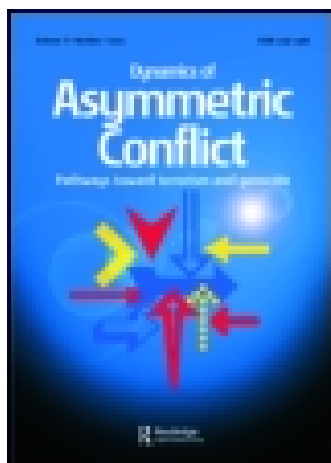


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The war of ideas on the Internet: An asymmetric conflict in which the strong become weak

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IDEA PAPER

The war of ideas on the Internet: An asymmetric conflict in which the strong become weak

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Advertising and public relations – the war of ideas – is increasingly being conducted on the Internet, rather than in “old media” of print, radio, and television. An important aspect of the war of ideas is the battle to control the perceptions of others’ attitudes and opinions. These perceptions are important because opinions about opinions (*meta-opinions*) act as social norms: they encourage the expression of positions seen as popular and discourage the expression of positions seen as unpopular. Using this interpretation, this article describes recent examples of opinion management to illustrate how the Internet differs from older media both quantitatively (acceleration of dissemination) and qualitatively (lack of centralized editorial authority). As a result of these differences, smaller and less-centralized groups often have the advantage over states and corporations on the Internet. Thus, in the war of ideas between the US and jihadist groups such as ISIS, the conflict is indeed asymmetric but the US is arguably the weaker side and must understand the unique constraints of the new battlefield in order to succeed.

Keywords: Internet; propaganda; public relations; meta-opinion; norms; spiral of silence; conformity

Operation Valhalla was an ideal counterinsurgency operation. In March 2006, a Special Forces team composed of both US and Iraqi soldiers raided an insurgent compound in Sadr City, Baghdad, killing 16 militants, capturing another 16 and rescuing a hostage (Dauber, 2009). They returned to base having suffered only a single minor injury, justifiably proud of having demonstrated what a successful operation should look like: a synthesis of good intelligence, preparation, and execution.

Yet, before they had reached their base, the mission had become a public relations nightmare. Other insurgents got to the scene and rearranged the bodies and removed the weapons to make it appear that the dead had been shot while at prayer. Pictures of the adjusted scene were published online for all to see in less than an hour, reinforcing a perception of the US as antagonistic towards the regional culture and values (Dauber, 2009).

The speed of the insurgents’ response is particularly breathtaking given that Iraq is a war-torn country with little of what might be called a modern telecommunications infrastructure. More impressive yet, what infrastructure exists is generally controlled by

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the Iraqi government and assisting US forces. Despite these obstacles, the insurgents published their story before the allied forces had even returned to their base.

Iraqi reactions to the photographs were strong, and triggered an investigation into the supposed US perpetrators. The Special Forces team was grounded while the investigation churned forward, as if they had unaccountably lost the engagement. It was weeks before their skills could be returned to action. The insurgents' use of media was more effective, militarily, than the armed men the Special Forces team took out of action (Dauber, 2009).

There is nothing new in staging scenes of warfare for propaganda purposes; the insurgents did not invent this stratagem. Nor did the insurgents have a greater command of technology – the investigation was cleared up in part owing to video records of the engagement taken by helmet cameras issued to the Special Forces team. The only real advantage the insurgents had was flexibility. The cellular structure of insurgent warfare gives local commanders greater authority than commanders operating within the strict chains of command of established militaries. Any countering press statement, let alone the release of the helmet videos from the Special Forces team, could only be authorized after the team returned to base (by which point it was already too late), was debriefed (far too late), and an official response was cleared by the chain of command (late to the point of uselessness).

The asymmetric war of ideas

As the last remaining superpower, it is unsurprising that current US conflicts are primarily asymmetric. An F-22 fighter plane costs over \$100 million, not including maintenance, and the upcoming F-35 is expected to cost over \$200 million. Such weapons are a significant and often hotly debated outlay even for major powers. In contrast, Al Qaeda's peak budget is estimated to have been \$30 million a year, which means the equivalent of one fighter jet could have funded them for 3–6 years (Vardi, 2010). To compete against major powers despite an unbridgeable gap in economic and industrial capability, asymmetric actors have turned to unconventional warfare, countering armored vehicles with IEDs and aerial surveillance with expert knowledge of local conditions. However, as Operation Valhalla shows, these groups can easily match the US and all its resources when it comes to propaganda and public relations.

