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**ASSIGNMENT – CONTENT AND COMMUNICATION  
STRATEGY**

**CHALLENGES IN FORMULATION OF A COHERENT AND  
COGENT COMMUNICATION STRATEGY IN ARMED  
FORCES**

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**ASSIGNMENT ON CONTENT AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGY**  
**BY CMDE NITIN KAPOOR – 47 INDC**

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**Introduction**

Over the last six hundred years, developments in the field of Communication and Information Technology have seen significant transformation and exponential innovation. From the time of invention of the first printing press in 1440 in Germany followed by the Industrial revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to the advent of the Information Revolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; communication and dissemination of information has metamorphosed in its reach, speed and content representing the very essence of '*Globalisation*' and the ability to connect '*every corner of the Globe*' through concomitant development of Mass Media . Communication techniques, platforms, strategies etc have become the new buzzwords which have been intertwined and integrated into the very fundamentals of doing business; be it in Governments, Public Sector or Private Corporations alike. The ability to disseminate ideas, communicate effectively and influence public opinion have gained equal if not more importance than the core task of an organisation itself. And amongst these rapid changes and development of new information/communication techniques and platforms which are occurring at a blistering pace, armed forces across the world suddenly find themselves in this unfamiliar environment of constant change and transformation, grappling with arriving at a relevant and suitable communication strategy while continuously debating between the '*old*' closed, secretive model of communication and the '*new*' open and expressive one.

This paper therefore seeks to attempt at identifying challenges in formulation of a coherent and cogent communication strategy in Armed Forces. The author intends it to be a free writing paper based on personal experiences and cognitive abilities post developing a rudimentary understanding of the modern communication world consequent to the capsule on '*Content and Communication Strategies*'. While addressing these challenges (which are elucidated in the succeeding paragraphs), the paper

focuses on large Armed Forces of democratic nations as a model of study as opposed to Armed Forces of authoritarian / non-democratic nations where narratives are spun and thrust by the authority wielding the power.

### **Large and Complex Structure and Organisation**

One of the foremost challenges to developing a coherent communication strategy in armed forces is their size and complex structure with units and personnel distributed across a vast geographic expanse, both within the country as well as globally (like in the case of a global super power like the United States). To correlate the aforementioned statement with respect to size, the Directorate of Public Relations of the Ministry of Defence of the Government of India has 29 Defence Public Relations Officers (DPROs) or spokespersons (Three at the respective Army Navy, Airforce HQs and 26 in the field) who are embedded in various formations of the Indian Army, Navy and Air Force across the length and breadth of the country. These DPROs are the representatives of the Ministry who are authorised to interact and coordinate activities of the armed forces by leveraging the strengths of both national as well as international media in the interest of the Armed Forces. To further corroborate the aforementioned complexity, a study of the media organisation of the US Armed Forces would reveal the colossal network as well as organisational challenges and magnitude of content coordinated by the Defense Media Activity (DMA) of the US Department of Defense (DOD). While the DMA handles the overall communication and information load of the DoD and the US Armed Forces, individual services (viz US Navy, Army, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard) concurrently have their own media channels pollinated and managed through respective websites, Facebook pages, Twitter handles, Instagram, Snapchat Accounts etc. Screenshots of the Web pages along with Web links of the DMA and USN websites are placed at Appendix A as illustrations to give a physical dimension to the scale and magnitude of communication management involved in Armed Forces and the ensuing challenge of dissemination of coherent and cogent public messaging. In summary, these expansive organisations therefore create their own bureaucratic channels of communication and hierarchical levels of authority to clear content before it can be posted or shared.

## **The Challenge of Creating a Story for the Armed Forces**

Communication strategy in the world of products and services deals with '*branding*' and their associated stories. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, successful products have transcended from assessment parameters related to quality, durability, satisfaction or robustness to being associated with their story or the values they stand for or represent, which goes deeper than judgements based on core utility of the product. Audiences now link and connect with products which epitomize a narrative, a message or an idea. Therefore, the 21<sup>st</sup> century content and communication strategies are now focussed on creation of narratives as the new form of mass communication as is evident from the campaigns associated with successful products like Apple, Coca Cola, Volkswagen, Toyota, Ikea, Walmart and many others which have inspiring and appealing concepts, mantras and stories.

