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Winning the story war: Strategic communication and the conflict in Afghanistan

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Abstract

In conflicts of the information age success in the application of force depends less on the outcome of tactical operations on the battlefields but more on how the war's purpose, course and conduct is viewed by public opinion at home as well as within the theatre of operations. Therefore western allies in Iraq and Afghanistan are not only involved in a physical struggle but also in a struggle over perceptions, for no long-term engagement of troops is possible without support from home, nor can a counterinsurgency succeed without the support of the local population. While the ability to exert influence upon various relevant target groups “opponents, the local population and the home front” has always been crucially important during conflicts, with the more recent globalized media this has led to previously unknown potential opportunities to influence audiences. With the intermixing of target audiences and the

successes achieved by terrorists in the field of communication, the importance of the ideological struggle has increased enormously. In this context the concept of strategic communication has become relevant, which refers to the consistency of strategy, activities, themes and messages, and the aim of obtaining legitimacy and support. The heart of a strategic communication strategy is formed by a strategic narrative, a compelling storyline which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn. Through a case study about the effectiveness of the execution of strategic communication during the mission in Afghanistan, the author wishes to increase the understanding of the concept.

Highlights

• I wish to contribute to the understanding of strategic communication. • I evaluate whether strategic communication has been effectively executed in Afghanistan. • ISAF implemented strategic communication, but only at the highest levels. • ISAF lacks a coherent strategic communication policy and common strategic narrative. • Strategic communication is still not implemented on the executive level of ISAF.



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Keywords

Afghanistan; ISAF; NATO; Strategic communication; Strategic narrative; Counterinsurgency; Public opinion; Public diplomacy; Information operations

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