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From: M. A. Harlow

Subject: Seminar Report: Asymmetric Information War at CNA

Enclosure: *Asymmetric Information War*

On June 20, 2005, the Center for Naval Analyses presented a Senior Seminar to discuss “How we are losing and could be winning the wars of ideas, propaganda, information and spinning the news to our adversaries.” The primary speaker led the audience in exploring many aspects of the challenging problems for the military, the government, and even the traditional media face when dealing with the exploits of new “information do-ers.” Using cheap cameras and readily available cell phone and internet systems, these new sources of information can dispute in near-real-time what officials may be saying. The primary presentation, *Real Time Crises – New Real Time Tensions* led to an extensive discussion of the ramifications of the clash between new technologies and old attitudes.

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*Asymmetric Information War*  
The Center for Naval Analyses  
CNA Senior Seminar  
June 20, 2005

How we are losing and could be winning the wars of ideas,  
propaganda, information and spinning the news to our adversaries

The primary speaker called his talk *Real Time Crises – New Real Time Tensions* and requested that his remarks be considered not-for-attribution. The following notes provide summaries of some of the more salient points brought up by the speaker and other participants.

The speaker began by referring to a Harvard University Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy reports [Real Time Television Coverage of Armed Conflicts and Diplomatic Crises: Does it Pressure or Distort Foreign Policy Decisions](#), from 1994, and a related September 2004 study, [Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication](#). In the first there was an effort to identify the cause and effect issues involved in real time news coverage and policy making. The second document noted that the US was currently losing the war of ideas in the world.

### Comments from the Presentation

Newsrooms today have some daunting challenges

- The central issue is maintaining credibility of the organization
- The asymmetric information environment is new to them, too
- Now public perceptions can be formed with anyone with a instant cam
- A similar discussion of these concepts was presented to JFCOM recently
- Issues may be obvious but often overlooked

All news events now can have instant scrutiny by a wide audience

- Low cost of information gathering
- Amateur “information do-ers” can be anywhere
  - They can counter official views in real time
  - Perceptions of individuals can be significantly different than reality
- Many do-ers use new terms and sexy, current buzz words to gain access or invitations to events
  - Examples: News guerillas or netizens
  - Really a new form of media
  - Citizen reporters challenging official views
  - Leads to troubling implications for public respect for what either the government or the media say about events

No longer just a Digital Divide among those who have and those who do not have access

- Now asymmetric capabilities
- A democracy of information for a plethora of peripheral sources
- Creating a credibility crunch
- Government/media need to embrace new technologies/applications or will completely lose control in crisis situations
  - New vulnerabilities if do not accept new ways
  - Institutional blindness is the threat

We should not expect to have adequate institutional power to cover anything that goes wrong

- Saw that with the release of the Abu Gareb pictures
  - Did more damage to national security than a loss of classified data
  - All done with a \$20 smart card and a \$200 camera
  - Result: asymmetric damage to the US image abroad
- Similarly, websites that cost little to operate have big impact when showing terrorist beheadings
- Result: distorts perceptions of US position in a crisis
- Pictures sent from Fallujah may have helped force an all-too-quick assault on city
  - US response was out of proportion to what had happened there
  - Only a few photos (of burned contractors) from an area inaccessible to journalists incited action before adequate planning

Compare effect of cheap photos with that of all the imagery from the expensive sensors so central to Network Central Warfare. Example:

- A Chinese farmer sent photos of people being murdered in a government land grab
- No journalists had access; no overhead imagery available or likely to be useful
- That hundreds were killed is obvious in photos but this disputes what the government said

Tyranny of real-time

- President Bush embarrassed when asked about Arafat's wrongly reported death
  - By a journalist at a new conference
  - Official systems may not get news as timely as open source – but may be wrong, too
- Whether right or wrong, government may need to respond immediately
- Such situations getting worse especially since they can be cruel and arbitrary

Government skills are declining in reaction to world changes

- Policy makers need to rethink the basis of their application of public diplomacy
- Some breakdown in accepting these concepts now going on
- Still active resistance to making changes to accommodate these new information asymmetries
- Old systems like Kodak and Agfa are failing because they remained wedded to their old celluloid business models

People all say that they want hard news with real data, remain fascinated by rumors of all kinds

- Now rumors are that much more easily passed on by email and cell phone

Challenge for media/government: What is the status of these amateur information do-ers?

