, not only do we have to fight for information, but we have to be the first with getting the information out to the media. He informed the commanders that it was their responsibility to talk to the media to inform them of what was happening. In this regard, if they needed to send their aircraft to Baghdad to pick up reporters, then meet the aircraft at their destination, talk to the reporters and then fly them back to Baghdad in order to file their stories, then that was what was expected (Boylan, 2008).

General Petraeus stressed to his commanders and staff that MNF-I does not attempt to suppress stories that reflect poorly upon operations. Although some media analysis organizations assess tonality of news stories, MNF-I did not apply this practice, but instead focused on General Petraeus's requirements that a story be accurate, in the proper context, and with the right characterization (Cihasky et al, 2005). This philosophy stems from his experiences in Central America, Bosnia, and the two tours of duty in Iraq as the Commander of the 101st Airborne Division, and later as the Commander of the Multi-National Security and Transition Command-Iraq. This culminated in a briefing about military and media relations that was developed while the Commander of the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth. This characterization parallels

framing – meaning that General Petraeus wanted the media to portray the events from the military's viewpoint with supporting detail (Entman, 2003; Aday et al., 2005). This did not imply that the military would give a version with erroneous information or that the independent media would necessarily accept the military version. There is a clear understanding that 'bad' news will happen during war and, as General Petraeus stated numerous times in daily operational update briefings: 'Even if you put lipstick on a pig, it's still a pig.'[1] Reported news should be balanced and not sensationalized. Furthermore, describing the events in the proper context with the right characterization or framing is important to ensure the reader or viewer has sufficient and accurate information to make their own assessment.

Iraqi and Pan-Arab media

The three most significant news sources in the Iraqi and Pan-Arab media are television, radio and print. Although an MNF–I website (in both Arabic and English) exists and is updated regularly, the main focus is on these three media. From a February 2008 nationwide poll, television was the primary source from which Iraqis obtained their news (78%), followed by radio (10%), and newspapers (3%). National polling (no response was received from 8% of Iraqis) showed that only 7 percent of Iraqis regularly use the internet. However, knowledge of the medium used is not sufficient for understanding the audience.

Ethnic and sectarian divisions in Iraq make a detailed understanding of the identity-group alliance of each media outlet essential. The promulgation of satellite television is a primary reason for television being the most popular medium. Furthermore, under Saddam Hussein, television was tightly regulated so, with the fall of his government, the opportunity for independent stations (potentially having a political bias) increased. The combination of these two factors led to more television stations, although the stations were not necessarily broadcast from Iraq or even supportive of the developing Iraqi government.

Analysis from the February 2008 nationwide polling shows that Al-Iraqiya is the primary television station watched (26%) and is regarded as supportive of the Government of Iraq (GoI). The second and third most watched are Al-Sharqiya (23%) and Al-Arabiya (13%); both are considered pro-Sunni. The determination of the bias was done jointly by the STRATEFF Communication Division, USM–I Public Affairs Section, and the Multi-National Corps – Iraq (MNC–I) Joint Fires and Effects Cell and updated on a semi-annual basis. Each of these organizations had the assistance of Iraqis and cultural experts

in assessing the level of bias to prevent an overtly Western view. A media source was categorized as either pro-GoI, pro-Shia, pro-Sunni, pro-Kurd, anti-Coalition, or no known bias. A rating of no known bias meant that the media source was unaligned with a faction or other identity group and did not consistently or predominantly frame their reporting from a single perspective.

The most listened-to radio stations are Al-Iraqiya (16%), which is considered pro-GoI, and Radio Sawa (16%), which is considered unbiased. The next most listened to is BBC (7%), which is also considered unbiased. The most read newspaper is Al-Sabah (24%) and is considered unbiased. Al-Zaman is the second most read (10%) and is regarded as being opposed to Coalition Forces. Al-Mashriq is the third most read (5%) and has no known bias. Another limiting factor of newspapers in the Iraqi and Pan-Arab region was that it was the slowest medium to report the news. It was not uncommon that news reported on television and radio did not appear in newspapers until two or three days later. Another reason for print being the least preferred medium is the comparatively lower literacy rate compared to European and US audiences.

These viewership and readership numbers show that television is the most popular medium for obtaining news. Monitoring these stations to ensure stories are balanced with proper characterization and in the right context or framing is important in order to not only have current situational awareness, but also to create a database to identify longitudinal trends. One of the challenges faced by the STRATEFF Communication Division was the lack of readily available data sources. In the West, media content analysis is greatly facilitated with Lexis-Nexis, Factiva, TVEyes, and Vocus. These tools were used extensively by the Communication Division to gain a thorough understanding of how Western media were reporting and framing OIF.

