

United States Air Force Public Affairs: Purpose and Effective Practices

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I. Introduction

As America's combat operations in the Middle East continue, The United States Air Force is moving forward with a new public relations strategy that emphasizes open communication and new media technologies as part of efforts to reach organizational goals. The central focus of this program involves making every Airman an online communicator capable of expressing the stories, messages and ideals of the Air Force and the United States government to the American public, and those abroad.

II. Context of Air Force Public Affairs Operations

Like the other three branches of the United States military directed by the Department of Defense, the United States Air Force counts among its publics the enemy it has been openly fighting in the Middle East since 2003, governments and civilians abroad who are both friendly and hostile to the United States, and American soldiers and civilians. The United States Coast Guard – also a branch of the military – focuses on similar constituents, but is run by the Department of Homeland Security.

Each of the above constituent groups receives focus from Air Force Public Affairs personnel for specific strategic reasons. Obviously, radical Islamist groups like al-Qaeda and the Taliban are granted special attention because both form central components of the enemy the Air Force is tasked with fighting at this time. Beyond this, such groups have become increasingly adept at amplifying their message through new media tools, and have reaped the benefits of their efforts. These benefits include significant increases in new recruits through online radicalization initiatives, additional monetary contributions spurred by online propaganda, and increased ease in the coordination of attacks due to online communication.

“By leveraging new information and communication technologies, al-Qaeda has transformed itself into an organic social movement, making its virulent ideology accessible to anyone with a computer...jihadis are empowering one another to be producers, not simply consumers, of this material” (Brachman, 2006). Examples to support this claim abound. In June of 2005, a video featuring almost an hour of live-action war in Iraq along with suicide bomber training footage was released online by Abu Musab Zarqawi and his associates. Zarqawi is a now-deceased legend in the jihadi community, who is often said to rival Osama bin Laden in popularity among the younger breed of jihadists.

The 2005 video, like Zarqawi’s others, was well promoted and delivered. Buzz was created ahead of time on jihadi message boards, and the video was made available for download at varying internet connection speeds from a specially designed web page. Washington Post staff writers who reported on Zarqawi’s information wing that year said “never before has a guerrilla organization so successfully intertwined its real-time war on

the ground with its electronic jihad, making Zaraqawi's group practitioners of what experts say will be the future of insurgent warfare, where no act goes unrecorded and atrocities seem to be committed in order to be filmed and distributed nearly instantaneously online” (Glasser & Coll, 2005).

A May 2008 report featured in the New York Times highlights the success of Zaraqawi's online exploits, and others like them. The piece in the Times profiles a forty-eight-year-old Belgian Muslim named Malika El Aroud. This individual is unique for two reasons. First, Malika is a self-styled female holy warrior for al-Qaeda. Second, she’s “an Islamist who is at the forefront of the movement by women to take a larger role in the male-dominated global jihad” (Sciolino, 2008).

The entrance of female Muslims into the world of jihad – a sphere of radical Islam traditionally reserved for males – highlights the power new media tools lend to this target public of the United States Air Force. The dictates of fundamentalist Islam may discourage females from leaving their homes to become physically active in jihadist efforts, but the web allows them to participate just the same. For this reason and for those outlined earlier, radical Islamist groups like al-Qaeda and the Taliban remain special projects for United States Air Force Public Affairs personnel.

As mentioned previously, governments and civilians abroad who are friendly to the United States are additional concerns for the Air Force and its public affairs arm. America maintains a number of military air bases on the soil of friendly nations across the globe. Examples include Ramstein Air Base in Germany, Misawa Air Base in Japan, and Kunsan Air Base in South Korea. Although these nations and their citizens are United States allies, it’s still vitally important that Air Force Public Affairs practitioners clearly communicate to foreign governments and their civilian populations the intent and details of U.S. military operations taking place on their soil.

