DISINFORMATION AND NATIONAL DEFENCE

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The First War of Independence fought in 1857, which was termed by the British as the "Sepoy Mutiny," was triggered by a rumour that the British were coating rifle cartridges in animal fat. Contact with this fat was taboo to both the Hindu and Muslim soldiers. This 'belief' spread like wildfire and resulted in a tremendous uprising against the British.

The *Mahabharata* records an incident in which the news that Ashwathama had been killed was disseminated. Ashwathama was the name of a famed elephant as well as the name of Dronacharya's heroic son. The elephant was killed but the news carefully hid this fact and only highlighted the name. The intended aim of this disinformation was to increase the vulnerability of the master warrior, Dronacharya. To lend authenticity to this piece of half-truth, an affirmation was obtained from the fountain of truthfulness, Yudishtra, who confirmed that Ashwathama had indeed died. Yudishtra took refuge in the technicality that he was referring to the famed elephant. The desired result was obtained.

In World War II, the landing site of Normandy for the Allied invasion was camouflaged by phenomenal deception measures to lead the Nazis to believe that the attacks would come at another site. The Americans in the Gulf War too managed to deceive the Iraqi forces about the direction of attack. All these were performed through meticulous disinformation campaigns executed through various media available at that time.

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The aim of this paper is to study the applicability of disinformation and propaganda as weapons of war today and the consequent media management.

ART OF PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION

Propaganda must be based on information which, to the enemy, is credible. Therefore, it must have good research and intelligence at its base. It must stem from a deep understanding of the target audience and must get the right message to the right audience at the right time. It should be presented in a form which will both attract and excite, while exploiting the target's physiological and psychological needs which it should then seek to satisfy. It should be neither excessively rigid nor dogmatic, nor unnecessarily hostile or contentious. It must therefore, necessarily be selective.[1]

The most important attribute of disinformation and propaganda is that both must be credible i.e. believable. Help here can be taken both from fact and fiction. The aim is to lure the receiver into believing something that would further one's cause. Audiences are more likely to accept an idea if they believe it was heard inadvertently i.e. in the style of 'matter of fact.' A message presented in an assertive way will be resisted. Opinions can be changed if a message is received from a variety of sources that mutually reinforce each other. People tend to approve of statements made by experts or by those who begin by expressing an opinion with which the listener or viewer strongly agrees. Under some circumstances, propaganda messages can be made more potent by incorporating opposing arguments in a way that tends to discredit them. The audience gets the impression that it is viewing both sides of the story.

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Disinformation and propaganda can both be classed as non-lethal weapons of war. They are certainly not the product of modern technology and have a history dating back to mythologies. Today's vocabulary, however, does have a classification, "non-lethal weapons" that can describe them accurately.

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1. Mark Llyod, *The Art of Military Deception*, (New Delhi: Book Mart Publishers , 2001) p, 139.

Their use in both war and peace to further one's cause is extremely well known and documented.

SOCIAL CONTRACT

Throughout history, war has been central to the emergence, conduct and survival of the state in all its forms, from the tribe to the modern nation-state. In turn, the origins of the state rest on the social contract, whereby men and women gathered together and subordinated their individual rights in order to gain a common defence of life and property and the other benefits that flowed from cooperation and association. However, no matter what political organisation emerged, everything revolved around the tacit bargain of consent and the voluntary abrogation of rights on the part of the individual and the community in support of the common good, with defence as the most pressing issue.

From these early times, the first demand on a monarch or a leader under the social contract was to protect the peace, to repel invasion, and to wage war in the interests of the group. Without exception, it was accepted that the ruler had the right to command the citizen's duty of obedience in time of war.

This social contract has been valid throughout history. It was reinforced in World War II where the threat of death and destruction was shared equally by the civilians and frontline soldiers. In the case of democracies, the populations readily accepted the abrogation of their rights, including that of a free Press.[2] At times, this social contract wears the garb of patriotism and exacts the same penalties from the population. President Bush successfully misled his nation into believing that Iraq was in nexus with the terrorists and possessed a stockpile of weapons of mass destruction. The US Senate, Congress and, in fact, the whole nation supported him when he invaded Iraq. Social contract continues to be valid and relevant.

