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*“Are we shooting?”- Strategic Communications Campaign in a
Population-Centric Counterinsurgency.¹*

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“Winning hearts and minds through political-military influence operations – often referred to as IO (information Operations) – against the setting of a long war is the subject of a growing debate, offering useful and sometimes harsh lessons from Iraq,”² most often centered around the concept of Strategic Communications. When the United States (U.S.) invaded Iraq in 2003, the White House and Pentagon were woefully unprepared to address issues of Strategic Communications within IO. The new media landscape of the twenty-first century was complicated and relatively foreign creating communication issues concerning their target audience(s), the best delivery medium, and necessary intent. Early in the conflict, tragedies involving journalists and their

¹ The opening line from the 1999 movie *Three Kings* (Warner Bros). The opening line is a triple-entente on the filmed nature of the conflict in the narrative, a rupture of the “4th wall” and a tactical question at the same time. The power of the line also implies the destructive and kinetic effect of the media’s eye on the conflict.

² Thomas Dodd, “Creating the right image: Information Operations,” *Jane’s Defense Weekly*, 18 June 2008, p. 77: Internet; www.jdw.janes.com

crew sparked a debate surrounding the nature of the forthcoming media's coverage of the war. The role that media-coverage served in informing the public of events on the ground was called into question.

By 2004, however, progress in pacifying Iraq after the initial invasion was not as pronounced as hoped. Despite the Iraqi army's swift defeat, pockets of resistance within the country were home to suspected Al-Qaeda members which contributed to prolonging the initial stages of the occupation.³ The city of Al-Fallujah⁴ in the strategic Sunni Triangle of Iraq, served as an Al-Qaeda strong-hold and deterred progress in pacifying the country. Two attempts were needed to seize the city. Between *Operation Vigilant Resolve* in April 2004 and *Operation Phantom Fury* in November 2004 the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) chose to modify its approach in the wake of a disastrous first attempt at pacifying the city, within an IO framework.⁵ The inclusion of embedded journalists as a component of a Strategic Communications plan during *Operation Phantom Fury* proved crucial to eventual American victory. However, the Pentagon had to resolve its relationship with the media, and address issues of strategic communications within a burgeoning insurgency. The battles for Fallujah serve as a case study, to illustrate the role and effect of Strategic Communications and DoD media policy as part of IO in a population-centric counterinsurgency. Effecting *perception end-states*, the dimension encompassing the target audiences' opinions, is best done through embedded journalists enhanced by new media in a Strategic Communications campaign.⁶

In order to understand the power of embedded journalists in the initial stages of a population-centric counterinsurgency, the following questions must be addressed:

³ The suspected presence of Abu Mussad Al-Zarqawi, a leading member of Al-Qaeda, prompted in great measure the initial attempt on Fallujah, as the US mission was still heavily oriented towards kill or capture missions.

⁴ Referred to often simply as 'Fallujah.'

⁵ Information Operations are defined as a three-pronged approach to control the information environment through the use of Media Operations, Psychological Operations, and Strategic Communications.

⁶ *Perception end-states* here defined as "The cognitive dimension encompassing the mind of the decision maker and/or the target audience." Department of Defense (U.S.), "Information Operations", (Washington, D.C.: Joint Publication 3-13, 13 February 2006), pp. 18-23; http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp3_13.pdf (last accessed 13 November 2011); and James S. Corum, *Fighting the war on terror* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Zenith Press, 2007), pp. 162, 180.

What is the history of military-media relations in the American context? What allowed embedded journalists in *Operation Phantom Fury* to have an effect on U.S. operations? In answering these questions it is necessary to address issues regarding the importance of media operations in contemporary warfare, as well as address issues of media bias and neutrality in embedded reporting, as well as the role of globalization in media and military operations.

When taken as a whole, this case study can draw the following conclusions: within a framework of Strategic Communications and media operations, through mass media amplified by globalization, the practice of embedding journalists in war zones presents a viable opportunity to reach both the public and decision makers in regional, international and state-side audiences. As media commentator Robin Brown states in

Media and the war,

As politics and society change so does the nature of war. In the twenty-first century, politics is conducted via the mass media with the result that the 'war on terrorism' is a war that is also waged through the media.⁷ It can thus be inferred that:

The way in which the mass media represent the conflict is part of the conflict. Media coverage has effects not simply on 'the audience' understood as a set of passive bystanders, but on those actually and potentially involved in the conflict.⁸

Strategic Communications is the process of "shaping the perceptions of opponents, supporters and neutral groups [in a way that will influence] whether they will become involved and how they will participate."⁹