As United States Air Force Captain Nathan Broshear mentioned in a 2009 interview with marketing and public relations strategist David Meerman Scott, “you’re dealing with issues that could potentially cause international incidents...if we show up in country, with a C-17 or a C-130, and we haven’t done communications with that local populace, with that government, and with that embassy, to let them know why we’re

there...that could be an international incident. The level of miscommunication that could happen if you don't execute properly...it could have very, very big impacts" (Vimeo, 2009).

Communication with governments and civilians abroad who are hostile to the United States is equally important for the Air Force. Obviously the dynamics of such communication will be different, but it's still possible to outline the ideals and goals of America, its government, and its citizens in a way that is accessible to those who are most likely to connect with both. In many cases, civilian youths in hostile countries are the best targets for pro-American messages. This is because they are often the most open to western conceptions of consumerism and globalization, both of which are supported by a system of liberal democracy and the conditions of civil and economic stability needed to support such a system. These are things America hopes to foster abroad.

Additionally, civilian youths are often the most tech-savvy segments of a foreign population. This is critical because, as shown earlier with radical Islamist groups, new media tools present highly effective ways to spread a message and organize groups of people around that message. Youth populations are also the most likely to break away from the fundamentalist religious beliefs and/or dictatorial regimes that may exist in their countries to pursue American-style democracy and the economic and political freedoms that come with it. Finally, youth populations in countries hostile to the United States are important to reach because they represent the future leadership of those nations. Influencing them with America's message early on can pay dividends down the road.

A number of examples exist that support the above claims. One involves the civil unrest that broke out in Iran during the summer of 2009 following the presidential election there. Reform candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi lost an electoral contest that his supporters believed was rigged in favor of incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Iranian youths, who make up the majority of the country's population, favored Mousavi, and forcefully spoke out against the election results. "On June 13, when protests started to escalate, and the Iranian government moved to suppress dissent both on- and off-line, the Twitterverse exploded with tweets from people who weren't having it, both in English and in Farsi. While the front pages of Iranian newspapers were full of blank

space where censors had whited-out news stories, Twitter was delivering information from street level, in real time” (Grossman, 2009).

A similar situation developed in Egypt, where the decades-old authoritarian regime of Hosni Mubarak came to an end this year amid a democratic uprising in the Middle Eastern nation. Members of Egypt’s youth population, like thirty-year-old Google executive Wael Ghonim, led this uprising. Ghonim is credited with pushing the nation’s pro-democracy protests forward through his use of Facebook. New media tools played a role in this social upheaval from start to finish. The observations of Chris Taylor, San Francisco bureau chief for tech-news site *Mashable*, are particularly telling: “Remember the kids interviewed in Tahir Square the night Mubarak resigned? What struck me most was what they were doing while waiting for the reporter to finish his introduction: thumbing on their smartphones. Want to hazard a guess at the website they were checking?” (Taylor, 2011).

It’s clear that new media technologies are opening the door to democratic reform movements in the Middle East – a region where countries hostile to the United States government abound. Outlined above are two instances where new media tools were successfully implemented in a reform effort that achieved significant results. For these reasons, United States Air Force Public Affairs personnel are focusing on the Middle East and its youth populations using new media technologies as a tool, amid continued traditional military operations in that region. In addition to this external focus on nations both hostile and friendly to America, Air Force Public Affairs practitioners are also communicating internally, with U.S. citizens and soldiers.

Like multi-billion dollar corporations that operate globally in the civilian world, the United States Air Force and the rest of America’s military branches have employees – U.S. soldiers. In the Air Force, these soldiers are referred to as Airmen. The Air Force needs to communicate with its Airmen on a range of issues, including engagement with the media and how initiatives and operations that involve them will be presented to the public. The Air Force is also finding it necessary to initiate discussions with Airmen about their social media presence, a topic that will be addressed in greater depth later.

The Air Force is like a civilian corporation in another respect – it has investors. These investors are Congress and the rest of the nation’s civilian society. For this reason, Air Force Public Affairs practitioners have to continually make the case to the public and to elected officials that their service branch is both vital to America’s national security, and providing a good return on the taxpayer’s investment.

