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Influence Operations: Action and Attitude

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationships between attitudes, behaviour and influence. The major objective of influence operations is predominantly to exert soft power and in doing this there is an assumption that it will change attitudes. It is assumed that by changing attitudes favourable to the influencer that behaviours will be changed. However, this is a problematic assumption. Influence operations whose messages seem to contradict the real behaviour of the influencer tends to nullify the message; and, in fact, might reinforce the attitudes and behaviours of the foe and begin to alienate friends. Messages should be based on a credible reality; actions that prove that reality to be false might actually have a negative impact and reinforce unwanted behaviours.

Keywords

Influence operations, attitudes, behaviour, credibility.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent RAND text (Larson et al, 2009), the concept of Influence Operations is said to consist of such elements as diplomacy, strategic communications, public affairs, covert operations, information operations and is strongly influenced by military force, economic elements and civil affairs. In other words, it is about almost everything. It reflects the intertwined world we live in with influence actions initiated by strategic geopolitics and economics and designed to be targeted to the psychology of individuals and groups. However, as the modern world is wired, the effects of actions designed for a local area cannot be detached from the global arena. Decoded digital pictures of an aerial attack on suspected insurgents in Iraq, which was a very local action can become global overnight on the Internet as can its effect on the actions people affected by this vision. This paper will argue that actions and influence operations are intimately linked. In fact, the *raison d'être* of influence operations is to alter behaviour; it is no good winning 'hearts and minds' if behaviour does not change. In this context, 'influence' is changing attitudes (that is a person's evaluation of a psychological object) and behaviour (that is, the physical manifestation of that person's physical body and its environment) so decisions are made that are beneficial to the influencer.

Influence Operations are working in a complex world –so the approach needs to be systemic but this means that those at a strategic level need to know the operational effects of their actions on the psyche of both the enemy and their allies. The reverse is also true where operational activity can suddenly have strategic implications.

OBJECTIVES OF INFLUENCE OPERATIONS

The whole point of influence operations is to exert power via the use of *soft* techniques such as strategic communications, diplomacy and public relations, so minimizing the use of *hard* techniques such as military force and economic sanctions. A useful model of power in this context is one given by Lukes (2005) where three distinct levels of power are introduced. The first *one-dimensional* view is where one party can make another party do something they would not have otherwise done for example, when an enemy surrenders. The *two-dimensional* view of power includes the previous view but where a party creates or reinforces values and practices within a situation that limit the scope of options for another. Here the conflict may be overt or covert. The *three-dimensional* view of power adds the idea of shaping perceptions and cognitions so various options are not even thought about; conflict can be latent in these situations. It is this latter situation that influence operations would like to emulate. However, it could come into conflict with the mores of a democratic society. Interestingly, Lukes does bring in the idea of coercion into power conflicts but defines *influence* as the situation where one entity obtains another's compliance without the use or threat of deprivation. In an ideal world, influence operations would use the three-dimensional idea of power with non-coercive tactics. In reality, the idea of using only influence to solve a conflict is not always feasible so whilst the concept of non-coercive conflict management is an appealing one, it is not always possible. Those with great faith in soft techniques often forget the incredible effect of events and actions that drive people to do, rather than just think, something. Winning hearts and minds does not necessarily change behaviour and the work of an influence campaign can be neutralised by events such as the bombing of civilians or revelations of torture.

Information, influence and the missing factors

The basic element of influence operations is information, which is an ill defined term, and therefore before any arguments about its use can be examined its meaning should be clarified. Information is created in an individual when data are interpreted by the brain in the context of the knowledge already possessed by that individual. Information is where data and cognition meet (Alberts et al, 1999). Hence, these three elements are quite distinct: data are basically external to the person, and are selected and absorbed by the brain then interpreted by the person's knowledge base to produce information. Hence, information is personal and unique to the individual and a dynamic product of a person's cognition.

Simplistically, knowledge is long term and is developed by a complex combination of such factors as religion, socio-economic development, cognitive potential, body state, age, and the context of the situation at hand. Information has a dynamic, temporal element – it is not fixed. The ability to influence needs to take all these factors into account. The driving force of behaviour is within what has been termed in this paper 'knowledge' (that is the context in which data is interpreted) but this element is itself dynamic and dependent on situation and the type of stimulus and which part of the brain deals with the incoming data. Thus, propagandistic messages which appeal to emotion will stimulate a different reaction to those that deal with rational arguments. However, information is unique to the person and can change at different times with the same set of data with the same person. The premise behind many influence campaigns is that data (messages) can win the hearts and minds of the target audience although psychological operations tends to emphasise the use of messages that are coordinated with much more physical actions such as bombing or more friendly methods such as cooperative building projects to produce a desired effect (Radvanyi, 1990). Some (for example, Arquilla, 2007) would use information operations and rely almost entirely in the information domain to persuade enemies and allies. This description tends to assume that human behaviour is directly controlled by the conscious part of cognition whereas elements of emotions are often derived from the limbic system and fed into the neo-cortex of the brain (Dozier, 2002). Hence, rational thought is often over-ridden by basic impulses when behavioural outcomes are observed. The two basic psychological aspects of rational and emotional thought are supplemented by the very strong forces of social pressures and plain habit.