In the case of Fallujah, three competing perceptions end-states of the battle -- that is to say public opinion and conception of the situation at a domestic, regional and international, and state-side level -- proved to be centers of gravity in the

⁷ Robin Brown, "Spinning the war: Political Communications, Information Operations and Public Diplomacy in the War on Terrorism," in *War and the Media: Reporting conflict 24/7*, edited by Daya Kishan Thussu et al., (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE publications, 2003), p. 87.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

counterinsurgency and battle of opinion.¹⁰ As military historian Charles Ricks states in his study of military-media relations, “success is defined in terms of credibility with the news media and with various American and international publics.”¹¹ As such, influence over the three demographics’ perception end-states, as well as perceived legitimacy of its message, was crucial to favourable outcomes in forums where public opinion was crucial to sustained support of a war and an administration’s policies.

History of U.S. Military – Media Relations

War reporting has occurred from the beginning of American history, from coverage of the fight for American independence by amateur journalists, to photographers documenting developments of the Civil War. It is only in the twentieth century with the media’s expanding reach that the concept’s power and influence in shaping public opinion took on new dimensions. With the advent of an analytical and independent media in the U.S., DoD media policy has evolved with each conflict in an attempt to meet the demands placed on it by a free and open democratic society. Each evolution was done in the name of addressing previous mistakes apparently preparing to fight the previous war the next time around - thus a step behind.¹² DoD media policy’s greatest advances occurred in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. It was the first televised conflict available to the public on a mass scale. Through the influence of the coverage on the public’s opinion, it affected the credibility of presidential power at home and American power internationally. The increased influence and reach of the media and reporters, was due in part to the power of Western mass media, and to perceived media and journalistic independence during the conflict. The perceived autonomy of the media from the Pentagon provided a veneer of truth and respectability to their content in a time of great public scepticism. The unanticipated effects on the development and outcome of the war prompted major revisions in how the American

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 90.

¹¹ Charles W. Ricks, *The Military-news media relationship: thinking forward* (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute U.S. Army War College, 1993), p. vii.

¹² Pascale Combelles-Siegel, *The troubled path to the Pentagon’s rules on media access to the battlefield: Grenada to Today* (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute U.S. Army War College, 1996), p. v.

military interacted with the media and the American public as it digested the implications of an altered news cycle.

During this period of intense reflection for the military, the DoD enacted several new media access policies that included the creation of media pools, the official position of “embedded journalist” and increased Public Affair Officer (PAO) presence to assist in relaying official messages and information both in theater and at home.¹³ This robust DoD media policy was put to its first real test with the start of the campaign against Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi Army as part of *Operation Desert Storm*. Unfortunately, the military proved unable to adequately handle the information needs and requirements of embedded and media-pool journalists travelling with units, which was seen as deliberate sabotage of the press.¹⁴ The press was loath to follow precautions established for Operational Security (OPSEC), exhibited a lack of military knowledge and failed to respect other guidelines for their own security in the combat zone. The media policy, particularly the use of embedded journalists, proved ineffective and ill-adapted to the situation, while the press was not prepared for the realities of conflict. The DoD and the media experienced a chill in relations following the failures of the war, which was only exacerbated by the landing of marines in Somalia amidst the flood lights of live camera crews.¹⁵ This effective failure of DoD media policy did not prepare either actor for the conflicts of the twenty-first century or the increased influence provided by new media and globalization, or the changing nature of warfare.

¹³ Wherein one journalist or photographer files information available to all accredited members of the press within a given pool.

¹⁴ “Using news media pools to cover combat units during the Persian gulf war and relying on slow ground transportation to deliver news media products were seen as deliberate efforts to restrict journalists from covering stories or to delay the reports.” Ricks, *The Military-news media relationship: thinking forward*, p. 1.

¹⁵ Michael R. Gordon, “Mission to Somalia; TV Army on the Beach Took U.S. by Surprise,” *The New York Times*, 10 December 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/10/world/mission-to-somalia-tv-army-on-the-beach-took-us-by-surprise.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> (last accessed 12 March 2012).