However, tools such as these did not exist for extensive Iraqi and Pan-Arab media cataloguing. A media monitoring enterprise was necessary to identify MNF–I and USM–I organizations conducting monitoring, how they were capturing, storing, and using information. A principal reason for establishing an enterprise was to reduce redundancy in monitoring. Multiple agencies monitoring the most-watched television stations probably provided a good cost benefit, but having more than one agency monitor a media source that less than 1 percent of Iraqis cited as a primary source of news did not provide that same benefit.

Our assessment of agency monitoring of Iraq media found that each one did so for different reasons. This included current situational awareness, creating an historical database, identifying how specific topics were being portrayed, and identifying erroneous stories. Each intention brought with

it different coding schemes and content sensitivities. As a result, relying on one agency to monitor a source might not be sufficient to meet another agency's tailored needs. This meant that redundancy of certain outlets (above and beyond the most watched, listened to, or read) was necessary. After collaboration between the organizations that monitored media, consensus was achieved as to which organizations monitored which media. From May 2007 until May 2008, redundancy was reduced by 41 percent.

A database called the Iraqi/Pan-Arab Database (IPAD) was created in September 2007 that all MNF–I and USM–I organizations could access, and all monitoring agencies found IPAD acceptable for most of their requirements. IPAD consists of over 160 different Iraqi and Pan-Arab media sources and had over 15,000 references by May 2008. This searchable database provides an archival capability to discern trends and key themes and messaging. This database, coupled with the Western media tools, provided the resources needed to provide a robust analysis and assessment capability. Currently, IPAD is proprietary and is not shared with a broader audience.

Media and key themes

MNF–I focused on four primary themes or threads: political, economic, diplomatic, and security. The stories in the databases were categorized under these four headings to assess trends in salience over time. A story could be classified in more than one category. Not surprisingly, security-related stories – involving operations and violence – dominated the Iraqi and Pan-Arab media from August 2007 to April 2008 and accounted for approximately 43 percent of Iraq-related stories concerning OIF and its effects. Political stories, typically involving elections, Parliamentary sessions, and passage of laws, occupied approximately 33 percent of the Iraqi and Pan-Arab media. Diplomatic and economic-related stories, approximately 15 percent and 10 percent, respectively, occupied the least media (see Figure 1).

During August and September 2007, the Western media similarly had a larger percentage of OIF security-related stories, vice diplomatic, economic, or political OIF-related stories. From the MNF–I and USM–I perspective, economic-related stories, involving employment and reconstruction efforts, ideally would have dominated the media, but these stories were often overshadowed by security conditions. This illustrates the agenda-setting theory with the media focusing public attention on events such as casualties and the lethal danger of improvised explosive devices, and making the public aware of them (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Miller and Krosnick, 1997; Soroko, 2003). This does not imply that MNF–I considered the media wrong for covering these
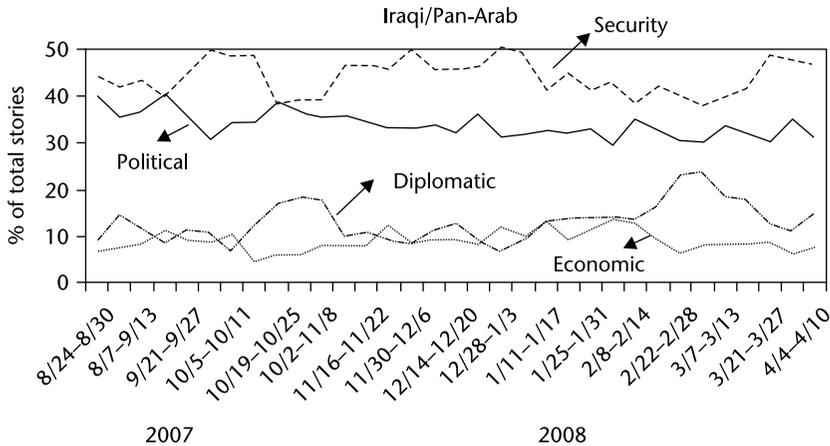
Figure 1 Percentage of media stories by line of operation in the Iraqi and Pan-Arab media from August 2007 to April 2008 (dates in US format).

stories since they were an important element of OIF, but instead reflected its desire that the media agenda incorporate more stories highlighting progress and stability in Iraq. The media's main focus was on security-related stories since violent activities are also an example of event-driven news (Lawrence, 2001; Livingston and Bennett, 2003; Aday and Livingston, 2008). These events could not be controlled by MNF–I and could be characterized or framed in multiple ways. Although MNF–I would have regular press conferences (discussed later), events such as bombings, helicopter crashes, and Turkish cross-border operations were more likely to appear in the media and made MNF–I more reactive than proactive. Procedures were implemented by MNF–I (also discussed later in the paper) to address event-driven news and to give media the most complete and up-to-date operational reporting.