While creation of the aforementioned stories and narratives in respect of a product or a service which has quantifiable gains both in monetary / non-monetary terms, creation of a similar story for the Armed Forces in accordance with the Golden Circle posited by Simon Sinek is indeed a challenge. What are the end-products of an Armed Force, how do we assess its quality in peace time when there is little or no threat to a nation, why do we have an Armed Force (beyond the standard national security question) and what does it represent or stand for; all lie in the surreal domain while attempting to align them with the Golden Circle Theory. *This limitation is conspicuous while dealing with the external content and communication strategies even though within the organisation, leaders can use this model to communicate with their internal audience* as referred to by Simon Sinek with respect to leadership displayed by Martin Luther King and his ability to influence masses of humanity.

Consequent to the challenges highlighted above, the material distributed by Armed Forces on their media platforms tend to be a well-produced narrative (in terms of content, quality, editing) of *inter alia* their daily activities, operations, initiatives, campaigns, messaging from senior leadership, contribution to civil society unless when the Media Managers and Public Relation Officers are undertaking '*Risk Communication*' with a targeted audience or segment of society.

Another associated facet which is linked with the previously highlighted challenge relating to size of Armed Forces is the *number of stories* which can be created for each individual service and organisation unlike the '*one specific story or narrative*' for '*one product*' in the civil world. Further, since the Armed Forces in democratic countries are answerable to civilian control, the narrative or story of the civil administration and the Armed Forces have to be in consonance and in sync to bring out a common and legitimate media product. The current disconnect displayed between the higher echelons of the US Navy, the Commanding Officer of the Theodore Roosevelt (Aircraft Carrier with COVID-19 cases) and the Acting Secretary of the Navy is a burning example of inconsonance and clash of narratives between involved players which are highly avoidable since they have a direct bearing on the morale of men in uniform and impacts the image of the service and its internal management.

### **Predominance of Social over Conventional Media**

An analysis of the media and communication strategies of Armed Forces with respect to utilisation of platforms would indicate that info and content distribution is predominantly based on web based / social media platforms as opposed to conventional media viz television, print, audio etc. One of the primary reasons for following this strategy is the reluctance of Armed Forces to utilise paid media due to prohibitive costs as well as not owning a dedicated media channel. Therefore, a study of communication platforms by Armed Forces across the world would indicate proliferation of employment of web based / social media platforms as their primary channels of communication due to negligible cost, deeper penetration of the targeted audience as well as primary control over content. Notwithstanding, since both the Web based and Social media largely remain unregulated fields in contrast to conventional media, Armed Forces do face the associated challenges of operating with these platforms since every single Smart Phone and its owner is a potential news generator.

## **Who is the Audience for Armed Forces**

The public and social marketing strategies of renowned and well-known products or services invest significant energy, science, time and effort in identifying the target audience for their deliverable products with the aim of creating a captive market in an environment surfeit with competition and competing market strategies. Deep analysis of potential, available and penetrated markets is undertaken to formulate the *story* or *narrative* of a product which will appeal to the identified market. And finally, sales or market share are quantifiable milestones on assessing the success of the marketing strategy. Unfortunately, in the absence of means and wherewithal except for probably population surveys or analysing number of hits, views or downloads of hosted material, there are no means to ascertain or infer the success of communication strategy of Armed Forces.

Having touched upon the challenges of identifying a target audience in accordance with norms of public and social marketing, the communication strategy of Armed Forces is aimed at three types of audiences which are as follows:-

**Internal Audience.** This audience comprises of currently serving personnel in uniform as well as government servants involved with '*matters Defence*' of respective nations. This audience is focussed upon to keep them abreast of developments, operations, initiatives, communication from senior leadership as well as shape and educate the official environment.

**External Audience.** This audience comprises the general public as well as veterans of the Armed Forces and the messaging is focussed on all of the above including conveying '*Risk Communication*'

**International Audience.** This segment comprises both friendly foreign countries as well as adversaries and the messaging strategy could be utilised for information warfare or creation of deterrence.

## **Content Challenges**

As was illustrated in the challenges emanating from the size of an armed force, an associated problem area is '*content*'. With the reduction of attention spans of audiences, emergence of new stories by the hour, proliferation of platforms, concept of '*just enough information – just in time*', the ability to occupy the air waves both in terms of volume and pace; all pose as significant considerations in devising communication strategies in the Armed Forces. How much information to share, when to share and at what pace to share remain dominant aspects while balancing the requirement between attracting '*eye balls*' and '*over exposure*'. Since different services within Armed Forces have different communication strategies; some may follow an '*aggressive*' media doctrine while some may choose to remain '*low Key*' which may result in a virtual '*competition of visibility*' between services. The doctrine is also not inked in stone and the media philosophy of individual services witnesses '*ebbs*' and '*flows*' with frequent changes in the top leadership who guide the direction, rate and amount of media engagement based on their own personal cognitive biases or judgement.