U.S. Military – Media relations at the dawn of the twenty-first century

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Pentagon was struggling to regulate the outward flow of information as interconnected networks and media outlets increased communication and exchange of images. The seminal work on the changing nature of war written by William Lind et al., *The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation*, posits that a fourth generation of war based around high technology, terrorism, a transnational base of the enemy, direct attacks on cultural elements and psychological warfare will likely characterize conflict at the turn of the century.¹⁶ The 2003 invasion of Iraq marked a shift to fourth generation warfare mainly be a further increase in the flow of information and images between the DoD and the media. The advent of new media has afforded everyone the capacity to be a war-time correspondent, particularly therein the populations caught in the middle of conflict further increasing the sources affecting people's opinions and perceptions. New media and military affairs commentator Paul Murphy in his work on the media and the Israeli-Hamas war in 2006, defines contemporary new media as any capability that:

empowers a broad range of actors (individuals through nation-states) to create and disseminate near-real time or real time information with the ability to affect a broad (regional or worldwide) audience.¹⁷

New media defined accordingly becomes a tool in the arsenal of anyone conducting a Strategic Communications campaign, amplified by the interconnectedness of globalization. In the hands of journalists and civilians alike, it allowed the media coverage of the pacification to increase in scope and tone as operations in Iraq got under way. Murphy explains "It also points to the importance of competing on the information battle-space, not only in counterinsurgency operations, but across the spectrum of conflict."¹⁸ From that point on, everyone from an enlisted soldier with a video camera, to an insurgent with a camera phone would be able to influence the perception of events in the following months. If not addressed correctly, as forecast by

¹⁶ William S. Lind et al., "The changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation," *Marine Corps Gazette*, October (1989): pp. 22-26.

¹⁷ Dennis M. Murphy, *Fighting Back: New Media and Military Operations* (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute U.S. Army War College, 2008), p. 4.

¹⁸ Murphy, *Fighting Back: New Media and Military Operations*, p. 5.

Murphy, the U.S. could lose the information battle in a forthcoming conflict, and as a result, possibly the war itself.

The fraught military-media relationship in Iraq was a two-pronged issue. On the one hand, operations were stalled by an institutional failure to draft appropriate policy when it came to meeting information demands, and on the other an external threat amplified by globalization and new media aggravated an operational failure by the Americans.¹⁹ As a result, the U.S. conducted several of its initial Operation IRAQI FREEDOM operations with little to no strategic communication campaigns to reflect the reality of the situation, or at the very least an official statement on activity outlining methods, goals and the purpose of the operations. The information battle-space is important to the simplest of military operations in a globalized war, no theater exists in isolation. In the 2003 Iraq war, the absence of an American by-line allowed insurgents and Arab media outlets to profit from the situation with their own Strategic Communication campaigns, aimed at demonizing the U.S. occupation and attempting to draw increased international pressure against the American presence- this is presciently demonstrated in the battles for Fallujah.

Case study part 1: *Operation Vigilant Resolve*

The city of Fallujah is one of three major cities forming the Sunni Triangle in the heart of Iraq. Fallujah set itself apart from the rest of Iraq in tone and character for several reasons, notably the religious, cultural and geo-strategic importance of the city. The religious composition and influences in Iraq allowed post-invasion sectarian violence across the country to flourish. The fact that Saddam and the Ba'ath party were majority Sunni (as is Al-Qaeda), the city was used as a stronghold for Al-Qaeda and an insurgent safe-heaven amidst a sea of Shi'a Iraqis. The city's history as a cross-roads and trade route for thieves and cartels made the city a perfect place for Al-Qaeda to occupy as it faced mounting American military pressure to leave Iraq and logistical needs to support an insurgency.

¹⁹ Scot MacDonald, *Propaganda and Information Warfare in the Twenty-First Century: Altered images and deception operations* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 3.

The inherent instability of the region was a thorn in the side of the Iraqi interim government. In 2004, the U.S. was preparing to hand over control of the country to the newly appointed Iraqi leader, Nourri Al-Maliki. Security and stability in the major Iraqi population centers would be required in order to guarantee a smooth transition of power. The U.S. political and military policies were still operating on a different timetable, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld foresaw the American role as an occupying force ending soon after an official hand-over of power and a decent interval of security.²⁰ *Operation Vigilant Resolve* was a pacification operation designed to enable U.S. forces to clear Fallujah of Al-Qaeda and install Nourri Al-Maliki. Unfortunately, the lack of a strategic communications plan or media operations by the coalition to prepare or secure the information environment proved to be a costly oversight.

When *Operation Vigilant Resolve*²¹ began on 4 April 2004, intense fighting followed throughout the city as insurgents resisted the Americans, aware of the set-back it would have on the insurgency. From the outset, the battle was characterized by intense fighting, urban combat tactics by the insurgents and a violent American reaction. Almost immediately after the operation got under way, international and regional perception end-states were shaped through surfacing coverage of the operation provided by new media sites such as YouTube and the Arab media, despite the U.S. bombing of Al-Jazeera's Baghdad offices the previous year.²² Sources such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabya as well as insurgent run websites, were showing footage of American forces supposedly conducting illegal operations and these clips were shown without

²⁰ During the initial phases of *OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM*- the name given to the American operations in Iraq beginning 20 March 2003- in the aftermath of President Bush's "mission accomplished" speech aboard USS Abraham Lincoln, it was implied that the U.S. would begin drawing down their force levels and initiate an official hand-over of power to interim government.