During August and September 2007, the Western media similarly had a larger percentage of OIF security-related stories, rather than diplomatic, economic, or political OIF-related stories. However, after the Congressional testimony of Ambassador Ryan Crocker and General Petraeus in September 2007, security-related stories, which had occupied approximately 40 percent of the media for Iraq-related stories, dropped to approximately 30 percent (see Figure 2). There were two primary reasons for this decrease in coverage. The first was that there had been significant 'hype' and attention to the testimony, but there was little that came out of the testimony that was substantially different from what President Bush's Administration or USM–I and MNF–I senior officials had been stating prior to the testimony. The second reason was that there was an actual decrease of violence in Iraq. This does not imply
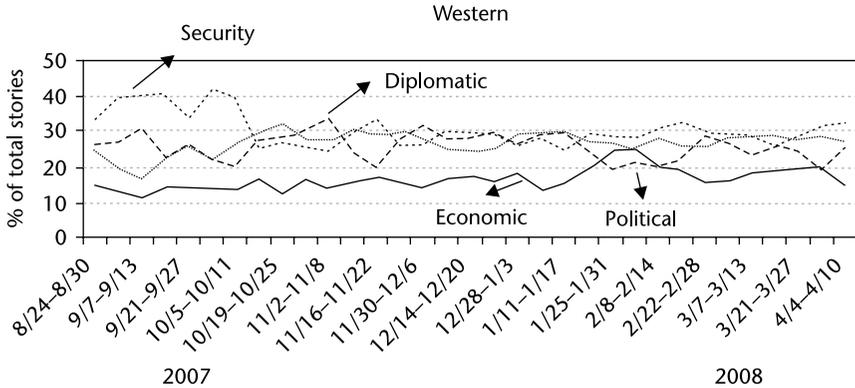
Figure 2 Percentage of media stories by line of operation in the Western media from August 2007 to April 2008 (dates in US format).

that the testimony caused the reduction of violence. An explanation for the decrease in violence was that al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) attempted its own version of a Tet-style offensive prior to the testimony, but its impact was minimal (Kukis, 2007). However, AQI did use its resources and suffered losses that restricted its ability to conduct operations after the testimony, which, in turn, led to a reduction in violence.

From August 2007 to April 2008, political stories averaged 28 percent, diplomatic averaged 23 percent, and economic averaged 16 percent. Diplomatic-related stories had the most variability since events such as the visit of Iranian President Ahmadinijad and Turkish cross-border operations occurred periodically and would cause a spike in coverage. Although the Communication Division welcomed 'good news' stories (those stories that highlighted progress and stability in Iraq), there was not a formal metric to determine the number of these stories that appeared nor the associated trend. Recall that the emphasis was on balanced and accurate stories in the proper context and frame, thus, ideally, an improvement in security and progress would correspondingly show an increase in these 'good news' stories. In reality, these stories did begin to increase in the late spring of 2008.

Related to how the Iraqi stories were partitioned among the four different lines of operations was the overall number of OIF-related stories in the media. Not surprisingly, the number of Iraq-related stories has decreased since late 2006. Figure 3 is based upon the MNF–I media source list (approximately 200 primary television, print, and radio outlets)[2] and is different from the one used by the Pew Research Center which uses 48 outlets (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007). However, both the MNF–I source list and Pew Research Center list (which examines fewer sources) show a similar declining
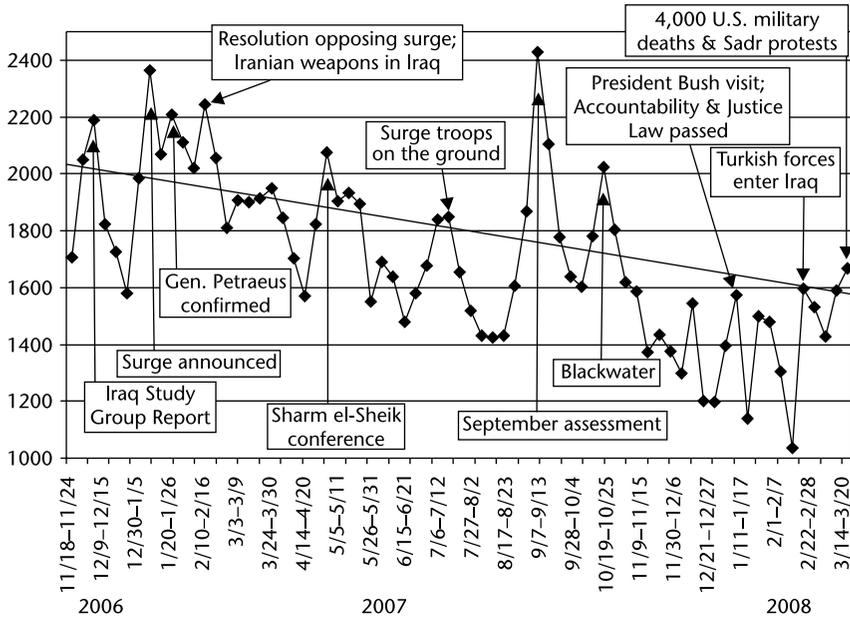
Figure 3   Western media coverage from November 2006 to March 2008 of OIF using the MNF–I media source list (dates in US format).

