The Challenges of Strategic Communications for National Security

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ABSTRACT

National security is at the core every nation's national interest, policy direction and relations with other nations. Hence, nations communicate their intentions and actions to both its citizens and the global community. At times of peace, crisis or war, nations have the obligation to inform their people and the international community on their actions or decisions with the aim of persuading, promoting national interest and policy, influence expected behaviour and public perception or opinion, counter propaganda, misinformation, and extremist narratives, strengthening national unity at times of crises, supporting intelligence and diplomatic operations in alignment with the nation's security strategy. However, this onerous responsibility is not only constitutional but morally and diplomatically necessary to achieve success at all times (peace, crisis and war). This article focuses on the challenges of achieving strategic communication in the quest to ensure national security. The components and objectives of Strategic Communications for National Security are discussed as well as The Challenges of the Media as a Watchdog of Security Sector. Media ownership, securitization, dumbing down, Judicial deference, lack of synergy and trust between security and media institutions were identified as some of the major challenges of the media as a watchdog of security sector. Overcoming these challenges requires the concerted efforts of the security and media institutions to collaborate in the spirit of patriotism and professionalism for the national security.

INTRODUCTION

The role of communications for national security has continued to receive keen interest from stakeholders because it determines the failure or success of any country's kinetic and non-kinetic efforts to secure its people (Stavridis, 2007; Johnsson, 2011). Success in strategic communication is largely dependent on the ability of stakeholders in the security architecture to effectively coordinate the use of media, messaging, psychological operations, information influence and public affairs to achieve both domestic and international security objectives (Cornish, Lindley-French, & Yorke, 2011).

The Core Objectives of Strategic Communication

Strategic communication for security is intended to achieve the goal of security and promoting national interest. Some of these objectives include: promoting national interest and policy, influence expected behaviour and public perception or opinion, counter propaganda, misinformation, and extremist narratives, strengthening national unity at times of crises, supporting intelligence and diplomatic operations in alignment with the nation's security strategy (Cojocaru, 2020; Nabila & Thompson 2025). Strategic communication has been described by Bean (2016) as a tool for persuasion. So, persuading both domestic and international audiences on security decisions or policy direction requires strategic communication.

Also, strategic communication is vital for security diplomacy and to directly influence perceptions among citizens and within the international system, including the use of communication to pursue the national interests and the political-strategic objectives of the nation-state (Guerrero-Castro, 2013; Lupulescu, 2022).

Strategic communication should be deployed not only at the time of crisis, but at all times: peace, crisis and war, but with different missions. At the time of peace in a nation, Strategic communication should be used to propagate democratic values, national interest and retain credibility in the international community. At the time of crisis, Strategic communication should be deployed to obtain credibility and attract support from the

international system. And at the time of war, which is the worst situation, Strategic communication should be used to legitimize freedom of action by gaining domestic and external legitimacy of the war decision.

Components of Strategic Communications for National Security

The success or failure of strategic communication is inherent in how the components of the strategy are effectively managed and coordinated to inform stakeholders and the people Orujov & Mammadzada, 2023). Some of the key components of strategic communication which are relevant for national security include the following.

i. Public affairs and crisis communication

In this context, the strategic communication effort is geared towards the management of communication between security institutions and the populace to build mutual trust, inform and educate the stakeholders on the actions or activities of the state and security agencies.

In a country where the people have little or no confidence or trust in their security agencies, this situation can be assuaged through timely, accurate and clear information on the security situation and responses to guarantee the safety of the citizens. Similarly, during crisis and emergency situations, strategic communication in the form of crisis communication helps to manage perception, maintain stability and control the menace of rumours. The benefits of effective public affairs and crisis communication would that rumours do not gain grounds, and that misinformation and propaganda are not allowed to achieve their aim of causing panic and destabilizing the country. This also is an important means of projecting and protecting the credibility of security and national institutions.

ii. Narrative Development

Narratives are very important in communication, as they convey perspectives, values and purpose in messages or stories about social phenomena. Narratives shape the perception of the populace as well as influence their behaviour. For instance, narratives frame how citizens and the international audiences understand and respond to security threats. In fact, narratives are deployed as a tool of strategic communication to counter extremist ideologies and thereby build public trust and legitimacy in the state and security institutions. Finally, narratives, if properly deployed, have the advantage of reinforcing national identity and unity at times of national crisis, emergencies or wars.

iii. Audience Segmentation

In strategic communication, it is productive to segment the audience on the basis of shared characteristics to ensure messages are impactful, effective and tailored to specific audience to achieve message precision in accordance with identified cultural and socioeconomic appropriateness in diverse audiences. This is effective in making sure that the message resonates with the diverse audiences. It is important to emphasize that one-size-fits-all messaging approach is a recipe for failure in security communication. Segmenting the population for the sake of strategic communication can occur on the bases of age, gender, level of education, occupation, location (urban or rural), religion, political ideology, tradition, culture, media habits, risk exposure (vulnerable or secure populations), and language (lingua franca or local dialects).