The Internet was developed with the fragility of centralized infrastructure in mind, and designed to allow communication even in the event of an all-out nuclear war with the Soviet Union (NPR, 2014). Although states and large corporations pay for the cables and servers, the Internet provides a kind of "guerrilla infrastructure" available to both states and non-state challengers. For non-state groups the Internet presents both a threat and an opportunity. It is a threat because it expands the scope of the dominant state culture to individuals in a way both more direct and more subtle than broadcast communications. It also offers non-state groups an opportunity to access a global and instantaneous communication system that allows these groups to get beyond preaching to the choir of their local sympathizers (Kaplan, 2009).

This, then, is the shape of the war of ideas in the twenty-first century. Both states and non-state groups have direct access to their audiences, whoever they might be, and the state's control of the Internet's infrastructure is not an insurmountable advantage. Instead, speed and decentralized response are the keys to success. In this article I suggest a conceptual structure for understanding public opinion and how it is constructed in a world of instant communication and social media. I then examine some further examples of how

public opinion is manipulated in this Internet age. Finally, I draw some conclusions about the weak position of the US and the wider future of public relations and propaganda on the net.

Public opinion and polling

Every election cycle in the United States produces a period of time during which attention is focused on opinion polls – national, state, regional – that are paid for by dozens of organizations, including the candidates' campaigns. In recent years, governments have made more focused investigations into public opinion. Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (US), 7/7 (UK) and 11-M (Spain), Western governments have worked to track Muslim political opinions, both among Muslim immigrants in Western countries and in Muslim majority countries. Even non-democratic countries often make some effort to track public opinion, not least because an aroused citizenry has been known to bring sudden and surprising regime change (e.g. USSR in 1991, Tunisia in 2011).

Measuring – and moving – public opinion is a thriving business, in which international corporate conglomerates compete to provide “integrated marketing programs” that go far beyond 1950s Mad Men-style advertising. Integrated campaigns seek to offer clients a combination of services, including brand management, public relations and corporate crisis management on top of electronic and print advertising. At the same time, new pressures for accountability support research comparing tracking polls to sales figures in order to evaluate the outcomes of advertising expenditures.

Polling technology is thus key to both political and corporate competition for public opinion. Indeed, polling is such a familiar part of modern culture that it may seem the very definition of public opinion. Is not public opinion what polls measure it to be – plus or minus a few percentage points? The next section argues that this is not an adequate definition of public opinion, and introduces a broader view that includes the concept of *meta-opinion*.

Meta-opinions: Opinions about opinions

In his 1995 book *Private Truths and Public Lies*, economist Timur Kuran tried to answer a pressing question of the post-Cold War world: how did the USSR collapse? Cold War fears supported numerous Russia experts and Kremlinologists, but none of these predicted the sudden dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Kuran's idea was that preference falsification – expedient lies – had hidden deep public disapproval of the Soviet regime, which was suddenly revealed when Gorbachev's glasnost reforms cracked open a door to citizens' honestly expressing their displeasure.

The USSR was an authoritarian state with an active secret police, a large and brutal prison system, and a history of encouraging citizens to denounce each other. Russians who thought the Kremlin was incompetent or morally bankrupt had every reason to keep quiet. Citizens observing their neighbors could see only public support for the government, and from this position of pluralistic ignorance, most could only assume that they were a minority in their doubts and displeasure. However, when Gorbachev's reforms allowed minor protests – protests by a brave few who were *not* immediately arrested and “disappeared” to the gulag – Soviet citizens could begin to see the true extent of public opinion against the government. The change in private opinion may have been gradual, but the changed perception of public opinion – the change in meta-opinion – occurred rapidly, leading to the collapse of a superpower.

In this analysis, Kuran distinguished the actual distribution of public opinion from the perceived distribution. The perceived distribution is a meta-opinion, an opinion about opinion. When opinion and meta-opinion diverge substantially, related social and political structures are unstable. Any accident that reveals the true distribution of opinion can cause sudden political change – as it did in the USSR. Although not all meta-opinions diverge as wildly from real opinions as Kuran suggests for the old Soviet Union, the strength of meta-opinions in suppressing or delaying a change in public opinion has been noted by other researchers in far less repressive regimes (Shamir & Shamir, 2000).