trend with spikes still occurring in OIF-related coverage, especially concerning high-profile events and announcements. There was a significant decline in coverage in the January to February 2008 time period, but coverage increased due to the Turkish cross-border operations and speculation concerning the April Congressional testimony. As noted previously with the discussion of agenda-setting and event-driven news, the reduction in violence led to a corresponding reduction in coverage. Instead of a reduction, MNF–I would have preferred the coverage to include stories highlighting diplomatic, political, economic, and security progress and stability, but these stories did not dominate the media agenda.

Alignment of key messages

Message alignment or coordination, coupled with the requirement for accuracy, was central to the shaping of the media information environment. For the most part during May 2007 to May 2008, MNF–I leaders had strong message alignment and did not contradict each other's message. The focal point of the messaging involved the pace of progress and security conditions. For example, if General Petraeus highlighted that security gains and progress were

fragile, then another senior leader would echo similar remarks in subsequent media engagements. Message discipline was most likely easier to accomplish given the hierarchical nature of the military (Keen and McQuillan, 2003). All MNF–I senior leaders were to either attend the daily operational updates to General Petraeus where he gave guidance or review the published notes from these updates. Additionally, each major organization in MNF–I had dedicated military public affairs officers that assisted their leaders by preparing talking points based upon this guidance. These processes supported the messaging coordination and synchronization (Maltese, 1994).

The Joint Campaign Plan stipulated that MNF–I and USM–I conduct strategic communication to convey its messages to Iraqi, Pan-Arab, and Western audiences. Although messaging occurred throughout the week, press conferences gave MNF–I the best opportunity to prepare and execute its messaging coordination and to frame events. If event-driven news item occurred recently (i.e. within the past 24 hours), then these press conferences were a timely venue in which MNF–I could express its position. A press conference was held on Sunday and normally involved an MNF–I spokesman and a representative from the GoI, either a military or civilian official. The intended audience was Iraqi and Pan-Arab, although numerous Western journalists attended. The Monday press conference was typically a Pentagon Press Conference and involved an MNC–I military commander who would give an operational overview from their perspective. The primary MNF–I press conference was normally held on Wednesdays and was primarily focused on Western audiences. However, from May 2007, there was a significant increase in Iraqi and Pan-Arab journalists attending these press conferences and, more importantly, asking questions. Additionally, these journalists showed a greater propensity to ask challenging and probing questions. General Petraeus provided daily feedback to MNF–I on key messaging and this feedback was incorporated into the press conferences, both in the prepared remarks and for integration into the question and answers period. The essential element was that strategic communication was top-driven so that subordinates could then reinforce the same messaging.

Messaging from the GoI was also important to capture. However, their message reinforcement and alignment did not always occur. The primary reason for non-alignment was that they were still developing their strategic communication capabilities. Under the Saddam Hussein regime, their messaging was not always factual and was often done to portray the regime in the most positive light, regardless of the reality. The Iraqi public still has a fair amount of skepticism about the information provided by the GoI, based on their experiences under Saddam Hussein. The GoI does have a spokesperson

(Dr Ali al-Dabbagh) and a National Media Center, but alignment between the Office of the Prime Minister, Ministry of Interior, and Ministry of Defense is not always synchronized and compatible. However, improvement was noted in the first half of 2008, especially in messaging involving Turkish cross-border operations and the strategic framework negotiations.