This task has become more difficult since the end of the Vietnam War, when America did away with conscription as a method for staffing its armed forces. Although the average citizen may view this as a positive development, the end of the draft has been a double-edged sword in many respects. Consider the following: “Without a draft, it has been easier for the middle class in general, and liberals in particular, to follow their traditional impulse to turn away from the military...even as late as the Vietnam War, two-thirds of the members of Congress were veterans. Today, almost two-thirds are not” (Ricks, 2007).

One can arrive at his or her own conclusions about what this development means for an armed forces serving a democracy, but one thing is for sure – today’s average American and congressional representative know significantly less about the United States military and how it operates than the average American and congressional representative of twenty to thirty years ago. Current statistics bear this out: “Today, fewer than 1 percent of Americans serve in the military. Despite an ongoing two-front war on terror, that number is far smaller than the 4 percent who served during Vietnam or the 12 percent during World War II. Most Americans alive today do not even know anyone serving in the military” (Beres, 2011). This presents the Air Force Public Relations practitioner with unique challenges when it comes to communicating to civilians what the Air Force is all about, and why it’s valuable to the American taxpayer.

III. Responding to Challenges and Measuring Results

Section II focused on the challenges faced by Air Force Public Affairs practitioners as they exist in the context of public opinion, public relations and social media, reputation management, international relations, government relations, investor relations, and employee relations. The following section will add media relations to this list, examine how Air Force Public Affairs personnel have utilized new media

technologies to respond to some of the challenges outlined earlier, and determine what the results have been.

In April of 2009, United States Defense Secretary Robert Gates approved a policy change permitting media coverage of dignified transfer operations at Dover Air Force Base. These operations serve to welcome home the remains of fallen U.S. soldiers, and had previously been closed to the media. The policy put into place by Gates permitted media coverage, the release of the basic information on a deceased service member, and the expected time of arrival of the flight bearing the remains, only if immediate family members consented to media presence.

Additional guidelines stated that media personnel granted access to dignified transfers must conduct themselves in a respectful, quiet manner, absent of film and photography aids and flashes. When the new policy was announced, Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said, “so, if it’s 2 o’clock in the morning, you get lighting that is 2 o’clock in the morning-type lighting...we are not changing the dignified transfer process to accommodate media. What we are doing is accommodating the media to cover the existing dignified transfer process” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2009).

With about a month to go before deadline, the Air Force Public Affairs practitioners tasked with carrying out this policy change had many restrictions to work around, but “it falls on public relations professionals to orchestrate the relationship between their organizations and the media...first, an organization must establish a formal media relations policy” (Seitel, 2011). This is precisely what Air Force Public Affairs did, and a central goal of the effort was to influence public opinion in a positive way regarding the dignified transfer procedure and the human cost of war. To influence public opinion, “communications professor John Marston suggested a four-step model based on specific functions: (1) research, (2) action, (3) communication, and (4) evaluation” (Seitel, 2011). Air Force Public Affairs personnel followed this four-step model.

First came research, which involved the survey of a representative sample of 1,263 Airmen to measure internal opinion on the issue, and an analysis of media coverage of Secretary Gates’ dignified transfer policy change. The research process identified key audiences – military members, their families, and the American public, with the media

being a subset of this audience. Finally, “research indicated opposing views in key audiences. These conflicting findings were the basis of the principle planning assumption: ensuring the dignity, honor and respect of the fallen and care, service and support for their families while providing transparency through access for 100 percent of the media when approved” (PRSA - Solemn View, 2010).

Next came action and communication: “PA (public affairs) worked with the mortuary affairs team to create a Website; one of the goals (was) to give media access to background information. A series of articles were published and posted describing every step of the process. We (Air Force Public Affairs) also leveraged DOD (Department of Defense) Public Affairs efforts to tell the story of the policy change and implementation, and to further support internal stories regarding the first dignified transfer” (PRSA - Solemn View, 2010). Air Force Public Affairs also set up a planned timeline and procedures that involved consultation with families of fallen service members about the possibility of media coverage, the distribution of media advisories, coordination of media arrival, the development of media kits and individualized briefings, and a specialized media viewing area for the dignified transfers.