- New kinds appearing: v-loggers (bloggers sending pictures especially with digi-phones instantly)
- Problem: how to handle a possible terrorist with a camera phone
  - Same problem with soldiers taking trophy shots (Abu Gareb)
- Complication 1: Info do-er also has easy access to upload pictures to the internet
- Complication 2: Software makes faking or altering real pictures relatively easy
  - News media now need gate-keepers to help identify what is real
- Requires a whole new level of *transparency* in news
  - Show where the information came from
  - During OIF, General Franks promised “absolute truth as we know it”
    - Can absolute truth be determined in real time?
    - Need historians to figure it out
  - Governments/militaries must now fear accountability with cameras potentially everywhere
    - Might be able to eliminate all cameras from an area but not phones
    - Now there is no front line to keep media away from

Insurgent TV channels may help make the news and not just report it

- Cameras are positioned to record pre-arranged bomb blasts
- Non-insurgent TV must decide whether to air something just because it has been aired elsewhere
  - Can't always be sure that even video is real
    - GI Joe doll was used as a “hostage”
    - Lebanese born Marine apparently went AWOL, and was not a hostage
  - BBC chose not to air much of what is available on insurgent TV
    - People may find things on the internet but must look for it
    - Less choice is available to TV watchers or newspaper readers
    - So traditional media needs to be more careful what they present
- Insurgents have been seizing the high ground in the info war because they can be more flexible
  - Insurgents don't need to be as correct as officials do
  - Bureaucracies may take time to check facts so they look like they have something to hide

Legal issues are involved, too

- Military/government must now assume that all their operations, no matter how remote, can be monitored
- Omnipresent media of various sorts can act as a moral conscience
- Example: the Serb public believed stories of massacres were lies until recently
  - Videos showed different reality
  - Now acting to bring war criminals to justice

Military/government cannot hope to eliminate info do-ers in times of crisis

- Deadly force would only make matters worse
- Current doctrines fail to take into account these new realities
  - Info do-ers are likely to be in the middle of most operations now
  - They could choose to be there or just happen to be there by living there

A reporter discussing dangerous encounters between the media and soldiers:

- Journalists were not targeted by military
- Neither side had done enough to avoid such incidents ahead of time
- Required: fast, objective investigations into deaths of journalists with the hope of developing lessons learned

### **Comments from Extensive Question and Answer/Discussion Period**

There is a need for new Rules of Engagement to determine how to handle “non-combatants”

- Is a spy anyone with a camera and communications capability?
  - Soldier may see people on a hilltop near an operation with a camera
  - Previously, would assume they were spies; could eliminate them for “military necessity”
  - No longer have such clarity
- Need to handle people who are private citizens one moment and then must suddenly fight to protect themselves
  - Brits built special ROEs to handle such situations in Northern Ireland
- There are concerns that codified ROEs could be used against soldiers in later court actions

US military and government not organized to handle such issues

- Hard to react quickly enough to make required decisions
- Perhaps we need institutional changes to make this happen

People (non-combatants) may have a right to be where they are (their homes)

- But how do you handle their information collecting/distribution opportunities?
  - May put soldiers at risk
- There are no laws to cover these issues
  - Geneva Accords do not cover unarmed non-combatants
  - Should they be escorted out of the area?
    - Some people will likely remain anyway
- What makes someone a non-combatant in an information war?
  - May not be carrying a weapon or wearing a uniform, but?
  - Perhaps it relates to those who do or do not have an agenda?
    - No agenda needed; people record events just because they are there
    - Example: Hundreds took pictures at the Vatican during the Pope’s funeral

- Do people develop an agenda when they chose to pass on information/pictures?
  - “Agenda” indicates something pre-ordained, but...
  - Tourists had to make special efforts to send home their tsunami pictures last year but generally without any agenda

BBC may have a benign agenda to present the news but needs to filter agendas of the sources of information from other than own journalists

- Embedded journalists make change their unbiased perspective when they are getting shot at along with the soldiers they are with
- Competition among media outlets is an issue
  - If an organization does not publish a picture/story right now, will its competitor do so?
- BBC recognizes that it broadcasts into conflict zones
  - If it broadcasts wrong information, then can cause reaction problems
  - Must be sure of truth before broadcasting it

Major problems are developing concerning information warfare and public relations

- How will the military manage to produce information that is credible?
- How much does verification mean to the general public?
  - Maybe we need to train people to be more critical of news sources

Anecdotes of the information war provide only tactical snapshots. No one is getting/giving the big picture.

Once a photograph is distributed there is no control over where it is likely to go

- Fake photographs of UK soldiers “abusing” detainees were published
  - It took two weeks to establish they had been staged
  - In the meantime, a mullah in Iraq used them to recruit insurgents
- In the aftermath, an editor was fired but that hardly coped with the consequences

People taking pictures of events often without any real context can complicate situation

- Can provide challenges to public policy and government behavior
  - Not different in kind from previous scrutiny but volume has increase
  - Bad behavior is now more likely to be caught on film
  - So many more people can provide the information
  - Permitted response time is also reduced
- Can a military guard immediately parse why a person is taking a photograph?
  - Will the picture be distributed without tampering?
  - Should I get out my side of the story without any obvious spin?