Even if a service develops a cogent, comprehensive and well-coordinated media strategy, issues with respect to censorship, control, verification and whetting of what can be said and what cannot, will always remain the prime considerations prior content sharing. The underlying inhibition pertains to '*when does information become intelligence*' and assists the adversary in ratifying information that may have already been obtained through traditional intelligence gathering sources and mechanisms. And last but not the least, media and communication strategies '*in-sync*' with Government policies, initiatives and programmes tend to assist individual services in expansion and realisation of their future '*force structuring*' and '*expansion plans*'. This strategy is being successfully utilised by the Indian Navy in supporting the Prime Minister's **S**ecurity **A**nd **G**rowth for **A**ll in the **R**egion (acronym SAGAR which stands for the Ocean in the Hindi Language)<sup>1</sup> venture as well as the '*Make in India*'<sup>2</sup> initiative

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<sup>1</sup> [https://usiofindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/USI-Occasional-Paper\\_2\\_19-Unpacking-SAGAR-Final-print-File-1.pdf](https://usiofindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/USI-Occasional-Paper_2_19-Unpacking-SAGAR-Final-print-File-1.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/defence-ministry-indian-navy-submarines-make-in-india-project-75-i-indian-strategic-partners/story/357961.html>

to highlight its current capabilities as well as dovetail future infrastructure development and capability induction plans to support these programmes.

### **Risk Communication**

The operating environment of the Armed Forces is replete with threats, risk and dangers which are their professional hazards and consequently its personnel are trained to negotiate these perils in order to keep the nation safe from external aggression and internal disorders. The Armed Forces are therefore constantly involved in providing the necessary security envelope to the civil society at large 24X7, 365 days a year. In the course of conducting these operations, there are many times when there are developing crises including loss of precious lives or damage/loss of assets requiring the Armed Forces to be ever ready, vigilant and prepared for '*Risk Communication*' with the intention of sharing crisp, relevant and adequate details to prevent development of false or alternate narratives which may be exploited by inimical groups with vested interests. Such false narratives may lead to speculation, emergence of conspiracy theories and unnecessary media attention consonant with the idiom '*bad news make interesting stories*'. The risk of such stories being fed to the Media from internal sources also constitute an omni-present threat and possibility. The Armed Forces do not have the liberty to create a '*spin*' to a developing situation and the communication strategy in such circumstances is best served by projecting an accurate and correct picture. A vivid example of '*Risk Communication*' is the emergence of 26 positive cases of COVID-19 in an Indian Naval Base leading to release of a statement to all media houses simultaneously to present the facts and elaborate on the measures undertaken to contain the situation<sup>3</sup>.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations for a Comprehensive Communication Strategy**

The world of media and communications is indeed a fascinating and intriguing one and can be effectively leveraged to project, shape or influence targeted audiences with a comprehensive and cogent strategy. At the same time, mismanagement of media or an incoherent communication strategy

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/coronavirus-crisis-looms-over-indian-navys-western-command-headquarters-ins-angre-locked-down/1932779/>



