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# The Fourth Estate is dead, long live the Fourth Estate: A new military mindset for a rapidly evolving communication environment

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### ABSTRACT

The authors identify a need for a shift in the communication mindset of the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) to better account for the speed, ubiquity and mobility of human interaction in the evolving communication environment. The leadership requirement to define a new reality when guiding transition and complex change is identified. Three reality-defining truths are drawn from the convergence of leadership and communication theories. First, it is not possible to lead without communicating. Second, it is not possible to *not* communicate. Third, it is not possible to communicate without influencing others. Analysis of current DoD lexicon, principles and organizational design related to communication activities reveals a technical/monologic mindset. This mindset is evaluated based on the three truths, shortfalls of the mindset are identified, and four concrete leadership actions are proposed to guide a transition to a social/dialogic mindset. Proposed actions include defining a new vision and purpose for the military based on preservation of credibility and trust, creation of a new communication lexicon, creation of universal guiding principles, and revision of doctrine and training to incorporate social-communication thought, theory and practice.

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## 1. The Fourth Estate is dead. . .

In medieval times when a monarch died and a new one ascended to the throne the event was marked by a public declaration: “The king is dead, long live the king!” This phrase highlighted the importance of a smooth transfer of sovereignty from one ruler to the next and emphasized that a king was merely the physical embodiment of an enduring ideal of leadership, responsibility and authority that transcends any given individual. In today’s day and age the phrase might be modified to, “The Fourth Estate is dead, long live the Fourth Estate”, for while the ideal of free and open communication endures, the form and function of the free press has evolved from Gutenberg’s Bible to professional journalists-as-mediators and now to something more immediate and participatory. Yet as governments collapse around us and entire regions experience social upheaval influenced at least in part by the ability of individuals and groups to communicate outside of traditional boundaries and systems, the Department of Defense (DoD) continues to think in terms of information control and delivery while relying upon traditional media venues as a primary means of communicating with the public. These persistent habits degrade credibility and trust essential to the success of leaders and their organizations (Covey, 2006; Kouzes & Posner, 2003) and presumably contribute to unfavorable perceptions of the military and the United States as a whole.

Whether stalled out in the denial stage of grief, inhibited by fear of change, or simply bogged down by a hierarchical bureaucracy, the DoD must adapt its guiding principles, core processes and organizational structures to the rapidly evolving

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environment if it hopes to thrive rather than merely survive. First however, military leaders, planners and communication practitioners must develop a mindset that embraces the new reality (Schein, 2004) of a rapidly evolving communication environment characterized by the speed, ubiquity and mobility of human interaction. Gilmore (2010) presents a comprehensive change-leadership framework for use in sparking innovative revolution and deliberate evolution of DoD communication practices through a sequential shift in cultural mindset, guiding principles, core processes and organizational structure. This article focuses specifically on that framework's mindset element as the first step toward successful transition. The new environment's fundamental truths are identified, the Department's current communication mindset is evaluated, a potential new mindset is described, and concrete leadership actions to guide transition to this mindset are provided. The concepts presented here are grounded in the convergence of leadership and communication theory and can be used by leaders, planners and practitioners in the military – and potentially across departments and agencies – to guide integration of communication into contemporary operations in context of a new Fourth Estate that relies less upon CNN and the Washington Post to communicate *at audiences* and more upon processes and tools that allow real-time communication *with publics* who are the "... many different stakeholders, such as employees, members, customers, local communities, shareholders and other institutions, and with society at large (PRSA, 2011).

### 1.1. Mindset transition before structural change

Changes to organizational structure function most effectively when aligned with corresponding changes in core processes. (Axelrod, 2002; Bridges, 1986; Kotter & Cohen, 2002). However, change is distinct from transition in that it happens at a specific time or in stages at various times while transition is a three-phase process "... that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about" (Bridges, 2009, p. 3). In the face of multiple, frequent or difficult changes, a deliberate transition in mindset is often necessary as people look to their leaders for guidance regarding how to think about the new situation (Schein, 2004). Unfortunately the DoD has so far put the cart of structural change before the horse of mindset transition.