On a daily basis, key quotes were captured from MNF–I and GoI leaders. On a weekly basis, the best quotes for each of MNF–I and GoI were placed in a theme category (e.g. political progress, security, troop reduction). These best quotes were quite selective and limited to no more than one page each for MNF–I and GoI. The intent of these one-page documents was to frame events and highlight specifically the key messages that should be reinforced in media engagements based upon guidance from General Petraeus, the MNF–I STRATEFF Director (US Army general officer), and MNF–I STRATEFF Communication Division Director (US Navy flag officer). As an example, during the week of 15–21 March 2008, the theme of troop reduction was messaged by Ambassador Ryan Crocker of USM–I and General Petraeus. On 18 March, Ambassador Crocker stated: 'It's not simply assessing what the conditions are. You have to try and think through "How does it all change when we're not there?" Our absence can be as substantial as our presence' (Barr, 2008). On 16 March, General Petraeus stated:

> The overall trajectory is established. We're going down. We are reducing forces. But I can't tell you at this point where or how fast we should go beyond July. It is more than geometry, it is calculus … The question is how do we assess what happens when we are gone. That is hard to do. (Sennott, 2008)

These key messages were disseminated to senior leaders and served as an easy reference for remarks for framing events in media engagements. This is a good example of mutually supportive and synchronized messaging. The combination of the one-page reference and General Petraeus' daily reinforcement of key messaging contributed to robust message alignment.

Another advantage of keeping a historical record of these key messages was to identify any major changes or shifts in messaging. The major themes for MNF–I messaging from July 2007 to April 2008 were the surge in operations, political and security progress, diplomatic relations with Iran, AQI, Concerned Local Citizens or Sons of Iraq,[3] and future force structure. The messaging in these themes remained consistent during this time period amongst senior leaders. Sharing the convenient, one-page summary of key messages on a weekly basis was one of the reasons the alignment and consistency of messages occurred. These key messages, especially for MNF–I, were integrated into the press conferences and enabled the shaping and reinforcement strategic communication.

Iraqi perceptions

While stories need to be balanced in the right context with proper framing, messaging needs to be realistic and reflect facts on the ground. Messaging that is unsupported by actual conditions is counterproductive and harks back to the days of media control of Saddam Hussein, thus the emphasis was on accurate messaging. At the conclusion of each month, analysis was done to examine the key themes and messages that had appeared in the Western, Iraqi and Pan-Arab media, compare the messaging to facts on the ground, and examine Iraqi perception from existing polling information.

Polling in Iraq is problematic for several reasons. The first is that Iraq is still a dangerous place, so that having pollsters in all areas is not always feasible. There is also skepticism that Iraqis are willing to give their opinions, but are more likely to give the response they believe the pollsters want to hear. However, none of these reasons is unique to Iraq and many of the respected polling companies have extensive experience in dealing with these problems.

Polling is arguably the best way to gain a systematic and comprehensive understanding of the attitudes and opinions of the Iraqis. Although the numbers by themselves might not be wholly reliable, the trends over time are important and give senior leaders an excellent perspective. However, in order for these trends to have meaning, it is important that the methodology and questions remain stable. If the methodology or question set vary from survey to survey, then gaining meaningful insights is severely jeopardized. MNF–I did not directly poll Iraqis since it was highly doubted that trustworthy responses would be obtained. Although MNF–I may have surveys conducted on their behalf, this information would not be available due to operational security and the fact that the results are pre-decisional. However, USM–I and MNF–I would also routinely analyze other polling results conducted by outside agencies such as D³ Systems.[4]

As an example, during January 2008, there was extensive messaging that even though security had improved, these gains were fragile and AQI remained a credible threat. Operational reporting supported this messaging as there was a small increase in high-profile attacks and a significant offensive operation commenced in Mosul to defeat AQI fighters. D³ Systems conducted a poll of 2,228 Iraqi adults from 12–20 February 2008 for ABC News and the BBC. Results of this poll showed that 62 percent rated local security as positive which was up 19 percent from their previous poll in August 2007. Additionally, 46 percent said local security improved in the past six months compared to only 24 percent in August 2007. There are multiple factors that

influence Iraqi perception. Strategic communication messaging, although critical, is only one of those factors. However, it is not possible to accurately attribute how much of this change in perception was due to the messaging. Numerically determining the contribution of strategic communication to a shift in perception will continue to be an inexact science, but identifying if a shift in perception occurs remains an important consideration and one that can be determined using survey data.