Group norms

Roger Brown's classic 1965 text (*Social Psychology*, pp. 47–50) defined a group norm as the expected behavior for a particular combination of actor and situation. In a specified situation, most specified actors will behave in the same way, most will expect others to act in this way, and most will see *not* acting this way as somehow wrong. For example, it is a norm that younger persons on a subway (actors, situation) should give up their seats (behavior) to older persons who would otherwise stand. The power of the norm comes from the expectation that a younger person should behave “properly” – by putting courtesy for an elder above personal comfort. Even if a younger person feels no personal obligation to give up a comfortable seat to a stranger, the motivation to avoid social sanction can be enough to enforce the norm. Similarly, a job hunter can attend an interview just as well in jeans and a T-shirt as in a suit and tie – but few interviewees would risk the more comfortable attire.

Not all norms are so well-defined, however, and with no other available information people tend to believe they are in the majority – that what they think is right, and if they are right, most people will agree with them. It is reassuring to think that others agree with us – even hypothetically. This leads to a bias in estimating what percentage of a given population agrees with us. If we prefer brown bread to white bread, for instance, we will estimate the percent preferring brown bread as higher than will be estimated by someone who prefers white bread. This is known as the False-Consensus Effect, and applies to almost every kind of opinion, including political opinions, entertainment preferences, and food choices (Sabini, 1995, pp. 165–166). Given how friendships form around shared interests and preferences, the false-consensus effect may originate from sampling bias in assessing the opinions of others as well as from a motive to see our own opinions well-supported by others.

Another indication of the importance of norms appears when individuals make judgments either while alone or in the presence of others. In 1926, Floyd Allport conducted experiments in which participants were asked to judge the relative heaviness of weights and the relative pleasantness of odors (Brown, 1965, p. 669). When working in groups at the same table, with no discussion permitted (co-working condition), judges were measurably more timid; their judgments clustered closer to the midpoint of the judgment scale than judgments made by individuals working alone. Even for a highly subjective judgment such as the pleasantness of odors, and even with only one other person present, Allport's Harvard undergraduates were wary of being seen as eccentric or extreme. Allport referred to this tendency as an *attitude of incipient conformity* – minimizing deviation from an unknown norm by avoiding extreme judgment in either direction.

Perhaps the strongest demonstrations of the power of norms are Solomon Asch's 1950s Conformity Experiments (Brown, 1965, pp. 670–673; Sabini, 1995, pp. 22–24). Eight

participants were shown a stimulus line, then asked to pick which of three lines was the same length as the stimulus. However, only one of the participants was an experimental subject. The others were all Asch's confederates, who, on preselected trials, would all choose the same obviously wrong answer. Three-quarters of the subjects went along with the crowd at least once. In the real world, where correct answers are rarely so obvious, the pressure of the crowd can be enormous – but it must be nearly unanimous; even a single ally for the real subject cut yielding to about a fifth of what occurred when the real subject faced a unanimous majority (Sabini, 1995, p. 30). The implication for advertising or propaganda campaigns is that opinions seen as closer to unanimous will have more power.

Ignorance and doubt are not the only situations that can warp behavior and perception, however. Political scientist Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory argued that public opinion (as measured by polls) is not what people privately think, but only the attitudes people think they can express without running the danger of isolating themselves from others – in other words, meta-opinions (Griffin, 2008, pp. 372–382). Noelle-Neumann's theory assumes that most people have some sense of what current public opinion is and how it is trending, based on observations of media and other people. Based on these observations, individuals are wary of stating counter-normative opinions for fear of social sanctions and strained relations with friends and neighbors.

The Spiral of Silence Theory does not depend on ignorance of what others think (as does the False-Consensus Effect or Allport's attitude of incipient conformity) and can apply to a world filled with advertisements, political campaigns and acquaintances offering opinions on these campaigns. Like Asch's conformity experiments, the Spiral of Silence predicts that individual opinions should move towards the perceived majority over time, as strengthening meta-opinion preferentially silences the disfavored minority. Empirical support for the Spiral of Silence has been inconsistent (Roessing, 2010, but see Spencer & Croucher, 2008), which has led some investigators to study possible mediating cultural and situational variables (Shamir & Shamir, 2010). One possible explanation is that the Spiral of Silence depends more on fear of embarrassment than fear of isolation. However, it seems clear that many of the efforts to control meta-opinions are theoretically motivated by something like the Spiral of Silence.