The DoD's formal efforts to adapt within the rapidly evolving communication environment have to a great extent focused on changes in organizational structure guided by its traditional mindset regarding communication. This is exemplified by the addition of Strategic Communication (SC) to the longstanding communication-related stovepipes of Information Operations (IO), Psychological Operations, (PSYOP – recently re-named Military Information Support Operations or MISO) and Public Affairs (PA). However, military SC remains poorly defined, is inconsistently integrated into operations planning processes, and has not yet been formally incorporated into the DoD's doctrinal framework. Rather than inspiring new thinking, changing the organizational structure by inserting SC arguably added to the uncertainty and confusion associated with adaptive transition. Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff explains, "By organizing to it – creating whole structures around it – we have allowed strategic communication to become a thing instead of a process, an abstract thought instead of a way of thinking" (2009, p. 2).

Individuals are making creative efforts to transition DoD communication practices throughout the military in places where a fortuitous combination of leadership, initiative, education and experience foster collaboration and innovation. Leaders within U.S. Central Command have encouraged the breaking down of existing stovepipes to integrate communication into planning and operations in Afghanistan (Pincus, 2011). Air Force Technical Sergeants Ken Raimondi and Nathan Gallahan built upon existing expertise to produce the award-winning *Thirty Days Through Afghanistan* video series which reached beyond traditional delivery into the interactive medium of blogging (2010). However, the likelihood these localized efforts will result in persistent and beneficial organizational transition is limited by operations tempo, personnel rotations, and numerous difficulties inherent in the capture and application of lessons-learned.

### 1.2. Fundamental truths

Successful transition requires leaders to define the truths of a new reality (Schein, 2004). Three fundamental and interrelated truths emerge from the convergence of leadership and communication theories. First, it is not possible to lead without communicating. This truth is consistently revealed by change-leadership scholars and practitioners including Axelrod (2002), Bridges (1986) and Kotter and Cohen (2002) but is also generally reflected throughout leadership research, literature and practice. Second, it is not possible to *not* communicate and third, it is not possible to communicate without influencing those involved in the communication process (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). These truths set a context within which the DoD's current communication mindset can be evaluated and a new mindset recommended, but a basic understanding of two schools of communication thought, theory and practice must also be reached.

### 1.3. Communications and communication

Detailed exploration of communication theory lies beyond the scope of this article, but a general overview is relevant to the mindset transition proposed here. Two general schools of communication thought, theory and practice evolved in recent decades (Doorley & Garcia, 2007). The first school, communications, is grounded in technical or monologic models similar to those developed by Shannon (1948) and Berlo (1960) and emphasizes delivery of information from one point to another. The

second school, communication (sans “s”), is grounded in dialogic or transactional models and emphasizes social interaction and information exchange similar to Schramm’s model (1954).

Models from the respective schools share many similarities. For example, Berlo’s (1960) one-way model includes source, message, channel, and receiver elements. In comparison Schramm’s (1954) interactive model includes the corresponding elements of message, receiver and sender, though it also accounts for the role of context by assigning participants the shared responsibilities of encoding, interpreting and decoding.

While the two schools share many similarities, in context of the mindset change proposed here a key difference between them must be highlighted: The communications school emphasizes the elements of message (or information) and medium to ensure controlled transmission and receipt through technical means while the communication school emphasizes the sender and receiver as social beings to ensure appropriate selection and use of a medium to convey meaning. In short, communications is about equipment and communication is about people. Consequently the mindset of communications practitioners tends to focus upon control and delivery of information through a medium while the mindset of communication practitioners generally frames communication as a holistic process of human interaction.

Each school approaches the three enduring environmental characteristics of speed, ubiquity and mobility – and changes in those characteristics – in distinctly different ways. Speed in technical communications generally relates to the rate and volume of information delivery from point A to point B while speed in social communication generally relates to the rate and volume at which information is exchanged between people. Ubiquity in technical communications generally relates to the increased availability of information while ubiquity in social communication generally relates to the increased ability of individuals to participate in the communication process. Mobility in technical communications generally relates to the transportability of a given platform that sends and receives information while mobility in social communication generally relates to the ability of a given individual to participate in the communication process regardless of their location.