Managing erroneous stories

A major concern is the promulgation of misinformation or disinformation in the Iraqi and Pan-Arab media. Erroneous stories often result from misinformation or disinformation. Erroneous stories are defined as those stories appearing in the media that are not factually correct based upon the most current operational information from units on the ground. There were two primary methods used to diminish the effect of the proliferation of these stories. The first was to rapidly identify when erroneous information was in the media. Through the monitoring enterprise efforts discussed previously, there was real-time situational awareness to permit not only the identification of the story, but to then immediately contact the source and provide clarifying information. However, many of the Iraqi and Pan-Arab media were not necessarily unbiased, thus the media source may have chosen to disregard the new information provided by MNF–I. For example, Al-Baghdadiyah is an Iraqi satellite channel that broadcasts out of Cairo and is opposed to the Coalition Forces presence in Iraq. They were one of the biggest sources of erroneous stories. But when presented with clarifying information, they would typically choose not to provide a retraction or this alternative point of view. Figure 4 illustrates a seven-month snapshot of the number of erroneous stories and the number of references to those stories in the Iraqi and Pan-Arab media from September 2007 thru March 2008. Note that an erroneous story might have several references. For example, in February 2008, there were nine references to the erroneous story that US helicopters were intentionally targeting Sons of Iraq and seven references to the erroneous story that US military forces raided the Mustansiria Dentistry College.

 Although there is no definitive trend that indicates an increasing or decreasing number of erroneous stories or references, there are three important caveats. The first is that the number of monitored outlets increased three-fold beginning in December 2007 so that, although the number of erroneous stories increased, the number of outlets monitored increased significantly. The second note is that the length of time erroneous stories resonate in the
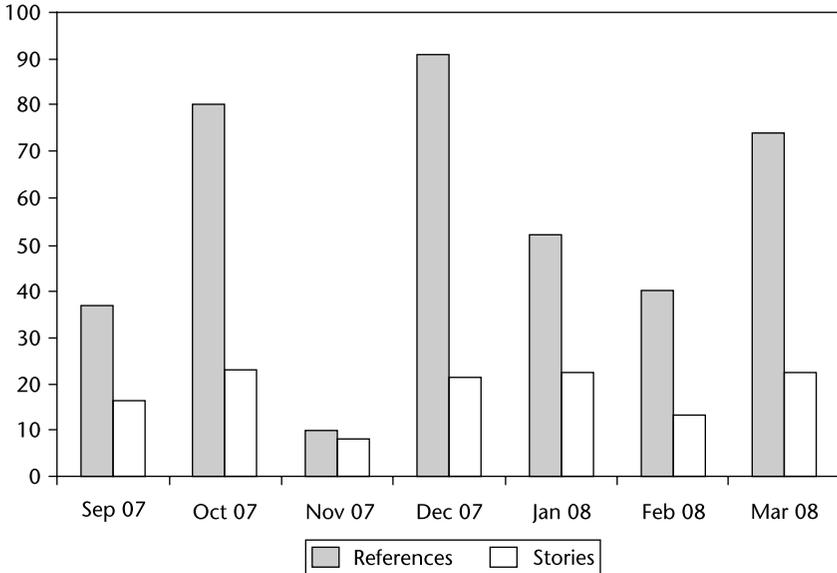
Figure 4 Comparison of erroneous stories and references to those stories in the Iraqi and Pan-Arab media (television, print, and radio) from September 2007 to March 2008.

media is just as important. The average length of time an erroneous story resonated was 3.2 days in September 2007, but by March 2008, the length of time was reduced to 2.1 days. Finally, the third caveat is reducing the time to confront the media outlet over an erroneous story. In September 2007, the average time was approximately 5.2 hours, but by March 2008, this time had been dramatically reduced to 1.2 hours.

The major cause of misinformation is confusion over reported casualties. On average, each month had approximately 10–15 references to erroneous reporting on casualty numbers. MNF–I units would receive operational reporting from units in the field concerning the observed number of casualties. Many of the media outlets employed stringers – people paid by the media outlets to obtain information about ongoing operations and facts on the ground. These stringers would go to local hospitals and count the number of casualties from a high-profile attack. However, they often counted many Iraqis going to the hospital for routine reasons unrelated to the recent attacks, which skewed resulting casualty numbers. Although MNF–I would rebut the media outlet, the outlet would often, at best, report both their numbers and MNF–I numbers or, at worst, disregard MNF–I input.

The second method of reducing erroneous stories and their effect is the use of timely and accurate press releases from MNF–I. The major wire

services (Associated Press, Reuters, and Agence France-Presse) would use information from these press releases to provide media outlets with notifications of breaking newsworthy events. However, the major advantage of providing timely press releases was to give a balanced portrayal with proper context and framing. This does not imply that the press release was used to falsely shape a story, but was used instead to provide the most factual information that had been vetted through operational channels. Analysis indicated that, on average, each press release generated 1.1 Western media references and 1.3 Iraqi and Pan-Arab media references. Furthermore, press releases that referenced kinetic events (i.e. offensive operations) resulted in more media references than non-kinetic events (i.e. economic developments). Press releases for kinetic events received 1.3 Western and 1.6 Iraqi and Pan-Arab media references, while press releases for non-kinetic events received 0.6 Western and 0.3 Iraqi and Pan-Arab media references, again illustrating the impact of event-driven news. Information that the media could use in a story was at a premium and each wire service strived to be first in the news cycle. Thus, if the services had to rely on a stringer for information for a story, then this would be their primary option. However, if MNF–I had a timely press release that referenced kinetic operations with substantial and relevant information, then the wire services would reference these press releases with direct quotes. These two methods of countering erroneous information rapidly and issuing timely press releases were critical to affecting the strategic communication effort.