Even in independent India, the social contract has been valid throughout. In our conflicts with China and Pakistan, the Indian public wholeheartedly supported the government. In fact, these hostilities gave rise to huge waves of

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2. Peter Young and Peter Jesser, *The Media and the Military* (London, 1997), pp. 6-8.

patriotism and willingness on the part of everyone to help the military achieve its aim.

MEDIA MANAGEMENT

Initially, it was easy for the state and the military to manipulate the media so that the public opinion supported the war aims. But once the reporter reached the battlefront and possessed the means to communicate, the equation began to change.

The capability of the military and the state to manipulate public opinion weakened. The fact that the media could present views other than the war aims of the military was anathema to the military. As a result, censorship, or at least the limitation of information, rapidly became the norm during war. This was rationalised as a requirement of the "operational security" of the troops involved.[3] To a certain degree, this was true. However, more often than not, the military used its powers to extend the fog of war. It used its powers to colour the information to its war aims and then release it. It used the 'social contract' and patriotism to obtain control over the media. Both the World Wars saw this. The Press and the radio were manipulated by both sides to further their military aims. Germany was quite open about media manipulation whereas the Allies did it discreetly.

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In the case of India, right up to the Indo-Pak conflict of 1971, mainly it was the Press and radio which were around as the media. The radio was a government monopoly which faithfully mouthed the official version. The Press too accepted every official bit of information as fact and reported it as such. The massive wave of patriotism that accompanied each conflict also did not allow the Press to seek or think of independent reporting as the unwritten social contract overshadowed

3. Young and Jesser, Ibid., p.25.

such notions. The opportunity to 'manage the media' existed, but the Indian military did not use it.

LIMITED WARS AND "INDEPENDENT MEDIA"

After World War II, the nature of warfare has been changing and has given rise to a wide variety of war forms, the most prominent of these being the limited conflict or low intensity conflict. The 'limited' nature of the 'lower' intensity often ensures that only a segment of the population of the nation is threatened or involved, leaving the vast majority sort of 'uninvolved'. At times, the conflict is conducted a large distance away from the 'nations'. Such attributes ensure that total unqualified backing by the public is not obtained and in fact the very "justness" of the conflict begins to be questioned.[4] In such cases, the mass media do not abrogate their rights and instead insist on their fundamental duty to inform the public. The Vietnam War was a classic example of the situation where the 'social contract' between the citizens and the government was questioned. The media became a free and independent player with the capacity to influence both the conduct of hostilities and particularly through its impact on popular sentiment, the direction of government policy. In fact, such was the sway of public opinion that the US government was finally forced to negotiate peace and withdraw. In the Vietnam War, the role of the media and its interaction with the military was an exception. Citizens and the media, by and large, continue to stay within the bounds of the social contract, support the conflict and willingly abrogate their rights. This was exemplified in the Falklands and Grenada conflicts, which saw a total collapse of the media's independence as it followed the military diktat in totality.

SPECTACULAR MEDIA MANAGEMENT IN THE GULF WAR

Much has been written about the spectacular media management achieved by the US in the Gulf War. What was remarkable about the American success was that it was used so extensively to spread disinformation and propaganda that its target audience believed everything. The media was excluded from the battlefront except for official briefings and the official clips handed out by the military. The military

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4. Ibid., p. 18.

was highly proactive and provided selected pre-edited and positive news to all branches of the media. As a result, the military was able to control the media image of the conflict. The military not only used the media to present its policies in the best light but also to deceive and disinform the Iraqis. Gen. Schwarzkopf made sure that the media pools were allowed extensive coverage of the marines' rehearsal of assault. As he expected, this received wide coverage on TV networks and convinced the Iraqis of an invasion from the sea.[5] Disinformation and propaganda were used extensively to propel the military aims successfully.