## 2. Current communication mindset

Nearly two decades ago, leading crisis communicator James E. Lukaszewski stated, “One of the great mistakes many have made in managing issues is a reliance on the news media as a principle vehicle of communication and reflection of community response” (1992, p. 3). Today an overwhelming majority of the world embraces a new participatory Fourth Estate characterized by speed, ubiquity and mobility: nearly anyone can now communicate immediately from anywhere with everyone. Yet the DoD clings to the past as it struggles to accept the ascension of a new monarch. Examples include ongoing parochial debate regarding access to and control of so-called new-media venues (SecDev Group, 2009), aggressive investigations into leaks of unclassified information (Armed Forces Press Service, 2010), and policies that hinder timely public engagement in real-time conversations throughout the commons (Shanker, 2010).

Analysis of communication-related parlance, principles, organizational design and contemporary DoD practice indicates a mindset firmly grounded in the technical or monologic school of thought, theory and practice. A primary characteristic of this mindset is an organization-wide focus on the information and medium elements of the greater communication process and corresponding emphasis on the technical systems related to data storage, security, and controlled delivery. This mindset resonates through the highest levels of DoD leadership. For example, information is identified as one of the four Instruments of National Power (JP 1, 2009) and in a memo with the subject line “Strategic Communication and Information Operations in the DoD” dated January 25, 2011, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates states, “In this *information*-centric environment, [Information Operations] training and education are particularly important” (Italics added). Amidst an ongoing communication revolution and rapidly evolving communication environment in which speed, ubiquity and mobility are increasing in parallel with Moore’s Law (Intel, 2011) to enable hundreds of millions of people to participate in a process of human interaction the U.S. military continues to conduct Information Activities amidst an Information Environment during a so-called Information Age.

Analysis of language used throughout a wide range of DoD doctrine, directives, policies and official correspondence reveals a consistent mindset emphasis upon the technical matter of how information will be stored, protected and transmitted or who within the military is allowed to release information, to whom it can be released, and under what authority. The term communications appears 40 times in joint doctrine for psychological operations, the term communication merely five. Information operations doctrine includes the term communications 82 times, communication 15 times (JP 3-13, 2006). The term communications appeared 46 times and communication seven times in the 2005 edition of Public Affairs Doctrine, numbers which shifted to 84 and 68, respectively, in the updated 2010 version (JP 3-61). While changes in public affairs doctrine are a move forward, it is notable the two terms are frequently used interchangeably and therefore imprecisely throughout related doctrine. This reveals at best an organizational focus on communication as a technical process, while at worst it may indicate a general lack of awareness and consideration regarding distinctions between the technical and social schools of communication thought, theory and practice.

The military’s communications-based lexicon extends far beyond imprecise use of the terms communications and communication. For example, the people with whom the military communicates are typically referred to as target audiences to which messages must be delivered, all terms that describe a technical or monologic activity of information management and transmission rather than an interactive social process (JP 3-53, 2003; JP 3-61, 2005; JP 3-13, 2006).

DoD’s current guiding principles, the Principles of Information, (JP 3-61, 2005; JP 3-13, 2006) address the conditions under which information can be released to the public or should be withheld. Likewise, organizational design reflects a

monologic mindset and resulting focus on the information and media elements of the holistic communication process: The Defense Information School (DINFOS) trains those most directly responsible for interacting with U.S. and friendly international publics; the Defense Media Agency (DMA) “. . . provides a wide range of high quality multimedia products and services to inform, educate and entertain Department of Defense audiences around the world. . .” (2011, italics added); and Information Operations personnel strive to “. . . achieve and maintain *information* superiority for the U.S. and its allies” (JP 3-13, 2006, italics added). Meanwhile the most robust elements of contemporary Public Affairs practice include *Media Relations* and *Social Media* sections that rely upon the Freedom of Information Act, Information Security and Information Assurance frameworks to guide public release of information (JP 3-61, 2005).

### 2.1. Shortfall of the communications mindset

Social media continues to expand and the DoD increasingly fixates on the technical aspects of controlling the medium while the rest of the world – including individual military members – actively engages in a global, real-time process of social exchange. This communications-based mindset encourages an ongoing effort to control the infinite, a behavior described by Gilmore (2010) as “. . . the proverbial Little Dutch Boy sticking a finger into an approaching wave.” Consequently the Department of Defense continues to develop policies that constrain interaction between military members and representatives of traditional Fourth Estate organizations (Shanker, 2010), to initiate structural changes such as Strategic Communication or Social Media sections intended to better manage delivery of messages to target audiences (USJFCOM, 2010), and to stimulate lingering uncertainty regarding who is allowed to deliver information to target audiences through the new Fourth Estate of social media (SecDev Group, 2009). While this does not ensure DoD failure it defies truths of the new reality and hinders adaptation within a rapidly evolving communication environment characterized by the speed, ubiquity and mobility of human interaction.