²¹ All Facts pertaining to OP VIGILANT RESOLVE and *Operation Phantom Fury* can be found in the work of Dick Camp, *Operation Phantom Fury: the Assault and Capture of Fallujah, Iraq* (St.Paul, Minnesota: Zenith Press, 2009).

²² Which was thought to have incapacitated the insurgents' capability to broadcast propaganda. The attack however was the result of an ill-constructed targeting policy aimed to destroy Al-Qaeda supporters. Al-Jazeera however maintained its credibility internationally as a western-style media outlet, despite American claims to the contrary. According to Philip Taylor "Al-Jazeera broke [the] mould by reporting within a democratic tradition, with dissenting and contrary voices visible and audible for the first time in the region." Philip M. Taylor, "We Know Where You Are: Psychological Operations Media During Enduring Freedom," in *War and the Media: Reporting conflict 24/7* edited by Daya Kishan Thussu et al. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE publications, 2003), p. 102.

official American commentary.²³ The insurgents were effectively conducting a media campaign with the global reach of new media. This left the interpretation of events entirely to one actor, with no corroboration possible. The American command chose to continue pursuing its objective of seizing the city despite the negative portrayal of the operation in the Arab media. Soon thereafter, the stories sensationalized in the domestic and regional media in the Middle-East were picked-up by Western and international news sources all the while continuing to reach diverse audiences online. Graphic pictures and video footage of casualties serving as *infotainment*,²⁴ drew commentary in western spheres of influence, thus effecting state-side and regional perceptions of the ongoing operations.²⁵

The power of an internet connection and globalization made its presence felt in a tangible way on U.S. military operations. Initially the Bush administration and the military command had not expressed any concern over portrayals of events, urging the Marines to continue the operation. As international and state-side media relayed coverage and asked for justification and official statements regarding the action of the coalition forces, international leaders and members of the Bush administration began privately expressing concern regarding the tone of the events being portrayed. With three crucial perception end-states influenced by the insurgent sponsored point of view, progress of the operation was called into question.

Three days into *Operation Vigilant Resolve* and several American casualties later, the American forces were asked to cease operations and leave the city in the hands of the Fallujah Brigade, despite massive progress into clearing the city of the insurgency. As discussed by Lind, "fourth generation adversaries will be adept at manipulating the media to alter domestic and world opinion to the point where skilful use of

²³ Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: the War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-maker from the Crimea to Iraq*. (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 538.

²⁴ Information presented in an entertainment structure through visually appearing icons, camera angles and commentary. The concept plays up the sensational dimension of any event. Daya Kishan Thussu, "Live TV and Bloodless Deaths: War, Infotainment and 24/7 News," in *War and the Media: Reporting conflict 24/7* edited by Daya Kishan Thussu et al. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE publications, 2003), p. 117.

²⁵ Knightley, *The First Casualty: the War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-maker from the Crimea to Iraq*, 538.

psychological operations will sometimes preclude the commitment of combat forces.”²⁶ They had just been proven correct in Fallujah, highlighting the disproportionate weight of the media operations in the contemporary environment of conflict. The American commander estimated that: “Mattis figured that the insurgents had between forty-eight and seventy-two hours before [the insurgents] were overwhelmed”...’this isn’t the time to stop. We need just a few days to finish this. That’s all – days.”²⁷ Yet American forces had to perform a tactical withdrawal to beyond the city limits, under fire from both the insurgents and the media.

Operation Vigilant Resolve could have proven a tactical victory over the insurgents and Al-Qaeda in the region. The operation was stunning in its simplicity and efficiency. But the lesson clearly identified was that it needed a Strategic Communications plan. It was:

Astonishing that the nation that invented the modern mass media and enjoys enormous financial and technical resources still has so far to go in putting together a coherent and comprehensive message that will appeal to the average citizen of the Islamic states who are bombarded daily with anti-western and anti-American messages.²⁸

The Americans had captured the city but left the information environment vulnerable to manipulation by the insurgents using the power of new media. As military theorist (ret.) LCol Hammes argues that “the only medium that can change a person’s mind is information. Therefore, information is the key element of any fourth generation warfare strategy.”²⁹ Although little evidence is available to explain American rationale concerning the lack of media operations surrounding *Operation Vigilant Resolve*, given the presence of embeds during the invasion the issue raises several questions concerning American assumptions and information capabilities of the insurgents and Arab media sources in the region. Under-estimated or not, the failure to account for possible counter-spin was a strategic setback that ultimately cost them the operation.