TECHNOLOGY IN AID OF MEDIA AND ITS INDEPENDENCE

One of the major hampering factors for the mediamen in their war reportage was the unwillingness of the military to accept their presence. The military justified it on the grounds of "operational security" as it rightly felt that the presence of the media and its need to report would lead to the enemy coming to know of its order of battle (orbat) and plans. The second major factor that obstructed the media was having to

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rely on communication channels provided by the military for onward transmission of its images. The presence of satellites, miniaturisation of photo equipment and advances in communications, presence of global networks, 24-hour news channels, etc have revolutionalised the media's ability to chart an independent course and operate outside the state and military's control. This was evident in the Kargil conflict wherein the Indian media was well equipped technologically and highly capable of independent reporting. However, in times of war, the "operational security" angle, coupled with 'social contract' and 'patriotism' severely restrict the media's independence. It has given rise to the embedded journalist, as seen in the recent Iraq invasion by the US. This clearly permits the military to exploit

5. Ibid., p. 166.

its immense power for planting disinformation and propaganda. It is even more effective today for, by and large, the media is now perceived to be outside the control of the state. Even though it gets shackled during war, its perception continues to be that of a 'free media' providing 'factual' coverage. The scheme of 'social contract' works subtly and it should be understood by the military that it is in its interest to let the public perceive the media as 'free' of controls. Only then can the disinformation and propaganda planted purposefully produce the desired effect.

WORLD WIDE WEB: THE INTERNET

The Internet differs from the earliest agents of the media in terms of control. With the traditional mass media, be it the Press, radio or TV, a small group of editors decided which news to print, broadcast or telecast. With the Internet, this control has disappeared. The 'individual' is the controller. Anyone can create a web page. Bulletin boards and now blogs are used to churn out instant opinions Ease of Internet polling produces results to colour public opinion. Every shade of opinion on every subject can be found posted on the world wide web. While it was easier to manipulate the traditional media in war through 'social contract,' the Internet offers a different scenario. As nobody is in charge, who will you manipulate?

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Nevertheless, the Internet in reality is a propagandist's delight due to the availability of total freedom and the anonymity offered. The Internet accommodates a wide range of views, from the radical to moderate, pro-democracy activists to intelligence officers masquerading as anti-establishment rebels. With such a mixed bag, the truth often becomes mangled.[6] Indeed, the Internet is the new tool for manipulation.

THE VERY OPPORTUNITIES OFFERED BY THE INTERNET ARE ALSO ITS WEAKNESSES

For disinformation to be effective, it must reach the target audience and it must be credible. The global reach of the Internet ensures the first. The second part of

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6. Philips H.J. Davies, "Information Warfare and the Future of the Spy", www.1wrdaphi@reading.ac.uk.

credibility poses problems. The digital world has unmatched methods of falsifying information, thus, producing a doubt on the quality of information. The speed of dissemination, however, works in its favour as humans tend to believe the first image. Therefore, the Internet can be exploited profitably for disinformation, specially in combination with other media so that the slur on its veracity does not surface and is instead submerged by its reach and the speed of the reach.

MEDIA MANAGEMENT IN THE INTERNET AGE : KOSOVO CONFLICT
The Serbian military reacted to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) bombing of 1999 by dispersing its ground forces throughout the countryside in hard to find locations. Without a ground threat to react to, lack of air superiority and unfavourable weather, NATO bombing failed to destroy much of Serbian forces and the conflict dragged on beyond the few days NATO leaders believed it would take. Milosevic seized this opportunity to portray the Serbs as victims of NATO, and particularly US aggression. During the conflict, NATO faced a massive Serbian propaganda and disinformation campaign designed to show 'collateral damage' in NATO bombing, and refugees fleeing due to air strikes. Possessing low penetration of computers and the Internet, it mobilised its student population in launching computer attacks and propaganda campaign on the Internet. News reports, photographs and other media rained Serbian propaganda around the world as fast as NATO bombs were raining down upon Serbia. It released gripping pictures of the American F-117A and F-16C fighters that were claimed to have been shot down. Pictures of errant bombs that caused civilian destruction, and hospitals full of children and the elderly who were victims of NATO bombing were constantly broadcast around the globe to rouse sympathy for Serbia. Through constant and repeated use of the electronic media in near real-time, Milosevic left NATO behind, gasping for breath in the propaganda race. So successful was the media blitz by the Serbs that NATO felt compelled to attack the TV stations as TV was perceived as a force multiplier. The point to note here is the asymmetry involved. The NATO forces had the technology but it was the Serbs who managed to plot, plan and execute a successful propaganda campaign through a combined use of the Internet with the traditional media. Admiral Ellis stated in his