There are two case studies of significance that illustrate the impact of a timely press release. On 21 October 2007, Coalition Forces conducted operations in Sadr City. Forces completed the operation at approximately 8:00 am. There were four press queries to the MNF–I Media Operations Center (MOC) prior to 10:00 am. However, the initial press release was not generated until 10:45 am and operational reporting only indicated six enemy killed in action. There was a four-hour delay in the subsequent press release that indicated 49 enemy killed in action. The resulting problem was that the peak Western media coverage occurred at 11:00 am, thus the information from the press release used in this coverage was not entirely accurate. This vignette served as an excellent impetus to modify procedures in the MOC to expedite timely and accurate press releases. The event on 27 October 2007, where Coalition Forces offensive action was taken in Fawwaliyah, is an example of a timely press release. In this instance, an accurate press release was released at 10:30 am, approximately two hours after the completion of the exercise. AFP published the first media story at 11:05 am and directly referenced the MNF–I press release using the desired framing language of 'rogue Sadr militant' in the title and 'extremist splinter group' in the body. This direct referencing of press releases

permits a shaping of the story that ensures balance with the desired framing and context.

Resonance of key themes and messages

Press releases were one source of sharing the story with the media, but press conferences were one of the best venues for conveying key themes and messages. These press conferences, coupled with battlefield circulations, interviews, and roundtables provided the opportunity for MNF–I to convey its desired messages. An analysis of monthly press conferences was done to not only examine the number of references to those press conferences, but to determine which themes and messages resonated. For example, in March 2008, MNF–I hosted six press conferences that resulted in 30 Iraqi and Pan-Arab media references, and 97 references in the major Western media. However, the number of references was not as critical as the question of whether the desired major themes were the focus of the references. In March 2008, these desired and reported themes included that recent violence in Baghdad did not mean security gains had been reversed, that AQI foreign fighters were disgruntled and felt betrayed by being misled into being suicide bombers, and that Iranian influence in Basrah was affecting the security conditions.

As noted previously, the problem is determining the effect achieved. The references just quoted serve as excellent measures of performance that answer the question of 'Are we doing things right?' In many instances, determining the effect is problematic since there are multiple factors that can influence the effect, thus making it difficult to determine the measure of effectiveness that answers the question of 'Are we doing the right things?' In most cases, the focus was on ensuring that desired MNF–I themes and messages resonated in the media. In conjunction with the press conferences coverage, the top key messages were also examined each month. In March 2008, the two top messages focused on Coalition Forces future force levels and highlighting that successes achieved are fragile without reconciliation. The message referenced most in the media concerning force structure was from General Petraeus stating: 'We are reducing forces, but I can't tell you at this point where or how fast we should go beyond July [2008]' (Sennott, 2008). This received 186 major Western media references and 290 references in Iraqi and Pan-Arab media. The most referenced message about gains achieved was also from General Petraeus: 'The gains are fragile and they are tenuous and until they are cemented by national reconciliation … then understandably what has been achieved on the ground will be a bit fragile' (Sly, 2008). This received 46 references in major Western media and 54 Iraqi and Pan-Arab

media references. The resonance allowed MNF–I to convey its desired themes and messages as it competed in the media with less facilitating messaging on Iraq. These two quotes are excellent examples of realistic messaging that avoided hype and overstatement and allowed MNF–I framing. The messaging was consistent with previous messaging, was reinforced by other spokes-persons, and did not attempt to sway public opinion, but rather to inform.

Embedded reporters

Embedded reporters were considered an excellent way to give a 'boots on the ground' perspective. OIF had a large number of embedded reports with units. From May 2007 to May 2008, the average number of embedded reporters per month was 84 (MNF–I defined an embedded reporter as one who spent a minimum of 24 hours with a specific unit). In many cases, the length of time a reporter spent with a unit was counted in weeks. Although there were a large number of reporters embedded at the beginning of OIF when operations were commencing and media interest was high, there was still a substantial number almost five years later. For example, in March 2008, there were 42 different embedded reporters who produced 68 stories in major Western media and 892 stories in regional Western media (see Figure 5). Although coverage was primarily on the coasts and Texas, there was still good coverage across the USA.