The final component of this campaign dealt with evaluation, which was “based on surveys, media content analysis (of articulated key themes or messages) and direct feedback from families. Media assessment focused on consistency of message in stories covering dignified transfers” (PRSA - Solemn View, 2010). Air Force Public Affairs determined that all of its initial objectives had been met as a dignified environment was provided for families, transparency was facilitated to the public through the media, and media attended every dignified transfer with family approval.

The above initiative brought the Air Force substantial recognition in 2010, when the Public Relations Society of America awarded the service branch with its “Best of Silver Anvil Award” – the public relations industry’s highest award for excellence. PRSA said of the dignified transfer campaign “Air Force Public Affairs professionals developed a fail-safe and repeatable media relations program that neither sought nor discouraged media reports, but that facilitated coverage consistent with each family’s wishes. In the first year of the new policy, 471 war dead returned to Dover for the dignified transfer of

remains. More than half (55 percent) of these ceremonies were covered by media” (PRSA - Silver Anvil, 2010).

The dignified transfer campaign coincided with and expanded efforts to make the Air Force a more transparent military force, and a service branch that more effectively uses new media technologies to fight what the Air Force terms “the information war.” Defense Secretary Robert Gates had a hand in spurring these efforts, just as he had a hand in provoking the public relations initiative detailed earlier.

In a 2007 speech at Kansas State University, Secretary Gates said “public relations was invented in the United States, yet we are miserable at communicating to the rest of the world what we are about as a society and a culture, about freedom and democracy, about our policies and our goals. It is just plain embarrassing that al-Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the internet than America” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2007). The Air Force Emerging Technology Team can be viewed as a response to the defense secretary’s critique.

Captain David Faggard heads the latest effort to integrate Web 2.0 applications into ongoing initiatives to achieve the organizational goals of the United States Air Force. His Air Force Emerging Technology Team is responsible for developing strategy, policy and plans for Air Force communicators worldwide that are applicable to an ever-changing communication landscape. Captain Faggard has been actively encouraging all Air Force personnel to use social media tools, and would like every Airman to be a communicator, engaging in conversations with the general public online.

Accomplishing this task requires a coordinated effort on the part of some 330,000 Airmen to tell the story of their service branch and the government that directs it in a way that’s authentic and engaging. To that end, Captain Faggard and his team have developed and distributed a guide for Airmen called *New Media and the Air Force*. The guide focuses on the following: direct action within social media, monitoring and analysis of the social media landscape, and social media policy and education for Air Force personnel.

As mentioned earlier, radical Islamist groups like al-Qaeda and the Taliban have become increasingly adept at amplifying their message through new media tools, and

have seen significant benefits from doing so. Captain David Faggard has recognized this growing trend, saying “I am concerned with how insurgents or potential enemies can use Social Media to their advantage. It's our role to provide a clear and accurate, completely truthful and transparent picture for any audience” (Web Ink Now, 2008). His observations are parroted in the new media guide he and his team have developed, which claims “these (new media) resources continue to be infiltrated by insurgents and terrorists using new media tools to counter our messages...the Air Force needs to turn all of its Airmen, and especially its front-line Public Affairs specialists, into communicators who combat the negative influence of enemy propaganda, misinformation and misrepresentation” (U.S. Air Force, 2009).

The central challenge in making this vision a reality involves the command and control, bureaucratic structure of the Air Force and the United States military as a whole. This organizational structure favors a one-way flow of communication moving through a public relations department that's primarily designed to inform rather than persuade. This model functioned well when there were few communication channels to manage, but it fails miserably in an environment where numerous communication channels exist supported by new media technologies.