unpublished after-action report, "The length of war could have been cut in half if the US had made better use of its information warfare unit, the first it had assembled and part of whose task was to present the war in the best light to the media and on the Internet."[7]

The Serbs treated the use of propaganda and disinformation not as individual acts but as a coordinated campaign.They used the Internet along with other elements of the media in a synchronous manner in near real-time. Its effectiveness can be gauged from the fact that it almost succeeded in achieving a near collapse of NATO due to erosion of popular support amongst its members as the conflict dragged on. The Serbs' reliance on non-lethal weapons of propaganda and disinformation helped them balance the military asymmetry they faced.

POWER OF THE IMAGE

Two events in India have shown what an image, specially the first image on television, can do. First was the expose by the Tehelka team. The scandal drew its power from a single image: the shot of Bangaru Laxman greedily scooping up a lakh of rupees in currency notes before stuffing the money into his drawer. That shot, repeated over and over again on every TV channel, finished off the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) reputation as a clean party. Any amount of explanation could not erase the power of the image. The second event was the public outrage caused by the video footage of M. Karunanidhi being manhandled by the Chennai police. The national uproar was almost entirely a consequence of the impact of the television picture. Because the images were so powerful, public opinion turned against Jayalalitha immediately. When the director general of police appeared on TV to defend his force, the anchors treated him with scarcely-veiled contempt. The point to note here is that both the images were provided by interested parties. Tehelka supplied the shots of Laxman's bribe-taking and Sun TV, controlled by DMK members, provided the Karunanidhi footage. Bangaru Laxman claims that the footage was doctored. Similarly, Jayalalitha also says that Sun TV provided

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7. Robert D'Amico, Dennis Lyn and Eric Wexler, "Munitions of the Mind," *Strategic Review*, Winter 2001.

selectively-edited visuals, in which the police were made to look bad while Karunanidhi and Maran gained sympathy. In fact, says Jaya TV, the AIDMK's channel, there is footage of Maran actively obstructing the arrest and even slapping a police officer. But because it was Sun TV's pictures that reached the national channels first, that version became accepted as truth.

During the Kargil conflict, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, made hectic efforts to garner the support of the international community against the so-called "large scale aggression" by the Indian armed forces. He was rebuffed by the Clinton Administraction and not even offered the customary lunch which is normally hosted for visiting heads of states. A lasting image telecast repeatedly of the forlorn Nawaz Sharif standing all alone with his head bowed, while all the US officials walked off, sent a powerful message. Nothing could project the hopelessness of Pakistan's position better. It was a big demotivator for Pakistan, which capitulated soon thereafter. A powerful image – more importantly a powerful first image – can have devastating consequences. Timing here is of crucial importance. A powerful visual, whether doctored or unfair, is almost impossible to refute. Here is a major lesson for the military in its quest for using disinformation and propaganda as a weapon of war.

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CAMPAIGN METHODOLOGY

Issues

To launch a disinformation or a propaganda campaign, a few issues need to be addressed. What is the larger aim? What do we want the adversary to believe? What are the best tools to achieve it?

Targets

In all variety of war forms, it is the leaders who define the aims, the methods and

the desired conditions of the war form. No state wages war. It is the leaders who do so. The decision to engage in warfare or to terminate it is made by the leaders in the state or the group. Group members or the citizens of the state may influence the leader's decision, but it is primarily the will of the leadership that has to be subdued.