There is another aspect to influence operations that is often forgotten: the physical outcomes of political decisions. Although political messages can be marketed much like commodities, the ideas generated must suit the environment (Helus, 2007). For instance, in a theatre of war, where family members are being killed and injured; it is futile to sell ideas that do not take the situation into account. Psychological warfare techniques might persuade an enemy that their position is hopeless but has not influenced them except in a very shallow and behavioural way. The distinction is important, practices such as bombardment, bribery or assassinations might be beneficial militarily but the long term political outcomes are more problematic. Throughout the last decade in Western countries, political and military decision makers have allowed images which have caused amazing dissonance in the population by actions that might make strategic sense but because the real reasons have been hidden and they obviously dent the social myths that the population has, for instance, the reasons given for the occupation of Iraq and the revelations about Abu Ghraib. It was quite astounding that Colin Powell's speech at the United Nations convinced anyone considering the spurious evidence, although in this case it was aided by a massive pro-war media campaign in the US. Donald Rumsfeld's first reaction to the pictures about prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib was to ask who had released them rather than their content. These examples are not here to condemn any one person but to show examples of actions that had overwhelming negative influence because the decision makers could not understand that they totally disregarded the intellectual side of the audience in Powell's case, and the emotional side in the Rumsfeld example. It is almost as if they either took no notice of the influence these actions would have on public opinion and that the 'stories' told to the whole world would be accepted; the problems were that the actions and their associated explanations either did not make real sense or were emotionally unacceptable. Both did not realise the interconnected nature of the world – also the separation of a local and global message is not that easy in the contemporary, networked world.

Contemporary influence operations theory asserts that changes in attitudes (and possibly beliefs) alter behaviour. However, research has shown that the relationship between attitudes and behaviour is a challenging one (Erwin, 2001; O'Keefe, 2002). Attitudes are evaluations that give positive or negative feeling about people, object or abstract or issue. Attitudes have specific referents. One model divides attitudes into three components: affect (emotions), behaviour, and cognition (knowledge and beliefs). There can be discrepancies between each of these. However, this model avoids the question of whether attitudes determine behaviour as it makes behaviour a component of an attitude (Augoustinos et al, 2006). Therefore, the task of influence operations is to beneficially change (for the influencer) the emotions, behaviour, knowledge and beliefs of the targeted group.

Also, attitudes can have *strength*; this is a measure of the consistent link between an attitude and specific attitude objects. Attitudes can also be *activated* where an action or message revives a hidden attitude. Influence campaigns often try to surface these as they do with unconscious attitudes (implicit attitudes). As attitudes are

not all conscious an influence operation needs to research underlying assumptions in the ‘target’ population.

Evidence showing attitudes lead to behaviours is weak whereas evidence showing behaviour leads to attitudes is stronger. For example, allied soldiers in the conflict in Afghanistan may develop attitudes to the local populace entirely on their experience in the context of their role. Here these attitudes might be reinforced by their own hidden attitudes and stereotypes.

INFLUENCE VERSUS BEHAVIOUR

There are a number of stages needed to change behaviour (Cragin and Gerwehr, 2005):

- **Compliance:** requires a short term effort and uses tactics such as coercion and enticement, this would include traditional psychological warfare tactics and such means as bribery. It is very much akin to using the one-dimensional view of power as the model for action;
- **Conformity:** requires a medium term effort and uses tactics such as social and environmental manipulation. This is analogous to the two dimensional model of power, and;
- **Conversion:** requires a long term effort and attempts to shape the worldview of people and limits the scope of their perception.

This model was designed to explain radicalisation but it gives insight to any influence campaign. Although the creators of this model explain it as a series of progressive stages, it is useful just to classify different grades of influence. The goal of most influence campaigns is to get to the ‘conversion’ stage and this requires long term efforts such as this found in conventional education systems or really consistent and long term advertising campaigns. However, others posit that strong attitudes and beliefs (that is, those more accessible from memory) are more resistant to persuasion and are more likely to predict behaviour. So paradoxically, if influence is successful it will be more difficult to alter that attitude and behaviour patterns by future influence efforts. The issue is further complicated as influence is almost impossible to measure either qualitatively or quantitatively as it is transient and its effect on behaviour is tenuous (Geltzer and Forest, 2009).