²⁶ Lind et al., “The changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation,” p. 25.

²⁷ Camp, *Operation Phantom Fury: the Assault and Capture of Fallujah, Iraq*, p. 79.

²⁸ Corum. *Fighting the war on terror*, p. 186.

²⁹ Col T.X. Hammes, “Fourth Generation Warfare Evolves, Fifth Emerges,” *Military Review*, (May-June 2007); p. 15.

In Hammes' framework, in fifth generation warfare characterized by the continued high-saliency of information and technology as well as increasingly diffuse actors, the information battle-space is as important as the physical one.³⁰ "Effective insurgents build their plans around a Strategic Communications campaign designed to shift their enemy's view of the world."³¹ In the information age, the insurgents will attempt to utilize information warfare and Strategic Communications campaigns in tandem with violence to affect the battle-space.³² Within this framework of analysis, the events in Fallujah, can be explained as a missed evolution of policy by the American military, as well as an inability to perceive the reality on the ground. As American forces settled into a holding pattern outside the city, and handed over control and security to a hastily formed Fallujah brigade, the command was forced to consider the implications of what had just happened.³³

Understanding the failures of *Operation Vigilant Resolve*

To understand the impact of the failure in strategic communications it is necessary to review the coverage of American operations during *Operation Vigilant Resolve*. It is clear that the portrayal of events in major media sources was incredibly biased or lacked a degree of factual basis.³⁴ Furthermore, the media's unquestioning portrayal of events in an un-critical re-broadcast further damaged the coalition's chances at retaking the city without international public interference. Media outlets

³⁰ In the 1990 Marine Corps Gazette, William Lind et al. establish a framework of generational warfare and a set of characteristics common to the nature of the conflict and the tools used in each generation. Lind et al., "The changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation," pp. 22-26; Hammes, "Fourth Generation Warfare Evolves, Fifth Emerges," pp. 14-23.

³¹ Hammes, "Fourth Generation Warfare Evolves, Fifth Emerges," p. 15.

³² Frank Webster, "Information Warfare in an age of Globalization," in *War and the Media: Reporting conflict 24/7* edited by Daya Kishan Thussu et al. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE publications, 2003), p. 57.

³³ The Fallujah brigade was a security force established in the city; mainly consisting of ex-Iraqi military and for the most part the very insurgents the coalition had been fighting during the battle. They were notoriously corrupt and ineffective.

³⁴ A review of media content available at the time (April 2004) through popular mass media search engines such as YouTube, Google etc. "U.S. Forces launch major Fallujah Operation," Fox News: internet <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,116144,00.html#ixzz1p3U4p2x6> (last accessed 12 March 2012).

based in the U.S. were less keen to portray the American operation in unfavorable terms, which would contribute later to claims that the American media was biased in favor of the operation, “[Director General of the BBC, Greg Dyke] said American TV news stations ‘wrapped themselves in the American flag and substituted patriotism for impartiality.’”³⁵ An equally alarming finding is that western media succumbed to beating the drum of war when it has, in its own mind, a long and strong history of being the military’s watch-dog. However this will be discussed at a later point. The mass media, amplified by the far reaching and near instantaneous speed at which information is shared, had a heavier than usual influence on the outcome of events, as predicted in the literature on generation warfare.

Regional scrutiny from neighbouring countries, international scrutiny from other coalition members and European powers, in addition to domestic interest from the American public provided the criticism of American operations necessary to halt the offence. This range of criticisms stems from American failure to control the three perception end-states the insurgents had identified as key in their struggle- “these battles take place in multiple media fields aimed at multiple audiences.”³⁶ This became clear to American forces when examining the spread of information, the tone of the reaction, and the disproportionate influence of their reactions. American historian and social critic, Arthur Schlesinger has concluded regarding the weakness of the message:

we have failed to convey to the Iraqis what our intentions are – or belatedly conveyed them. Consequently, all too many excellent and well intentioned actions on our part have not gotten through to the Iraqi public. It is almost as important that such plans, and such actions be understood, as that they can be executed.³⁷

In its failure to address three crucial perception end-states of international, regional & local and state-side audiences, the U.S. lost the strategic communications battle, and thus the first battle for Fallujah. The lessons of the first battle were to be taken into consideration as DoD officials attempted to resolve the issue in later operations.

³⁵Knightley, *The First Casualty: the War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-maker from the Crimea to Iraq*, p. 542.

³⁶ Brown, “Spinning the war: Political Communications, Information Operations and Public Diplomacy in the War on Terrorism,” 94.