Thus, it is obvious that it is the 'mind' of the enemy leadership that has to be manipulated. It would be wrong to presume that there is only 'one mind' of the enemy. The enemy is really many individual enemies, many minds. If the enemy is dispersed, separate minds would have to be attacked separately. If the enemy is concentrated, the attack can be centralised. The attacks have to be directed at influencing or manipulating the leader's knowledge or beliefs or indirectly by attacking the knowledge or beliefs of those upon whom the leader depends for action. Leaders and decision-makers usually are not difficult to identify in any organisational hierarchy. Whenever any organisation applies power or force, it assumes hierarchical characteristics.   Thus, the knowledge and beliefs of decision-makers comprise the Achilles heel of hierarchies.[8]   The aim of any campaign involving disinformation and propaganda should be to affect the adversary decision-makers in such a way that the decisions that result in actions support our military aims.

Affecting Beliefs

India as a democratic country, with a free Press, is slowly developing an identity of independent opinion amongst the news analysts. Compared with a closed society like China, which has a highly secretive and politically controlled media, information obtained from independent sources like BBC, CNN and the Indian media will appear to be more authentic and true. Such a belief can be utilised advantageously to propagate the notion that whatever 'closed door systems' like China offer is untrue. At a critical time, such discredit can change the quality of the 'fog of war'. To cite an example would probably serve as a forceful illustration. Today's technology and computer

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8. Richard Szafranski, (USAF), "A Theory of Information Warfare - Preparing for 2020," *Aerospace Chronicles*, Spring 1995.

simulation makes everything possible. In the movie "Forest Gump" the hero is shown shaking hands with J.F.Kennedy who died almost four decades ago. The films "Titanic" and "Matrix" are good examples of the power of the computers to create 'reality', that is more believable. It will, thus, be possible to use available clips of the leader of the opposing nation, and doctor these to show as if he is rejecting peaceful negotiations. Such doctored clips, telecast at the appropriate moment, can be used to camouflage or justify an offensive action by the military. Nobody will believe the subsequent denials as everyone would have 'seen' the clips. The video clips of the arrest of Karunanidhi telecast repeatedly had such an impact that all subsequent denials failed to erase the sympathy the DMK leader had obtained.

Organisation

Such campaigns are policy decisions that have to work top downwards. A very careful analysis needs to be made of the strategic aim which then has to be broken down to its tactical parts. Continuous monitoring and feedback of the success or otherwise are extremely crucial elements of such a campaign. Another very important aspect is the timing. The timing for execution has to be selected very carefully, specially if the vehicle for execution of the campaign happens to be the media. What is obvious is that a dedicated organisation needs to be created that can organise and harmonise the various elements so that the results are in tune with one's aims. It must have a 'think-tank' cell which can translate the strategic aim into tangible tactical goals. Pre-planned presentations mixing fact with inference to influence decisions will have to be prepared. Studies show that individuals give weightage to information in the order in which it is received. Such bias and other psychological weaknesses will have to be exploited.

WHO WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF THIS THINK-TANK CELL ?

Apart from the Services, and the Ministries of Defence and External Affairs, all the other decision-makers of our national security apparatus must be represented. The cell must possess the technical back-up and computer

specialists who can doctor or manipulate the visuals – be they cinema/television clips or mere photographs. The available intelligence and operations elements in Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff could be utilised for forming such a cell which could then be tasked for scenario building and contingency planning. As time is of crucial importance, this cell must have a direct link-up with the top-most decision-makers so that its expertise can be drawn upon instantaneously. Only then would we be able to use the weapon of disinformation effectively.

Advance Planning.

In this age of media proliferation, a good example to follow would be of the advertisement campaign market research groups who carry out surveys to determine the likes and dislikes of their customer target groups in terms of media preferences.