For managing public opinion, the precise mechanisms of normative power are not important. It is enough to recognize that norms depend on perceiving the opinions, preferences, and behaviors of others, and that manipulating perceptions of others can drastically affect individual behavior. The goal is always to create the appearance of a norm, an omnipresent meta-opinion that will quiet dissenters and critics, encourage supporters to be more visible, and convince any who remain on the fence that there is only one reasonable position to take – or risk censure. As Allport's experiments on the judgment of odors showed, humans are exquisitely sensitive to how others think, even when there is no basis for expecting criticism.

Public opinion on the Internet

Advertising, propaganda, public relations – these are all means of manipulating or controlling public opinion. Whether for political or commercial gain, the methods used tend to converge as technology advances. Today, the divisions among different kinds of media (television, telephone, Internet, print) are rapidly becoming more linguistic than technical, as the same infrastructure carries all of the data, and the same devices access them all. Voice-Over-IP (e.g. Skype), e-books, newspapers and blogs, Netflix and Youtube – all are now just Data.

The Internet differs from previous forms of media both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, the Internet accelerates the dissemination of information, a trait that makes it both powerful and, as discussed later, risky. Qualitatively, there are no publishers, no printing companies, no broadcasting companies to be controlled by corporate or political interests. Although cable companies and internet service providers (ISPs) are indeed centralized, various methods of disguising communications (with regards to both recipient/sender and contents) and the vast number of websites make effective opinion control by control of infrastructure immensely difficult.

In this environment, the future of public relations is in distributed responses – replying to and countering individual postings on the Internet in order to control a gestalt that overshadows any single and individually insignificant comment. Even if individual citizens remain unconvinced, rapid and ubiquitous deployment of counterarguments can create a norm, a meta-opinion that can help marginalize critics and prevent their ideas from spreading. In the face of the perceived norm, potential dissenters must overcome the pressure to conform and the fear of social sanctions.

Most attempts at controlling perception of public opinion show at least a practical understanding of the ideas described above, with groups using thousands or tens of thousands of posts across multiple forums and social media websites to create a desired meta-opinion. Would-be manipulators of public opinion must respond quickly to match the Internet's tendency for acceleration, and they must respond in a world with uncountable places to be heard. An effective manipulation must not only appear in many places at once (the goal of a classic old-media campaign), it must appear to be from many different sources. By posting under numerous accounts and false names, the desired opinion is given the appearance of being widely accepted. The next two sections provide examples showing, first, the speed required to manage opinions on the Internet, and second, the key importance of distributed response for managing meta-opinions and controlling norm power on the Internet.

Ideas on the Internet: Acceleration

In March 2011, rumors began to circulate in Chinese social media that the failing Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan was putting Chinese cities at risk. Further rumors suggested that the iodine supplement in table salt would help protect against the radiation drifting between Japan and China. Neither the distant Fukushima radiation nor the minute iodine supplement in table salt were large enough to justify the rumored threat or the rumored protection. Nevertheless, stores across China were soon out of salt (Burkitt, 2011). Two equally unfounded rumors triggered a national shortage in the world's most populous country. The rumors had major effects before the government could contradict them – if, indeed, the government could contradict them. With so many years of living with well-controlled media, Chinese citizens may be leery of the official story and unwilling to trust it when their personal health is threatened.

On 6 May 2010, the Dow Jones Industrial Average briefly dropped 9% in minutes – the result of automated trading programs collapsing in a dangerous feedback loop (Spicer & Younglai, 2010). The algorithms, designed to make money by operating faster than mere humans, worked all too well, causing the entire stock market to spiral briefly out of control. A minor accident created a norm that selling was the proper action. A norm that, despite having no basis in reality, sent both humans and emotionless computers into a frenzy that wiped out over a trillion dollars in five minutes.