³⁷ Camp, *Operation Phantom Fury: the Assault and Capture of Fallujah, Iraq*, 184.

Despite the American loss of Fallujah, the hand-over between Americans and Iraqis was still set to take place in the summer of 2004. As long as the situation remained stable in the hands of the Fallujah brigade, the U.S. forces would be able to proceed with operations elsewhere in the country and maintain an eye on the situation in Fallujah. As the months progressed the American sponsored Fallujah brigade became increasingly corrupt and ineffective, unable to control the situation at hand. Violence and suspected insurgent activity had increased daily and threatened the 'stability' of the region. Given the strategic importance of Fallujah as a geographic crossroads for population movement within the country, and the visible Al-Qaeda influence, the situation again needed to be addressed. Accordingly coalition forces planned for a second attempt to take the city of Fallujah.

Preparing for *Operation Phantom Fury*

Operating in the context of a generation warfare framework, Pentagon staffers took into account recommendations from the operational commanders, as well as their IO officers, to manage the three crucial perception end-states. There were several options for addressing the needs of the strategic communications campaign that would be needed to compliment the operation, of which the use of embedded journalists would be the centerpiece. In military and communications commentator Frank Webster's work *Information Warfare in an age of Globalization*, he remarks:

It is obvious that during conflict combatants desire to have the media on board, so that what happens in war is presented in ways that are acceptable to the wider public. However 'perception management' is difficult to achieve, chiefly because strict control of the media in an era of globalization is impossible when there are thousands of journalists present, when they define their role primarily as an investigate activity and they are sceptical of news sources, when domestic dissent is sure to get some coverage in democratic regimes, and where technologies from video cameras to the internet, mean that images, reports and opinions are relatively easily gathered and communicated.³⁸

³⁸ Webster, "Information Warfare in an age of Globalization,"p. 64.

As *Operation Phantom Fury* took shape, precautions were taken in line with the precepts of fifth generation warfare, beginning with pre-emptive shaping of the environment in terms favorable to a population-centric counterinsurgency. At a macro-level of analysis, such measures signaled that “the content and delivery of information ha[d] accordingly shifted from the mass propaganda of Mao to highly tailored campaigns enabled by new methods of communication and new social patterns.”³⁹

Leaflets containing messages and warnings to the populations of the coming American assault were distributed. Civilians were given the opportunity to leave the city or told what to do if they stayed and American forces entered their homes at any point. This early warning to civilian populations would dispel any future claims that the civilian population was caught in the “cross-hairs” of an American operation. This was also an attempt to allow the less committed to switch allegiances without being targeted. Communication lines running through the city were cut, and a black-out blanket of mobile services were enacted in order to prevent communication to outside or unauthorized sources. This would also preclude to a certain extent, the power of new media sites. Furthermore, major regional and local media offices in Baghdad were shut down prior to the operation to guarantee that there was no competing insurgent coverage of the battle that might fuel an insurgency and prolong the battle for the city.

Although international media would be present for *Operation Phantom Fury*, western journalists presented the best option for a balanced portrayal of events given the western media’s legacy of journalistic integrity, as well as the perceived independence and credibility of direct communication attributed to journalists- this compared favourably to lower levels of government or military credibility.⁴⁰ The Pentagon was confident in the legality and morality of the tactics and methods used by the Marine Corps and during their operations. Consequently, putting a “spin” on events was not necessary. Supporting this, Ricks highlights, “journalists who are assigned to operational units bring to life the dry facts of the news conference by providing the texture, explanation, and context of what is going on,” not to spin the events.⁴¹ In addition, people who could be trusted by the international, regional and

³⁹ Hammes, “Fourth Generation Warfare Evolves, Fifth Emerges,” p. 20.

⁴⁰ Thomas Dodd, “Creating the right image: Information Operations,” p. 79.

⁴¹ Ricks, *The Military-news media relationship: thinking forward*, p. 10.

state-side audience to tell the truth, would be key.⁴² The trust in the ability of the journalists to remain neutral, or at the very least be *perceived* as neutral, was more prevalent in western media and journalist cultures. As historian James Corum explores in his work, although Arab and other cultures had media outlets and journalist, there was not a middle-eastern legacy of un-biased journalism. Corum argues: “The greater part of the media in Arab states is government controlled, and often publishes what one can only generally describe as crude propaganda.”⁴³ As such, using local and regional journalists risked producing highly-questionable coverage with low levels of credibility and thus jeopardizing the communications battle. This line of thinking showed a deeper understanding of the new role of media operations in a conflict, previously unseen.