An organization can let go of old practices while still building upon proven experience and expertise (Bridges, 2009) as demonstrated by U.S. Central Command (Pincus, 2011) and Raimondi and Gallahan (2010), and even amidst a changing environment occasions will arise when the current DoD communication expertise in monologue – delivering messages to target audiences – will be an appropriate course of action. However, this must become one of numerous possibilities rather than the default starting point.

It is not possible to lead *without* communicating (Axelrod, 2002; Bridges, 2009; Kotter & Cohen, 2002), therefore leaders, not merely communication practitioners, must actively engage in communication activities. Similarly, people throughout the DoD must be deliberately incorporated into DoD communication processes for the obvious but often overlooked reason that they are *already engaged* in communication which in turn influences those around them (Watzlawick et al., 1967). The DoD now exists in a reality that precludes tightly controlled technical communications practices, therefore a transition to a mindset grounded in the social or dialogic school of communication thought, theory and practice is needed. In other words the Department of Defense must learn to think in terms of social communication because it cannot *not* happen.

## 3. Leader actions to guide mindset transition

Changes faced by the DoD today “. . . may involve developing new competencies, establishing new relationships, becoming comfortable with new policies and procedures, constructing new plans for the future, and learning to think in accordance with new purposes and priorities” (Bridges, 1986, p. 26). Due to the complexity of the associated mindset shift proposed here it must originate among senior DoD leaders who, once prepared to let go of the old situation and accept the new reality, can in turn guide their organization through the neutral zone and new beginnings stages of transition (Bridges, 2009). The following four actions are proposed to assist DoD leaders in shifting first their mindset and then that of the entire military from the traditional grounding in technical or monologic communication to a social or dialogic approach that embraces the truths of the new reality and accounts for the speed, ubiquity and mobility of human interaction in the evolving communication environment. First, they must re-define the military’s vision and purpose. Second, they must establish a new communication lexicon. Third, they must establish a universal set of guiding principles. Fourth, they must revise DoD doctrine and training to incorporate social communication thought, theory and practice. These four actions will enable a mindset transition that will in turn stimulate the creativity and innovation necessary to imagine and implement appropriate changes to core processes and organizational structure.

### 3.1. A new vision and purpose

One significant aspect of successful transition is the ability of leaders and their followers to let go of an old identity and accept a new one. This requires leaders to clarify new purposes, outcomes, plans and roles that help an organization conform to truths of its new reality (Bridges, 2009), which has yet to happen in the DoD. For example, the U.S. Army Field Manual (2006) for counterinsurgency was created as one guide to military success in today’s environment, but though the manual emphasizes the importance of civilian populations in contemporary military operations its writers stopped short of realizing a new purpose for the military. Despite the manual’s persistent theme that support of the populous is essential to military success and that over the past decade the purpose of most military operations has more frequently been to help people rather than kill them, the manual was written through the narrow lens of how to defeat an enemy rather than how to render

him irrelevant. The authors of the counterinsurgency manual imagined new ways to achieve an old purpose – but failed to imagine a new purpose within a transformed reality in which the speed, ubiquity and mobility of human interaction are defining environmental characteristics.

A new vision and purpose for the military might be drawn from the truths of the new reality. If one cannot lead without communicating, cannot *not* communicate, and cannot communicate without influencing others, then the alignment between what the military says and what it does becomes vital to organizational success. Free societies are in fact built upon trust and credibility created through consistency of words and deeds (Kouzes & Posner, 2003), a fact recognized by senior military leaders as well as leadership-scholars. Then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (2008) states the solution to DoD's communication challenges will not “. . . be found in some slick PR campaign or by trying to out-propagandize al-Qaeda, but rather through the steady accumulation of actions and results that build trust and credibility over time.” Admiral Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also emphasizes this point with the assertion that nobody has “. . . proven more capable of establishing trust and credibility in more places than [the U.S. military].” (Mullen, 2009). Even instructors at the Defense Information School (2010) tell their students, “Your credibility and trust are all you have. (p. 2).