The current new media environment demands a two-way symmetric flow of communication, which “advocates free and equal information flow between an organization and its publics, based on mutual understanding...with the public relations communicator serving as a mediator between the organization and the publics” (Seitel, 2011). This reality places Air Force Public Affairs personnel in a difficult position, as they are required to both respect and uphold the rigid command and control structure of their service branch, while also effectively responding to an online environment like the blogosphere where communication is decentralized – a setup that's not conducive to the one-way flow of communication traditionally favored by the United States military.

The Air Force Emerging Technology Team's new media guide acknowledges the above challenge, framing it as an opportunity for the Air Force to tell its own story: “Traditional, vertical communication is critical for the Air Force, but new technologies give Airmen the opportunity to horizontally inform the media, the public, and each

other. If the Air Force does not tell its own story, someone else will” (U.S. Air Force, 2009). This assertion represents a paradigm shift for a public affairs department operated by the military. By incorporating both vertical and horizontal communication into its overall strategy, Air Force Public Affairs is saying it exists not only to inform as mentioned earlier, but also to persuade.

A component of this effort to persuade is something called counter-blogging, which Captain David Faggard says is when “Airmen counter the people out there in the blogosphere who have negative opinions about the US government and the Air Force” (Web Ink Now, 2008). This activity requires a shift on the part of Air Force Public Affairs from a system of control-based management of communication, to one of participatory management. It’s illustrative of the paradigm shift mentioned earlier – a shift that welcomes the idea of more Airmen telling the story of their service branch via social media. However, “social media presents a wide array of risks and opportunities and the stakes are high. Through social media, PR professionals can reach their target audience in new, engaging ways. At the same time, the potential to misstep and encounter an ensuing backlash is high” (Vocus, 2011).

To minimize the potential for missteps, the Air Force Emerging Technology Team has issued a series of guidelines meant to help Airmen respond to content that is hostile to their service branch and the United States government, while balancing their unique responsibilities as members of the United States Air Force to protect classified information and maintain the safety of fellow service members in harms way. These guidelines include the blog assessment chart pictured in figure 1, the blogging assistance short list shown in figure 2, and the new media tips list outlined in figure 3. The Air Force Emerging Technology Team has also issued guidelines for measuring and evaluating the effectiveness of new media communications, which are shown in figure 4.

The above new media directives and the online public relations efforts they inform have received positive reviews from a number of bloggers who focus on standout work in the public relations industry. In 2008, marketing and public relations strategist David Meerman Scott said “I particularly like the detailed Air Force blog assessment flowchart that Capt. Faggard shared with me. It provides, in simple to understand, but in

a detailed and specific way, how to react to blog posts. Everyone should take a look at this and consider applying something similar in your own organization” (Web Ink Now, 2008). Similar praise came in 2009 from blogger Dana Theus via socialmediatoday.com – an online community for professionals in public relations, marketing and advertising: “Considering that over 70% of their Airmen are active in social networking through Facebook, MySpace and other public sites they're ahead of the curve in understanding that all Airmen are communicators, and they're taking a smart approach to unleashing the power of their employee base for the good of the service” (Social Media Today, 2009).

Working in tandem with Air Force counter-blogging efforts and the organizational guidelines that direct them are the Air Force YouTube channel: “BlueTube,” the Air Force Twitter feed: @AFPAA, and the U.S. Air Force Live blog. Under the direction of Captain David Faggard, the Air Force also has a presence on MySpace, Facebook, Second Life, iReport, Friendfeed, Digg, Delicious, Slashdot, Newsvine, and Reddit. Initiatives that make use of these new media tools augment current efforts to address the issues outlined in Section II that deal with public opinion, public relations and social media, reputation management, international relations, government relations, investor relations, and employee relations.

IV. Conclusion

The United States Air Force is acknowledging the strategic value of military transparency and new media technologies. Its recent dignified transfers campaign and new media guidebook and initiatives support this assertion. This service branch is moving forward with a public relations strategy meant to create a more open Air Force, and get more personnel communicating online with both the general public and those who are hostile to the United States. Social media tools represent a very large cog in this newly developed public relations machine.

Resources

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