Of note, although civilian journalists would prove crucial to the victory of the Strategic Communications campaign in the media operations surrounding *Operation Phantom Fury*, there was a considerable contingent of combat reporters from within the U.S. military attached with the units as well, which strengthened the military’s information capabilities. Colonel Holbert, the Public Affairs officer at the Marine Base outside Fallujah shared in the edited work covering female marines in Iraq after the battle for Fallujah *The Few. The Proud*, that “for the first time ever, [Col Holbert] placed three combat correspondents in each battalion instead of one,” in addition to the “45 or more civilian media representatives from newspapers or TV and radio, with video and still cameras, and laptops,” embedded in units.⁴⁴ As well, the combat correspondents would provide much coverage of the battle, however their neutrality was called into question on a more frequent basis, thus, limiting the efficiency of their coverage. Robin Brown makes the remark that:

The key problem here has been the yoking together of public affairs with activities such as PSYOPS and deception. While military press officers insist that they will not deceive the media, the doctrinal relationship

⁴² Corum. *Fighting the war on terror*, p. 180.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁴⁴ Sara Sheldon, *The Few. The Proud*. (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2007), p. 129.

between their work and other elements of IO inevitably creates suspicions.⁴⁵

Creating a strong culture of balance and veracity in Strategic Communications is crucial to its future success.

Accredited western journalists, who were to be embedded with the units set to conduct *Operation Phantom Fury*, were sent to a media preparation course at Fort Drum in up-state New York to prepare them for the realities of the operation. Ricks explains that:

The solution to much of the concern over security of information lies in a comprehensive plan for the inclusion of news media, reinforced by ground rules and supported by procedures for providing explanation and context about the sensitivity and complexity of military actions.⁴⁶

The advent of cable news network, and the 24-hour news cycle has meant that there is no longer a media corps dedicated to covering military operations and exercises beyond what the Pentagon briefing room discloses.⁴⁷ Institutional memory and trade-craft used in covering the military, such as familiarity with military acronyms, personnel, hierarchies and professional links had been lost at the end of the twentieth century much to the detriment of the military-media relationship. In order for media operations to be effected in *Operation Phantom Fury*, the journalists would have to be prepared on what to expect in a combat situation, the necessary rules and procedures that needed to be followed in order to ensure their safety as well as that of the mission. This would further ensure the smooth transmission of the message. In return, the Pentagon needed to ensure that proper communication equipment and satellite up-links were available to the journalists in order to allow them to file their stories in a timely manner, thus allowing an almost immediate account of events to be available to the world.

⁴⁵ Brown, "Spinning the war: Political Communications, Information Operations and Public Diplomacy in the War on Terrorism," p. 90.

⁴⁶ Ricks, *The Military-news media relationship: thinking forward*, p. 23.

⁴⁷ Ricks, *The Military-news media relationship: thinking forward*, p. v.

As a final touch in preparing the information environment, in discussion with newly anointed President Nourri Al-Maliki, *Operation Phantom Fury* received an Arab name for regional and local press. In a classic counterinsurgency move, the solution adopted a local face. *Operation Phantom Fury* became *Al-Fajr*, Arabic for New Dawn. This move to co-opt the naming of the operation completed the strategic communications plan pre-operation, and did much to prepare the information and physical battlefield for a favourable outcome. Thus completed, the comprehensive strategic communications media strategy was then put to use.

Operation Phantom Fury begins

On 4 November 2004 when U.S. and Coalition forces began *Operation Phantom Fury/Al-Fajr*, cameras were rolling and reporters were filing stories through the improved communication up-links to news channels and media outlets around the world. The effects were evident almost immediately.⁴⁸ During the seizure of the hospital in Fallujah, Iraqi and American forces conducted a clear and sweep of the building to determine that it was not being used by the insurgents. They had a cameraman accompanying the forces filming everything as they went. The feed from the camera was being transmitted on a media pool up-link and was taped by Al-Jazeera in neighboring countries, and shown with inaccurate information, stating that the forces were terrorizing the occupants and were shooting women and children once inside.⁴⁹

The story being portrayed although highly dramatized and fictional, did not gain much attention from international or state-side viewers who were convinced the operation to clear the hospital was being conducted within rules of war. Because there was an immediate western/coalition perspective being broadcast simultaneously, what could have been a strategic communications debacle, was averted because there was a counter-story already present, able to controvert any stories coming out of the region. This situation reflected a great improvement over the previous public affairs

⁴⁸ Ricks, *The Military-news media relationship: thinking forward*, p. 30.

⁴⁹ L600M: *Seizing the hospital*, Scooped by Al Jazeera – Manifold productions <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vGmScPNB5U&feature=feedwll&list=WL> (last accessed 10 March 2012).

vulnerability and inability to address events caused by the lack of a coherent or strong media strategy. Due to the robust Strategic Communications policies surrounding *Operation Phantom Fury* the tides had turned.