In a world in which every action communicates something to somebody and human interaction is immediate, global and mobile, reality may dictate a DoD vision and purpose similar to the following: To preserve and strengthen the credibility of and public trust in the military “. . . by consistently aligning [its] words and deeds and coordinating free flow of timely accurate information between the military and the public while at the same time maintaining security and preserving the privacy of [DoD] service members and employees” (Gilmore, 2010, p. 18).

The military must of course preserve its skill and competitive advantage against America's enemies. Whatever the new vision and purpose for the DoD might be however, as with the ability to deliver messages to target audiences, environment DoD leaders, planners and communication practitioners who transition from a technical/monologic mindset to a mindset based in social/dialogic interaction must begin to think of destruction of an enemy as one of numerous possible goals rather than as their default starting position.

### 3.2. *New communication lexicon*

Much of the DoD's current communication lexicon reflects the technical or monologic school of thought, theory and practice. To facilitate a transition toward a social or dialogic mindset, DoD leaders, planners and practitioners alike must be more precise in their use of communication language. For example, they should consistently distinguish between the terms communications and communication and, unless used purposefully, the term *target audience* should be replaced by the word *public* as defined by either PRSA (2011) or Broom (2008). Perhaps the most tyrannical effort will be required to eliminate abuse of monologic synonyms for communication including *information activity*, *messaging*, *theming* and most notably, *information*.

While there may be those who believe these recommendations are merely a matter of semantics, three important points about language might be considered: First, organizational language reflects special meanings of common words that “. . . ultimately become one of the deepest layers of [a] group's culture. . .” (Schein, 2004, p. 16); Second, few people like to be thought of as *targets*; Third, communicating *with* people is a significantly different activity than communicating *at* them.

### 3.3. *Universal guiding principles*

In addition to establishing a new vision and purpose for the DoD and updating its communication lexicon, leaders must develop a universal set of guiding principles for use throughout the Department. USJFCOM (2010) provides one possible model that depicts the need to maintain a delicate balance among seven principles in order to preserve the credibility of and public trust in the military. The principles, identified through analysis of current communication-related DoD doctrine, are Free Flow of Information, Accuracy, Timeliness, Unified Voice, Delegation of Voice, Security and Privacy. Whether these principles are adopted or others are developed, a universal set of principles will help guide value-driven behavior throughout the DoD toward realization of the new vision and purpose defined by its leaders (Covey, 1990). Additionally they might be made available to the general public along with a direct invitation for comparison between the DoD's principles and those of other organizations that interact with the public (USJFCOM, 2010).

### 3.4. *New doctrine and training*

Although DoD leaders can use a new vision and purpose, lexicon, and principles as tools to begin an organization-wide shift in mindset from the technical/monologic school to the social/dialogic school, a comprehensive transition will also challenge leaders, planners and communication practitioners alike to develop new competencies, establish new relationships, become comfortable with new policies and procedures and create new plans for the future (Bridges, 1986). These challenges must be met with deliberate and comprehensive modifications to doctrine and training throughout the Department, for in a world in which human interaction happens in real-time on a global scale, communication is no longer an activity that can be relegated to a specific section or sub-department.

#### 4. . . . Long live the Fourth Estate

The Fourth Estate is dead and the world has moved on to embrace a new reality characterized by the speed, ubiquity and mobility of human interaction. Yet the U.S. Department of Defense, having long excelled at the technical practice of information control and delivery, continues to rely upon both traditional and new media venues primarily as a means to deliver messages to target audiences, those in mourning in effect clinging to the memory of a past monarch in an effort to maintain the status quo. If the DoD hopes to thrive and not merely survive in coming years it must undergo several significant changes to its communication processes and organizational structures, but those changes will result from new and creative thinking rather than habit and reflex. Leaders cannot lead without communicating, one cannot *not* communicate, and one cannot communicate without influencing others. These are the truths that define a new reality of real-time dialogue and global social interaction. These are the truths that must guide the Department to think in new ways and declare boldly, “The Fourth Estate is dead – Long live the Fourth Estate!”

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