The permanent campaign

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In London, Washington DC and Brussels, 'information warfare' has returned to policy-makers' lips of late. The concept is used in the framing of Western efforts to counter and overcome the persuasion campaigns of Russia in Ukraine and ISIS's targeting of potential Western recruits. It is not simply that Russia's 'hybrid war' model might be destabilizing audiences' sense of certainty about what is happening in world affairs. It is that such a strategy undermines the very fundamentals of information and credibility that informed debate are supposed to rest upon. The return to information warfare also signifies frustration that ISIS's social media content appears to be driving a very visible and unstoppable flow of young Westerners to Syria. In short, there is a palpable sense that the West is losing its information wars.

The return of information warfare is only likely to deepen the condition of permanent war that seemed to take hold of the imaginations of policymakers and journalists in the last 15 years. The war on terror was framed as a generational strategy – by 2009, US military leaders spoke of 'the long war'. Security was understood to have diffused to include any causes of instability, uncertainty or danger. This justified the interpenetration of military and intelligence agencies with economic, social and even cultural and religious institutions. Digital connectivity expanded the speed and immediacy of news coverage of global crises. While it is a practical burden for journalists to trawl through endless user generated content, that content has brought vivid footage of war and conflict that has enlivened and resurrected traditional news organisations. There are a number of factors, then, that explain why war has become the ongoing backdrop to our lives.

One of the biggest problems with the explicit turn to information warfare is that it continues the blurring of war and not-war. The field of media, war and conflict can help clarify how this is happening. Scholars bring theoretical lenses, attention to historical comparisons and concern for communication ethics. Consider a few examples.

In terms of theory, we can explain how the mediatization of war contributes to the blurring of war and peace. Stig Hjarvard (2008: 114) writes:

> Mediation describes the concrete act of communication by means of a medium in a specific social context. By contrast, mediatization refers to a more long-lasting process, whereby social and cultural institutions and modes of interaction are changed as a consequence of the growth of the media's influence.

As media become embedded in more military practices, so it becomes less feasible to imagine a military *not* conducting information warfare. As every military organization sets up its Facebook Warrior group or social media black-ops team and reaches joint communication strategies between defence and foreign ministries, so processes of communicative targeting and campaigning become routinized. A state *not* constantly active in the information domain surely leaves itself open to its enemies, the logic runs.

Historically, we can bring to current debates knowledge about how information warfare was conducted in the past and with what effects. During the Cold War, for instance, public diplomacy tools were used to communicate to publics behind the Iron Curtain to foment revolt. As Alban Webb (2014) has documented, in Hungary in 1955, Nagy's rule encouraged critical debate and gave citizens the space to question Hungary's direction under Soviet rule. In December that year, a 'writers' revolt' saw intelligentsia inside and abroad question state interference in magazine editorials. As this unfolded, the BBC World Service broadcast programmes about what a post-Soviet Hungary might look like. It compared Hungary to West Germany and Austria – visions of prosperity. When the Stalinist Erno Gerno replaced Nagy in 1956, students and workers protested. The new government vacillated in the face of their demands. Inspired by foreign broadcasts from Britain and America, protesters launched an armed revolt in October. On 30 October, Radio Moscow said Russia would pull out troops. The BBC World Service announced a new Hungary was to blossom. Radio Free Europe implied foreign assistance was coming, announcing 'a practical manifestation of Western sympathy is expected at any hour' (Webb, 2014: 152).

On 1 November, Khrushchev changed tack. Soviet troops gathered on the Hungarian border and on 4 November they invaded – 2,700 protesters died in two weeks. Radio Free Europe's contribution to US information warfare efforts may have contributed to this massacre by creating unrealistic expectations in Hungary that the West would intervene to support the protestors. Voice of America and the BBC were more circumspect. But it was enough that *some* heard Radio Free Europe, and spread the rumour. Indeed, the station offered tactical military advice, explaining to listeners how to use Molotov cocktails.

It is easy to see how international broadcasters and other institutions responsible for cultural and public diplomacy might get drawn into today's information warfare. Why not send tactical advice to pro-NATO Ukrainians faced with little green men inside their borders? While the credibility of international broadcasters, education exchanges and friendly NGOs rests upon hard-earned trust often built over decades, policymakers' short-term goals or sense of crisis might lead them to ask for some rapid-response public diplomacy – like in 1956. Policymakers may believe all means of communication should be mobilized to 'win' the 'battle of ideas'.

And yet, in enrolling a broader set of institutions and organisations, and treating them as 'tools' of a battle, this risks undermining what makes public diplomacy organisations credible and effective. As we see from responses to Al-Jazeera's coverage of Egypt and Bahrain in recent years, audiences know when a broadcaster becomes politicized. This in turn colours attitudes to the country sponsoring the broadcaster. Does the return to information warfare suggest policymakers view propaganda as legitimate? If Russia's hybrid war undermines certainty and the hope of reliable information about conflict, then why project reliable information? These are ethical questions that cannot be avoided.

When it comes to communication, war has taken back the concept of campaign from politics. Over 30 years since Sidney Blumenthal (1980) described how US politics had morphed from periodic elections to the 'permanent campaign', militaries now frame the waging of information warfare as a legitimate, continuous exercise. As a result, is the very concept of 'war' watered down? Can non-military organisations avoid being enrolled in these campaigns? Scholars in the field of media, war and conflict have studied such situations before. We can contribute knowledge, pinpoint trade-offs and raise questions that can throw into doubt the wisdom and necessity of understanding world affairs as a war without end.

References

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