Both of these stories illustrate the Internet's ability to accelerate minor problems into major ones while those with authority or responsibility are still trying to understand the situation. It has long been said that a lie goes round the world while truth is getting its boots on, and if today's truth travels faster than before, the lies are faster yet. Of course, a temporary shortage of salt and a brief dip in the stock market are not tragedies, but the story of Operation Valhalla, with which this essay began, suggests that the costs of false rumors can be more than inconvenience.

In the past, a slow response to rumor was less costly. The bureaucratic process ensured an advantageously consistent pan-organizational message, and the reporting, printing and delivery delays of newspapers made the delay caused by organizational decision-making a relatively small and tolerable cost. The advent of radio and television significantly decreased delivery time, but only within a framework of very large and legally cautious broadcasting companies who would, at least, attempt to obtain a comment from an official spokesperson before running an alarming or anti-government story.

The Internet's speed is one of its greatest strengths, but that same speed makes large, top-down bureaucracy too slow to fight effectively on the Internet. The future of Internet conflict of almost any sort lies with those who can adapt and delegate, to produce rapid and distributed campaigns.

Ideas on the Internet: Distributed response

The most famous example of distributed media manipulation in today's world is China's army of Internet Commentators, known also as the 50 Cent Party, a reference to how members are paid a small fee per post (Weiwei, 2012). These posts are designed to uphold the party line by attacking critics and defending government policies. While some members are full-time workers, many receive enough training to supplement their income by posting in their spare time, before or after work. These part-time commentators are neither quite employees nor quite volunteers. The hundreds of thousands of people who contribute to the work of the 50 Cent Party can create a sense that the party's narrative is everywhere, and everywhere dominant. Undesirable ideas are not just deleted (although this also may happen), they are responded to and argued against wherever they may be – chat rooms, forums, or comment pages.

In earlier times, the Chinese government could manage the same effect through its control of publishing and printers – a tactic that they have not given up entirely. Recently, China has been extending its bans of several US television shows to online streaming sites, in continued recognition of how popular television can accustom people to norms the central government may find counterproductive (Feng & Wang, 2014). As a television provider employee put it, "It portrays a kind of living style that is totally Western. A leader like Xi must sense the mismatch between the culture he is promoting and the culture that these videos are spreading" (Feng & Wang, 2014).

Ownership of the major Internet companies in China is not enough, however. With over half a billion people on the Internet, censorship on the scale of the 50 Cent Party would become blatantly, personally obvious to the population as a whole – as opposed to the limited number of writers and editors censorship used to be applied to. Facing distributed content creation, China has limited censorship for practical reasons, and instead turned to distributed counterattacks.

Showing the broad appeal of the 50 Cent Party's methods, the Chinese government has recently found itself investigating Internet Commentators for abuse of position (ECNS.cn, 2014). With appropriate bribes, a corporation in China can get its own concerns and public

relations goals added to a Commentator's duties. For those corporations who do not need the powerful (and government-restricted) tools of the 50 Cent Party, the private "Water Armies" offers similar capabilities (Yan, 2010). The Water Armies train and pay their own commentators in much the same way the 50 Cent Party does, putting the same rapid and distributed response methods at the disposal of anyone willing to buy their services.

It is hardly surprising that other countries have shown interest in the methods of the 50 Cent Party. In the fall of 2013, Israel announced a program that Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel called an element of the public diplomacy front (Associated Press, 2013). Students from Israeli universities are to be given partial scholarships in return for countering critics of Israeli policy. This program is in addition to the previously organized Interactive Media division of the Israeli military, where dozens of soldiers are similarly tasked. The expansion of the method from a few soldiers to many students shows Israel's understanding that control of norms depends on decentralization and an ubiquitous presence. More recently, over 400 student volunteers have been assisting the Israeli Defense Force in countering Hamas propaganda – which also includes the spreading of images, videos, and tweets across the Internet. As for their methods, one of the volunteers said "The whole point of such efforts is to look like they are unofficial, just everyday people chatting online" (Hall, 2014).

In September 2013, Prime Minister Erdogan of Turkey unveiled a program of "social-media representatives" (Albayrak & Parkinson, 2013). Unlike the Chinese and Israeli programs, Erdogan's is meant to work on behalf of his party rather than for the government as a whole. Everything else about the program is quite familiar, however; 6000 young members of Erdogan's party are to be trained to respond to criticism and share the party line across multiple social media platforms.