Figure 5   Number of media stories about OIF from embedded reporters appearing in the USA (March 2008).

There has been recent criticism that former Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld used retired military analysts to convey messages from President Bush's Administration. The problem was that they may not have been sufficiently independent as spokespersons, and some believe their ties to industry presented ethical problems (McCarthy, 2008). Embedded reporters were considered independent and were not subjected to publishing restrictions outside of operational and personal security requirements. The reporters were free to tell their appropriate stories. MNF–I has found that these embedded reporters gave readers an excellent first-hand perspective of what military members experience. Although not all of the material is flattering, it does offer a strong dose of realism of what military members are experiencing and feeling. Furthermore, even if the stories do not gain strong nationwide coverage, they do gain good regional coverage and, in many cases, this regional coverage is more appropriate since the embedded reporters are with units from a certain geographical area in the USA.

Although not directly related to embeds, the internet 'blogosphere' also offered an excellent opportunity for readers to gain a different perspective on OIF. There were numerous blogs that offered both military and non-military the ability to share their views and opinions with others. Beginning in May 2007, military members were required to clear the content with a superior officer prior to publishing. The stated purpose was to ensure operational security, although some might consider it as a means to suppress military members from giving negative views that could circulate in the blogosphere (McCleary, 2008).

MNF–I periodically conducted an assessment of the blogosphere (e.g. http://www.technorati.com) to determine the primary OIF topics being discussed. For example, an assessment from February to March 2008 showed that the top blogs discussing OIF were Huffington Post (http://www.huffingtonpost.com), Daily Kos (http://www.dailykos.com), Drudge Report (http://www.drudgereport.com), and the Corner (http://www.corner.nationalreview.com). The primary discussion on the blog about OIF revolved around the US political debate about the continuing US military presence in Iraq. However, military blogs such as The Long War Journal (http://www.longwarjournal.com) did focus more on actual military operations and events in Iraq. The common theme found in most of the blogs, regardless of political leaning or ideology on continuing the war effort, was a respect for the military as an institution. MNF–I continues to engage military bloggers in order to improve factual blogging about Iraq.

Conclusion

The justification for war in Iraq and continuing military presence there remains a contentious issue that sparks debate. The role of MNF–I strategic communication was not to sway the debate, but to provide factual information about OIF events. The goal was to have media provide balanced and accurate stories that were in the proper context and framing, and MNF–I wanted to ensure the media had the information it needed in a timely manner, coupled with the requirement for operational security.

The MNF–I STRATEFF Communication Division partnered operations research analysts, media analysts, and cultural experts to create innovative methods and practices to provide USM–I and MNF–I senior leaders with timely media situational awareness, analysis, and assessment. Analytical results were provided weekly to not only public affairs personnel, but also to other organizations and staffs supporting OIF, both inside and outside Iraq. The results were briefed to Ambassador Crocker and other senior diplomats by the USM–I public affairs section on a regular basis. The STRATEFF leadership briefed General Petraeus on a weekly basis and, on average, included three media analytical efforts. The seven areas included in this article were those routinely briefed to General Petraeus. They were deemed the most appropriate for providing him with media situational awareness and the alignment between what the media was saying, Iraqi perception, and facts on the ground. The challenge of determining the influence of MNF–I messaging on Iraqi perception still remains.

Strategic communication is an essential element for waging war and, arguably, one of the most important elements for irregular warfare – the type of warfare that the US may continue to face for the foreseeable future. Due to its importance, strategic communication must be monitored, measured, analyzed, and assessed to provide senior leaders with the important situational awareness necessary to make better decisions. This is the cornerstone of operations research – providing decision makers with unbiased and accurate information for them to consider when making choices. The processes and methods employed by the MNF–I Communication Division illustrate the viability and benefit of using operations research in analyzing and assessing strategic communication.

The surge in forces and operations that began in mid-2007 saw an increased role of strategic communication. The MNF–I STRATEFF Communication Division used a variety of methods to provide senior leaders with the impact and effect of both MNF–I and GoI communication efforts and how the media

was portraying OIF events. This area remains quite fertile for developing additional methods and techniques to ensure senior leaders during conflict have the best situational awareness and recommendations for action in developing, implementing, and evaluating their strategic communication.

Notes

1   For the interested reader, see Clarke (2006).
2   The complete list is available upon request.
3   These organizations are locally recruited security forces composed of Iraqi citizens that are supported by the US to fight AQI and maintain neighborhood security.
4   D³ Systems is an example of a vendor who has experience in conducting research, especially polling, in difficult and austere environments. The Gallup Organization is another example.

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