If the enemy's leadership has a preference for CNN, BBC or Al Jazeera, then that should be the vehicle for the onslaught. The Internet has a special advantage in that it also enables 'customised propaganda' Information can specially be tailored to suit the target audience's weakness. All such efforts will have to be on a long-term basis and ,hence, the need for a specialist organisation. While dealing with the media, timing is of critical importance. These campaigns will have to be prepared well in advance for various contingencies. The speed of the media and the needs of the media all relate to crucial timing and only pre-planned campaigns, with a possibility of last minute modification, promise effectiveness.

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Indian Expertise

Can the existing military-media organisation handle such campaigns? Currently, the Directorate of Public Relations (Defence) which is an element in the Ministry of Defence, handles the media on matters of

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defence. It has representation from the three Services but is predominantly a bureaucrat controlled organisation with little specialist calibre or understanding of matters military or media. It is designed to handle peace-time interaction. During the Kargil conflict, a Press briefing by combined representatives of the Ministry of External Affairs and the two involved Services was institutionalised on a temporary basis. Both the army and the air force created an ad hoc element to handle the media. There is nothing to suggest that the army and air force attempted disinformation and propaganda during the Kargil conflict even though Barkha Dutt of Star News was at the 'front' with the troops. (A precursor of the embedded journalist of the Iraq invasion by the US). It is time the respective defence planners sat down and created an organisation so that in the future, these two non-lethal weapons of war viz. disinformation and propaganda, are utilised effectively to further one's military aim. What is suggested is small specialised cells. They should have both horizontal and vertical connectivity between various ministries/Services/ elements. That disinformation should find a place in the planning and execution of military operations at the tactical level needs no emphasis. In fact, most military campaigns and operations include such aspects. What is needed is an awareness that in the new millennium information plays a very crucial role and is extremely vulnerable to manipulation. It is this vulnerability that must be exploited.

CONCLUSION

Towards the end of the 20th century, the search began for weapons that minimise destruction by offering precision with no collateral damage and eventually to weapons that don't kill – non-lethal weapons. In this vast non-lethal armoury that is being developed, two of the oldest non-lethal weapons are

already available: disinformation and propaganda. Both have been used extensively in the past successfully. The marvels of technology that have led to the information age have again brought these two weapons into prominence as today information is power and these two weapons directly affect the very perception of information – by manipulating it.

The vehicles of propelling these two non-lethal weapons are the myriad forms of the media that have evolved. The media has a prominent place in society as it is at the very heart of today's civilisation, referred to as the information or the knowledge age. The media's role is to keep the citizen informed. It is perceived to be a 'free agent' uncontrolled by state. As has been seen, but for a few exceptions, it is managed by the state and the military in times of war to aid and further the military's aim. The perception that the media continues to be 'free' during war lingers on even after peace has been interrupted by war. It is to the military's advantage that such a perception persists for it enables the military to manipulate the information flow through its disinformation and propaganda campaigns.

Multiplicity of the media, the Internet, the convergence of media technologies all point to a future where the 'control' on information will slowly slip away, and the individual and his ability to manipulate information will triumph. Veracity or truth will be at a premium. Anonymity is one of the chief attributes of the world wide web. It is an ideal ground for a propagandist, with ample scope for manipulation, spoilt by the premium on veracity. Unless the disinformation or the propaganda is believed, it is useless as a weapon. Kosovo has shown that a way out exists. The weakness of the human psyche to believe the first 'arrived' message, the speed of the Internet, its vast global footprint are some of the factors that favour the propagandist. The power of the image, specially the first image, provides a phenomenal opportunity to the military to exploit when it uses these two non-lethal

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weapons. These weapons don't cost much. For very little, they deliver an effect worth crores.

It is time the military seizes this opportunity with both hands. But the military alone cannot produce the desired result. All the elements that are responsible for national security must get into the act. For disinformation and propaganda campaigns to be successful, a dedicated organisation is needed to be carved that has the necessary technical back-up, is able to coordinate and interact horizontally and vertically, and has total support from the top of the hierarchy. It is time the defence planners and others responsible for national security address these issues so that both disinformation and propaganda are utilised effectively to enhance national security.