In South Korea, a team in the National Intelligence Service attempted to influence public opinion before an election with over a million blog posts and Twitter messages (*New York Times*, 2014). While a very good example of the global interest in distributed propaganda, the South Korean courts did not look kindly on the spy agency involving itself in domestic affairs and convicted the intelligence chief involved.

Even the United States has shown interest in some elements of these methods, with the first implementation appearing to be Operation Earnest Voice (Fielding & Cobain, 2011), under the direction of the United States Central Military Command. Unlike the previous examples, this program is entirely military, being staffed by the Air Force and directed at websites thought to be frequented by extremists. While information on the goals of this program is scarce, there appear to be only 50 full-time posters, giving Earnest Voice a very narrow reach compared to the Chinese, Israeli, Turkish and South Korean examples. There is no indication at this time that the United States is trying to use the Internet to manipulate US public opinion at home.

In 2011, the US Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) was established by Presidential Executive Order, which gave the ideas and methods of Operation Earnest Voice a permanent home. Based inside the State Department, this interagency program is currently led by [Ambassador Alberto Fernandez](#). Himself an Arabic linguist, Ambassador Fernandez directs about 50 linguists who blog, tweet, and post in Arabic, Pushtun, Urdu, Somali and, most recently, English (Brown, 2014). They combat extremists' ideas in the previously uncontested idea spaces of the Internet, and by destroying the appearance of a consensus in extremist forums they hope undecided potential recruits will have second thoughts.

All of these programs demonstrate a need to counter unwanted opinions informally and at their point of origin – individual Internet users. None of them involves massive media

campaigns and slick presentations, just patient individuals with a keyboard and an Internet connection. Distributed response is the necessary tool for today's Internet-dominated information network.

It is so crucial, in fact, that corporations have joined governments in developing distributed advertising and counteradvertising. Corporate attempts are often called "astroturfing" – artificial grassroots movements.

Corporate public relations on the Internet

A notable example comes from Dell. A technology company in the struggling business of computer sales, Dell has embraced the distributed nature of the Internet. Dell set up the Social Media and Community University (SMAC University), an in-house group devoted to preparing any and all employees of the company to handle corporate public relations at an individual level (Strom, 2012). Despite the unfortunate acronym, Dell considers the program a success. Thousands of Dell employees have taken at least one class provided by SMAC. As with the 50 Cent Party, these employees are not full-time marketing or PR people, instead contributing on a part- or free-time basis. Also like the 50 Cent Party, Dell seeks to respond positively and actively to unhappy comments about their organization.

Most corporations seem to be less adept at controlling Internet meta-opinions than Dell, with famous failures perhaps outnumbering success stories. There are numerous examples of fake reviews and fake Twitter posts being uncovered owing to unbelievable writing or identical wording. Some organizations understand the need to affect a decentralized public opinion, but fail to understand the necessity of a distributed, individualized response. Instead, they create a single fake testimonial worthy of a late-night infomercial and splatter it across a hundred forums and blogs using "bots", computer-created and controlled accounts designed to act like regular users without needing any direct human control. It appears that bot posts have so far been easily identifiable by their stereotypical repetition and crude messages, and have produced mostly annoyance, mockery, and deletion. Bots have so far failed to convince the marketplace, with prices for such programs around a fraction of a cent per fake account (Bilton, 2014). It is possible that further developments could increase their value, but for now the marketplace currently places a premium on the human touch.

The prize for the most tone-deaf attempt to control perception of opinion may go to online marketplace kleargear.com, which has intermittently included a non-disparagement clause in its license agreement (Griffith, 2014). If the company decides a customer's statement is "libelous", the customer is required to remove it or pay \$3500. This method is not only ethically and legally questionable, it has failed to deter negative posts and instead harmed the company's image further when it came to light.

Video game publisher Electronic Arts (EA) tried a slightly more subtle route that still backfired. Customers of one of their games were asked to rate the game, with high raters then being directed to the Android marketplace to rate it for real and low raters being instead forwarded to a complaint form (Hawkins, 2014). This artificial selection process predictably led to a vastly inflated rating, but only briefly. Annoyed customers and bloggers quickly made their displeasure known elsewhere, leading to deeply unfavorable scores for the game on independent review aggregating websites, as well as significant criticism for an already unpopular corporation.