Even though certain coercive actions might alter behaviour there would have been no *influence* as defined above. This might be sufficient in highly combative situations but is less useful in drawn out insurgencies or terrorist actions which are political rather than purely military in nature. In these situations more integrated actions are needed. It is argued here that marketing ideas is not sufficient to get a long term behavioural change. The actions of the influencer will shape the outcomes not just influence campaigns; although this seems self evident many influence campaigns do not appear to see the link. There should be no mismatch between the ideas promulgated and the behaviour of the influencer. Hence, to argue that A is here to protect B and the actions of A results in the harm of B, it will not be effective. To win a war of ideas actions must match message. It is almost futile to craft an elaborate message if the actions of the messenger blatantly contradict the meaning and spirit of the message.

CONCLUSION

This paper postulates that influence operations have ambitions to be a non-coercive means to change the behaviours of groups. These groups are normally antagonistic toward the influencers but also might be allies that need to be encouraged. However, the influencing of people is a complex task that involves a myriad of factors and is context specific. When there is a conflict situation where worldviews clash then the difficulty in fundamentally influencing the target is a much more involved with the influencers behaviour rather than just marketing ideas and images.

Of course, influence operations need to plan for desired behaviour patterns that are required of the targets of the influence campaigns and this is awkward. Ultimately, the overt goal of the influencer is to get the target to behave a particular way. However, often the targets are forced or encouraged to behave in a particular way not because they believe in that form of behaviour but it is seen as the easy way out of a predicament.

Influence campaigns have been made much more difficult in recent years because of the mixed and contradictory messages that have been sent out by the Allies, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the overt geopolitical objectives do not logically fit with the actions taken. For example, Friedman (2010) states that the overall American strategy is to not allow any state or groups of states to counter American economic and military power, and to win outright in Iraq or Afghanistan is not the purpose. Of course, this argument makes the actions in Serbia, Iraq, and Afghanistan quite rational; however, it does not assist those trying to influence allied, neutral and enemy populations that the actions taken are for the overt, expressed reasons. This is quite a challenge for those involved in influence campaigns as the geopolitical realities bear no resemblance to propaganda arguments or actions. In fact, if Friedman’s argument is taken to its logical conclusion that is exactly the desired effect: that of total confusion where both friend and foe are bewildered, except of course, those planning the actions. In the last decade, Western geopolitical strategies are necessarily secret but make the

task of persuading domestic audiences that the message is a true reflection of reality. Hence, influencing both friendly and antagonistic audiences is made extremely difficult. In fact, it gives sustenance to the foes of the West by ridiculing the messages put out. If there is a mismatch between action and the espoused worldview, it would seem that an influence campaign would be less than successful.

For instance, there is often a disconnect in the messages from the Western allies in the conflict in Afghanistan. Whilst there is a geopolitical reason for troops to be in Afghanistan, these messages are often lost on the domestic population where abstract concepts such as ‘freedom’ had much less impact than the more concrete arguments (Newcourt-Nowodworski, 2005). A report such as the following from the BBC on 22nd February, 2010 would cause an immense amount of dissonance:

“Air strike kills Afghan civilians

At least 27 civilians died in a NATO air strike in southern Afghanistan, the Afghan cabinet says, revising downwards a prior statement that 33 were killed.

NATO said it hit a suspected insurgent convoy, but ground forces later found "a number of individuals killed and wounded", including women and children.

Sunday's attack, in Uruzgan province, was not part of a major NATO-led push in neighbouring Helmand province.

Civilian deaths in strikes have caused widespread resentment in Afghanistan.”

[BBC, 2010]

The *physical* outcomes of the *abstract* goal of freedom are superseded in many peoples’ minds. Hence, many in the West would be appalled at the deaths of children as they have been bombarded with propaganda since the Second World War setting up the social myth of a compassionate society whose military forces do not kill in this manner. Hence, this revulsion is not taken away by a rational apology stating that it was a mistake especially when the Western forces have been stating since the First Gulf War in 1991 that they had superior technology and intelligence systems that could give pin-point accuracy.

FUTURE RESEARCH

There is a need in the West to research strategies that will create favourable attitudes and behaviours in both foreign and domestic audiences. However, in a pluralist society this is problematic as beliefs and attitudes are varied and one focus in a campaign may be taken differently by various groups in that community. It is much easier in a society that has constant beliefs and attitudes; however, this is rare in a globalized and multi-culture environment. An ideal information space to investigate this is the Internet especially as Web2 has produced many interactive social network applications. Unlike the one way nature of Web1, this allows virtual communities to develop. Whether these can replicate physical groups is debatable, however, some insight could be gained by researching influence campaigns in this environment over a number of virtual groupings.

Finally, it could be as simple as going back to a dictum: “good politics requires good propaganda, and good propaganda requires good propaganda”.

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