Media outlets don't want to harm their “brand” by coming out too soon with news that proves to be incorrect

- Military has greater worries – should they act on their ROEs now or wait for more information?
- Technology will allow information to be delivered rapidly but it will not help recall incorrect information

Photos from Abu Gareb did need to come out to ensure that changes were made in the prison, however...

- Probably had more lasting impact on worldwide views of the US
- Always a balance problem of needing to maintain a fighting spirit among one's own forces, while destroying it in others

Media/government have less power to influence overseas views of the US than it does for Americans

- Wholly different audiences
- Even control over American views is limited
- US has largely lost the battle of hearts and minds overseas but need to keep working the problem anyway

It may be necessary to fixate on the acts of people, not just information about such acts

- Children must be taught to accept responsibilities
- Government needs to realize that everything will get out eventually

Relations between the military/government and the info do-ers/media

- Tactical units should not have to decide what to do with info do-ers individually
  - Need better ROEs
- Military and media can develop better relations so that media understands when information should not be distributed
- UK Special Forces understand that they now might be brought up on charges if they shoot cameramen in the midst of their operations to eliminate the info problem

In the Information Battlespace the general idea is to get information out first and accurately

- Shaping information issues
  - There is the technology to reach specific audiences
  - Must know the audience and what it is susceptible to
    - Africa may be more susceptible so can perhaps preclude conflicts
  - Who should be doing the "shaping?" Military? State Department?
    - Where should the strategy come from?
    - State's role should be public diplomacy but they have very few resources
    - Military can contribute because they are often more of them in country
    - Policy has not caught up to use new media sources
  - Perhaps should avoid the term "shaping" – no one wants to be *shaped*
  - Maybe need something like an urbanlegends.com website to combat rumors and falsehoods
- How do troops respond to stories about their war?
  - Can be very upset if hear untrue stories
  - Can feel left out if their part of the operation is left out of the coverage

Evaluating competing information sources is quite necessary

- Now we no longer give as much credence to a computer printout that we once did
- Perhaps we are in a transition period now, too, about current information sources
- No longer can assume old methods, organizations will be there in 10 years
- Probably should not give the most credence to those who report first
  - Need to depend on proven sources of correct information
  - Also, need to be ready to react to information quickly
  - May be better to say something immediately, even if incomplete, than to say nothing
- Military may need to practice honesty all the time to be believed in the future
- Public may need to learn that the first information is usually wrong
- Some people may go to certain websites/media outlets because they agree with the concepts being presented there.
- Some sites/media outlets may start building their credentials by bringing in well-respected commentators
- There is a chain of information sources that build a story
  - Something appears on an internet blog
  - May then be picked up by talk shows
  - Then it makes the traditional news shows
  - There need to be filters at each level to screen out falsehoods

Handling media in wartime

- Media may actually be too timid – take what they are given
  - Such expectations exist in the Pentagon
  - Info do-ers are more likely to challenge information
- Main street media need to be more questioning
- UK press tends to be more adversarial
- US press more likely to take info on face value from the government or unrated sources
- If behaving with honesty and integrity, the military should not have to worry about how what it is doing will look in the press
- There needs to be clarification between the tasks of the military public affairs officer and those of information warfare operations units

There needs to be a recognition about situational differences of occurrences

- Actions that could cause death vs. actions that could cause embarrassment
- Can those situations be easily defined?

While there is a need to tell the truth, there may not be a need to “blab” the truth

- Media’s job may be to find out what the military did not say

Perhaps people do not recognize that they have an agenda, rather like an accent; only others have them



There may be a general hope that these situations are self-correcting

- We now assume that all ads are somewhat believable
- Something of the same may be happening with the news
  - Can't wait for the news to be self-correcting
- Other fields are also struggling with new standards of truth
  - In legal battles, photos are no longer enough as evidence
  - Since they are too easy to fake, it is necessary to have corroborating information

Overload issues occur when trying to make decisions and perceptions

- No one can monitor all those blogs so getting blogs of blogs
  - They perform some sort of shaping, too
- May need to go to more transparency in identity information
  - Won't need to strip search *Aunt Bea* if we know exactly who she is
  - Might make civil rights lawyers uncomfortable, but Aunt Bea happier

Maybe ROEs don't need to be changed

- Many/most deaths of journalists/info do-ers were accidents of misidentification
  - Camera lenses could look like gun barrels in the right light
- Instead the government may need to find ways to offer competing ideas against those who plan harm
- More complications coming when more phones have both cameras and GPS capabilities
  - Might be confiscated during operations – but could you get all of them?
- Some more mature relationships are being developed with embedded journalists but they do not cover the types of issues covered at this seminar

The government does not seem to be up to the task of finding solutions to the challenges that face them from info do-ers. Maybe the Combat Commanders and JFCOM will be willing to look for ideas.