The famous Internet protest group Anonymous shows that distributed public relations can work without any corporate sponsorship or chain of command whatsoever. Anonymous has no real structure and no institutional interests. It is also practically

impossible to punish or sanction the group in any substantial way, and so, unlike all prior examples, Anonymous cares little about positive versus negative publicity. When, through group consensus, Anonymous takes a stand on an issue or event, members contribute computing power or research time towards publicizing and disrupting their targets. Websites are defaced or made unreachable, people are harassed via email and telephone, negative feedback is left in thousands of places, Internet poll boxes are digitally stuffed.

Opinions about Anonymous are mixed at best (with the US National Security Agency and most governments considering them an outright threat), but the issues they care about become news, and their accusations (whether real, false, or exaggerated) are widely heard. Although they lack the consistency of purpose or predictability that comes with stronger organization, Anonymous can be seen as a self-sustaining public relations machine that uses only distributed communication methods.

How to fight a global war of ideas

The ideal method, as extracted from the previous examples, can be summarized easily: no criticism must ever be seen, for no matter how short a time, without an appropriate counterargument. This method is not without risks, however. There is a limit to the number of posts a single person can produce, which creates the incentive for training and delegating small-time communicators, as China, Dell, Israel, and Turkey are all doing. These semi-trained public-relations experts will be operating outside of direct control, and meaningful oversight of their work is fatally slow. If any one of those semi-professional commentators, posters, and responders makes a mistake, however small, the Internet can accelerate that miss-step rapidly. If group members have differing ideas as to the institutional message or goal, then the distributed method may create a semblance of inconsistency and weakness, instead of the desired impression of uniformity and certainty.

The organizations that so far appear best at implementing these methods tend to be non-state groups – terrorists, insurgents, and interest groups such as Anonymous. These organizations have always been decentralized, some for philosophical reasons, but mostly because a unified command structure is a risk they can ill afford. Their adoption of distributed propaganda was an easy and natural development, and one that is successful enough that governments are outspending them by orders of magnitude in an attempt to catch up.

Today's large organizations – governmental, political, and corporate – are used to thinking that technology allows for greater and more perfect management by centralized authority. This is dead wrong. While central authority may be able to deal quickly with one particular crisis, a crisis on the Internet is made up of hundreds or thousands of separate events – far too many for a single decision-maker. The need for the chain of command to decide which decisions must be made at which level further slows centralized organizations. Although light-speed communication makes micromanagement a great temptation, future success stories in public relations will reward those organizations that can delegate and trust.

Consider that, at CSCC, Ambassador Fernandez has fewer than 50 employees, who work office hours from Washington DC. In contrast, thousands of volunteers work all hours to create and post new material for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). While the quality of ISIS materials varies widely, the sheer quantity offers a quality of its own. Perhaps more importantly, ISIS does not have the time or resources to police all material produced in its name and can, with considerable justification, disavow any missteps or failures. Ambassador Fernandez and the CSCC, on the other hand, are part of a unified

command structure, and are directly responsible for each and every message – and directly open to criticism as well (Brown, 2014).

Although the US remains dominant in kinetic warfare, it appears that, in the war of ideas on the Internet, the US is still recovering from a slow start. Perhaps owing to a lack of experience as a weaker power, the US government is only slowly moving resources to experiment with new Internet-focused tactics in the war of ideas. The CSCC is the beginning of a permanent place for this kind of innovation in the US government, and its progress will not be smooth.

Speed and creativity do not coexist easily with political accountability. As part of the US State Department, it is difficult to see how CSCC can be adequately insulated from political – and especially partisan – controversy.

A better model for the CSCC might be the foreign news broadcasting operations supported by the US government. As defined in the US International Broadcasting Act of 1994, “The Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) is both the name of the independent federal agency that oversees all U.S. civilian international media and the name of the board that governs those broadcasts” (“About”, 2014). The BBG is composed of nine experts in mass communications and international affairs, who are already responsible for foreign radio and television programs such as the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and Radio Farda (in Persian). The BBG model of an independent federal agency with bipartisan direction might provide the right kind and degree of distance between CSCC and its US Government support to allow rapid, creative response in the war of ideas on the Internet.

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