The success of Western media coverage continued for the remainder of the fighting and the post-conflict pacification of the city. Local outcry was minimized because the people of Fallujah understood the nature and purpose of the operation, as did the Iraqi people. International and regional coverage of the operation was decidedly more balanced than previous efforts, and produced less un-founded criticism. State-side American coverage was markedly supportive of American operations, featuring coverage that presented American and coalition efforts in a potentially biased fashion. The tenor and content of the messages, if perceived as un-balanced by audiences could have detracted from the overall credibility of the journalists in theater, and jeopardized the operation. As Macdonald aptly states:

[the] perceived intention of a source significantly influences the effectiveness... if a source is perceived to be a propagandist attempting to manipulate an audience, then effectiveness plummets dramatically.⁵⁰

Evaluating the case study

During this period, allegations of biased coverage were leveled against almost all embedded journalists. 'Embeds' started being referred to as 'in-beds', suggesting they were merely repeating the official Pentagon line, and no longer contributed meaningfully to the climate of truth needed in war-time reporting. It was argued that neutrality would be hard to maintain if the people the journalist was tasked with covering were feeding and protecting the journalist in question. In a war zone security tends to take precedence over political agendas when bullets start flying. It was feared the journalists might be tempted to moderate their coverage of events based on their battle experiences with individuals they had become close to. Could the veracity of the stories, images and claims made by the journalists embedded in units be trusted if they were tainted by basic allegiances concerning survival? As Philip Knightley states in the

⁵⁰ MacDonald, *Propaganda and Information Warfare in the Twenty-First Century: Altered images and deception operations*, p. 34.

The First Casualty, “Whether war correspondents would wish to continue as propagandists and myth makers, plying their craft subservient to those who wage wars, is a decision they will need to make for themselves.”⁵¹ However, addressing the issue of perceived bias in the embedded media corps proves to be a stumbling block along the way to a refined media operations and Strategic Communications policy.

Despite claims of media bias threatening to derail the post-conflict progress of *Operation Phantom Fury/Al-Fajr*, the initial use proved a success on several counts. The simplest measure of success is the fact that the operation was completed successfully. Without unjustified international, regional and state-side scrutiny this second operation went off without undue pressure. With media operations working as intended, the tactical and operational side of the war could continue as planned which assured a greater chance at operational success, the safety of the units employed and granted greater access to the public.

Conclusion

It is possible to make several conclusions based on the outcome of the 2004 battle for Fallujah. A strategic communication strategy that encompasses media operations and factors to utilize the power of new media and globalization is necessary to ensure an equal voice in the coverage of events.⁵² In the case of an internationally based population-centric counterinsurgency such as that conducted in Fallujah during 2004, embedded journalists provided the initial boon to credibility of message in attempting to influence three crucial information environments: the opinions of Iraqi locals, regional players, international observers, and finally those of Americans supporting the war effort. The information environments were the vital factors at play in the battle for Fallujah.

As the authors of *The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation* aptly capture, “if we bomb an enemy city, the pictures of enemy civilian dead brought into every living room in the country on the evening news can easily turn what may have

⁵¹ Knightley, *The First Casualty: the War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-maker from the Crimea to Iraq*, p. 548.

⁵² Webster, “Information Warfare in an age of Globalization,” p. 59.

been a military success (assuming we also hit the military target) into a serious defeat.”⁵³ The military does have an appreciation of the power of images and words. However, it must now account for the increased speed at which these materials circulate and the extent to which they require tending. As Ricks presciently posits,

The tension between the military and the news media will diminish with the evolution of younger officers, NCOs, and enlisted personnel who have matured, not just watching TV, but by having their growth and development recorded on home video cameras.⁵⁴

However, this increased awareness of the power of the media further emphasizes the “difficulty in trying to craft and communicate a message in an increasingly complex and competitive transnational media environment.”⁵⁵ By recognising and addressing the complexity of the task the U.S. military set itself up for success. By harnessing the power of globalization and mass media in the form of embedded journalists, the U.S. fixed a crucial credibility gap in the media and information operations policy needed for the 21st century. By integrating the new media into future Strategic Communications and embracing this in their information operations policies, the U.S. military can continue influencing perceptions in a fashion conducive to military operations.

⁵³ Lind et al., “The changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation,” p. 26.

⁵⁴ Ricks, *The Military-news media relationship: thinking forward*.

⁵⁵ Brown, “Spinning the war: Political Communications, Information Operations and Public Diplomacy in the War on Terrorism,” p. 97.

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