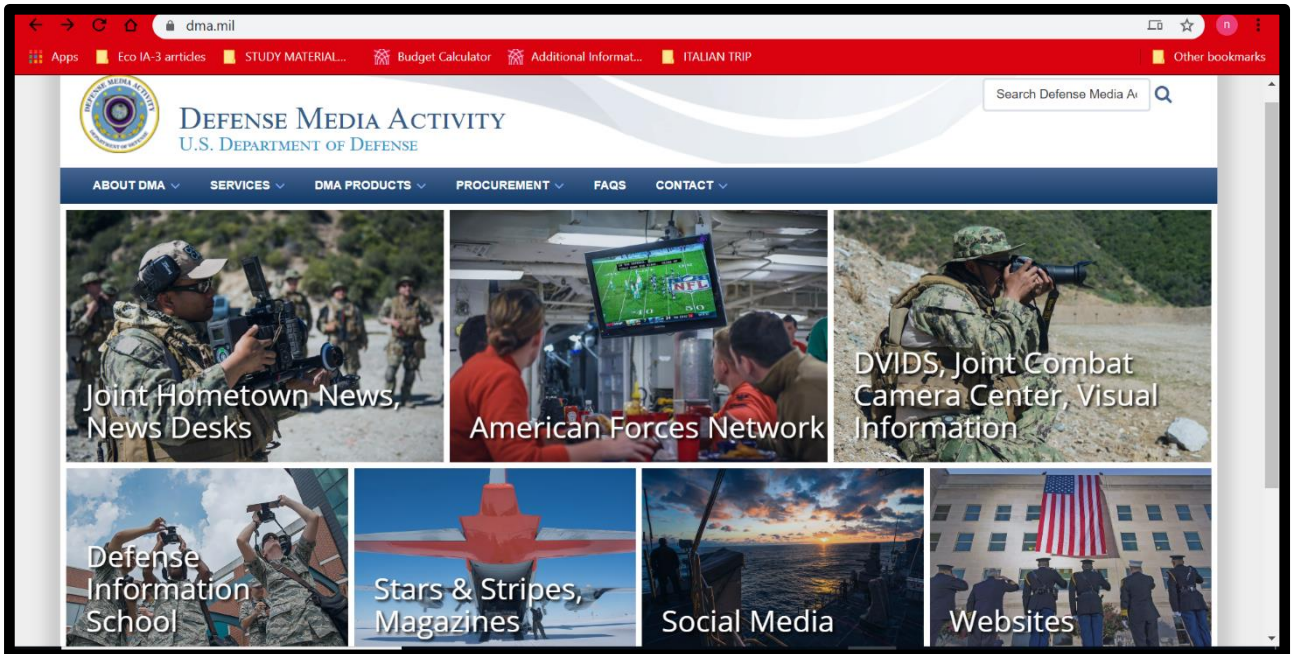
can undermine credibility and reputations developed over years of perseverance and commitment in a relatively miniscule moment reverberating on both the Government as well as its Armed Forces. The Armed Forces therefore, have no option but to adopt and imbibe tenets of modern communication in their work ethos as well as manage media and communication to further their organisational goals and objectives in the interest of national security. A few parting thoughts which may already be in practice in parts with respect to media management in large Armed Forces across the globe are elucidated *ad seriatim*:-

- (a) Inescapable necessity of a well-established, well-structured and streamlined media organisation with trained and experienced manpower.
- (b) Since success of an operation or mission has assumed visual and sensory connotations (*'smell' or 'taste' of victory has transformed to 'see' and 'hear' victory*) aimed both Internal and External audiences, inclusion of a mission specific media strategy in plans for every mission / operation would facilitate in effective utilisation and harnessing of media.
- (c) Establishment of efficient and bureaucracy free communication channels both intra and inter-service with focus on a healthy balance between *'centralization'* and *'decentralization'* for content sharing. The underlying principle of *'just enough information – just in time'* to harmonise speed of dissemination with accuracy of information should form the backbone of communication strategies.
- (d) In view of the limitations of developing a cogent narrative or story due to the arguments put forth above, formulation of *'Annual Themes'* could be considered which could then be the baseline for media engagement for a calendar year. As an illustration, themes like *'Maritime Security begins on the Coast'* or *'Maritime Security secures Maritime Trade'* can be utilised by maritime powers to disseminate their stories amongst the masses and spread awareness by utilising the full outreach potential of mass media.

- (e) Develop a clear understanding of corporate / commercial / public/social marketing and media strategy and implement suitable and adaptable tenets in the content and communication strategies of respective services of the Armed Forces.
- (f) Avoidance of both over and under exposure as well as competition amongst services for '*monopolising eyeballs or airtime*'.
- (g) All Services need to be prepared for '*risk communication*' 24x7 and should endeavour to be the first to break the news and shape the media environment as opposed to issuing tedious and tenuous clarifications at subsequent junctures. Risk Communication should be a sub-set of the Operation Plan for every mission. Preparation of '*Ready Use Risk Communication Templates*' for possible crises will come in handy for handling actual emergencies.
- (h) Media Organisation of the Armed Forces should have the technical expertise and '*state of the art*' equipment to facilitate provision of cross platform content.
- (j) Formal media training for officers across the rank and file is a quintessential necessity and visualisation of confident, well-groomed and well-spoken officers from the field contributes significantly in bring the true essence of armed forces into the living rooms of the public at large or rather to the *five screens* viz televisions, Desktop Computers, laptops, I Pads and mobiles.
- (k) Media management and Public Relations teams of Armed Forces must endeavour to measure effectiveness of the employment of communication and media strategy through number of hits/views/clicks etc to ascertain its efficacy and effectiveness.
- (l) Communication strategy of Armed Forces should always be a sub-set or in-sync with government narratives to achieve maximum all-round benefit as well as further national interests.
- (m) Exposure to '*Strategic Communication*' for mid-level officers would facilitate in harnessing strength of the media and developing experience in this critical field of modern information warfare.

**DEFENSE MEDIA ACTIVITY WEBSITE**

[\(https://www.dma.mil/\)](https://www.dma.mil/)



**US NAVY WEBSITE**

<https://www.navy.mil/index.asp>