For national security, the segmentation priorities can be categorized into **general public** where the emphasis would be for informing people on vigilance, awareness and reassurance; **young people** where the emphasis would be on how to counter radicalization and education in digital literacy; religious and security leaders; media professionals; diaspora communities; security personnel; and adversarial audiences. These segmentations are important for effectively reaching out to stakeholders through the appropriate media platforms that resonate with their demographic and socioeconomic classifications.

iv. Channels and Platforms

Strategic communications have been expanded because of the expanded channels and platforms that have been made possible by technological innovation. While the traditional media (television, radio, newspapers and

magazines) is very important in Strategic communication for security, the revolutionary impact of the digital and social media with their multiple platforms for communications (Instagram, twitter/X, Facebook, YouTube, telegram, WhatsApp, etc), have drastically reduced the control of the state and regulatory institutions over information dissemination in many countries of the world. The channels and platforms must be strategically deployed to match the appropriate audiences and urgency of the message. Importantly, multiple channels should be strategically used to ensure reach and repetition. The platforms should be monitored so as to get feedbacks.

v.   Counter-disinformation

This component of Strategic communications is crucial in the identification, exposition and neutralization of hostile information campaigns against security agencies and the state. It is important to note that criminal groups have their network of media accomplices and sympathizers, and they seldom fact-check information before they are sent to consumers. In fact, in the era of the social media, news travel faster than the light, so that fake news intended to cause fear and other forms of insecurity are easily disseminated through the various social media platforms that are accessible by commoners. Thus, it is incumbent on security agencies to have a team of dedicated social media unit that is vigilant and constantly counters disinformation.

The Challenges of the Media as a Watchdog of Security Sector

The failure of the media to serve as an effective watchdog has remained a source of concern for stakeholders in the security sector. While some of the issues that threaten the freedom of the press have been well documented, an obvious challenge is the lack of expertise on security issues. This situation has led to mutual suspicions between security institutions and the media, on one hand, and the security institutions and the people, on the other hand. Some of the challenges include:

i.   **Securitization**: the emphasis on secrecy of government activities because of the "sensitive nature" of security issues have led to a climate of ignorance or naivety about what government is doing to tackle security challenges. This situation may grow to a level where fear and hopelessness does not only become the source of the insecurity but the outcome even when the state may have addressed their fears in practical terms. Communicating the steps being taken could be a helpful therapy for an insecure soul, and secrecy and restricting necessary information to the public can be counter-productive for strategic communication for security. Similarly, a situation where critical and experienced journalists are excluded from interrogating security situations may have a significant impact on the media.

ii. **Media Ownership: when** the ownership of the media (newspapers, radio, television, etc) become monopolized to the extent that the moneybags and politicians in the society determine what news get to the public space, then security communication may be at risk, so that the independence and critical journalism that inspire public confidence in information received by the people are undermined.

iii. **Dumbing down:** the current trend of focusing on entertainment has reduced interest in public affairs journalism among journalists and the populace so that security-related information seldom get the desired weight of attention.

iv. **Judicial deference**: in countries where judicial deference is common, courts are likely to side with the government on issues pitting claims of national security against press freedom. As a matter of reality, many countries in Africa have used security threat or national security as an excuse to undermine the rule of law and engage in political persecutions of opposition figures and their supporters.

v.   **Lack of synergy and trust between security and media**: there is the absence of cooperation between security agencies and the media largely because of the differing cultures of the two institutions. Whilst the security sector values secrecy and calculated dissemination of "sensitive" information to the public, the media is obliged to inform the public on issues as promptly as possible. As argued by Antipova, (2023), information can be a source of risk for national security if not managed professionally and intelligently. This situation of securing information creates the lack of trust between the media and security agencies, leading to a situation where there is mutual distrust between security agencies and the media. Although the relationship between the two important institutions have become tense, the media and security sector are mutually dependent and must cooperate to educate the public and hold government to account over security policy and outcomes. The intelligence sector poses a number of

special challenges for the media. The necessity for secrecy creates the risk of over-reliance on official information and manipulation of information provided to journalists (Caparini, 2004).

vi. **Social media:** the social media has not only provided individuals with increased access to information with speed, it has also colonized the lived experiences of citizens (Suleiman & Shajobi-Ibinkule, 2024). The people rely so much on the information available through social media such that they also become victims of the misinformation and disinformation that are ignorantly or deliberately disseminated on social media platforms. The social media is a threat to strategic communication, and consequently a threat to national security when it supplies information that engender fear, hatred, tension and crisis, especially when such information are fabricated to achieve mischievous ends.

It must be emphasized that the freedom of the press is not a licence for undermining security information that are considered classified for national security purposes. In fact, national security is one of the grounds for limiting freedom of expression in Article 19(3) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

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