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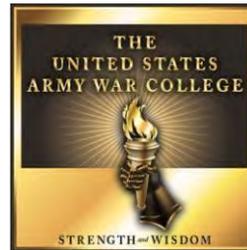
Beyond Belief – When Conspiracies
Are More Believable Than Truth
Battling the kinetic counter
narrative in combat

by

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Under the Direction of:
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United States Army War College
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Abstract

After an Afghan General was assassinated by the Taliban while standing a few feet from the U.S. and NATO commander a conspiracy theory engulfed Afghanistan. Many Afghans believed the U.S. was directly responsible for the death of their beloved Afghan General. This research paper is a first-hand account of the assassination and the competition in the communication environment in the months that followed. Though we practiced public communication as the military trained us to do, we were powerless in the face of this thriving conspiracy. This paper is an examination of the conditions which foster conspiracy theories, where U.S. military communication doctrine falls short in addressing misinformation, and what we can do, and did, to defend against similar circumstances. Ultimately, we found communication success by forging deep relationships with Afghan influencers, taking adversary misinformation head-on and ensuring the lead communicator is properly positioned in the organization to succeed. The lessons and reflections examined in this paper can and should be applied by communication officials in corporate and military settings.

Beyond Belief – When Conspiracies Are More Believable Than Truth Battling the kinetic counter narrative in combat

When I heard the shots, I instinctively took cover. I crouched behind an old Afghan truck and simultaneously drew my sidearm, prepared to fight. General Scott Miller, commander of U.S. and NATO Forces in Afghanistan, crouched next to me. “Keep an eye on the second floor,” Miller said as we surveyed the scene. As two entry-level soldiers would do, we communicated with each other and split up our security sectors.

We performed as the Army trained us; we took cover and looked for additional threats. The immediate threat was neutralized in seconds by an American protecting Miller. The soldier tasks came naturally; I’d done this before. It was everything else that was going to be complicated. I was the lead communicator for U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. This event was going to be big news: the four-star general was just in a firefight. I began building a mental file of the information I knew would be the international headlines within hours, if not minutes.

The scene was still chaotic when a second headline, more powerful inside Afghanistan than outside, emerged: Lt. Gen. Abdul Raziq Achakzai, the local police chief and staunch opponent of the Taliban, had been mortally wounded. An insurgent who had infiltrated Afghan government ranks had shot “Raziq,” as he was widely known, at close range. Although an American soldier killed the shooter immediately, in the ensuing confusion Afghan and American security guards had momentarily begun shooting. U.S. and Afghan forces were among the wounded.

My training and more than ten years’ experience doing military public affairs had prepared me for the events of October 18, 2018, which occurred during a visit by the

command team for U.S./NATO Forces to the governor and security leaders in Kandahar Province. The Defense Information School (DINFOS) teaches public affairs officers to look for and identify the elements of news. My job was to identify what was newsworthy, what would need to be addressed, and determine how to address it. DINFOS course curriculum describes the successful public affairs officer as someone with the ability, "...to recognize whether something has news value, or what is newsworthy...because you are often the sole person on the staff whose job it is to monitor news and its impact on your command."¹

Even before the shooting stopped, as the lead communicator, I was concerned with how U.S., Afghan, and international news organizations would report on the attack. I considered and evaluated the potential impact on our mission of likely headlines. In the minutes, hours and days following the incident, my team took the initiative to provide timely facts and a detailed, accurate, credible narrative of what had occurred.

However, we did not consider, until well after the event, that the truth would not be enough. Unexpectedly and unbeknownst to us, a conspiracy theory started spreading almost immediately across Afghanistan that threatened our mission and personnel. Though we followed military doctrine and training in handling this crisis, we had no training or doctrine that prepared us to detect, understand, manage or mitigate the new crisis that was soon upon us.

Rumors shared over social media and through traditional Afghan communication networks alleged that U.S. forces, and Miller specifically, were responsible for Raziq's

¹ U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Information School, "Crisis Communication," 2018.

death.² Four days after the attack, a member of the Afghan security forces who was allegedly grieving Raziq's death killed a Czech soldier in retribution.³ Near the end of October, *New York Times* journalist and Afghan citizen Mujib Mashal called me. "Hey man," he said. "Just checking to make sure you know that nearly every Afghan on the street thinks Miller had something to do with Raziq's death."⁴

To neutralize the misinformation, we followed the U.S. military's communication and crisis communication doctrine and training. We quickly disseminated the truth to multiple audiences using all the tools we had available. But this was insufficient against the formidable reach of Afghans' opaque channels of social media and word-of-mouth. We discovered that for all our experience, training and resources, we were largely powerless to counteract or eliminate the rumors or to identify and address their sources.

This paper will explore the power of rumor-based misinformation, techniques for detecting and challenging its spread, and the public affairs officer's role in countering misinformation while applying crisis communication. It will focus as a case study on how the Afghan population came to believe the false story that the U.S. was responsible for killing a celebrated Afghan icon and ally. It will also present more broadly an examination of misinformation and conspiracy theories and their tactical and strategic implications. A goal of the paper is to better equip commanders and communicators to understand and respond to a range of misinformation scenarios using tools of crisis communication.

² Mujib Mashal and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "NATO Soldier Killed as Concern Rises Over Afghan Insider Attacks," *The New York Times*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/22/world/asia/afghan-insider-attacks.html>.

³ Mujib Mashal and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How a Taliban Assassin Got Close Enough to Kill a General," *The New York Times*, November 2, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/02/world/asia/taliban-attack-raziq-alliance.html>.

⁴ Verified with Mujib Mashal January 2019

The Death of an Icon, the Birth of a Conspiracy

October 18, 2018 was a warm and sunny day in Kandahar.

Gen. Miller flew into the city to meet with tribal and political leaders, including the governor. The high-level meetings reflected the essential role of Kandahar province and the capital city of the same name in the stability of Afghanistan – historically and during coalition operations since 2001. Kandahar had been a Taliban stronghold and is widely considered the birthplace of the Taliban.⁵ The city of Kandahar is Afghanistan's third-largest population center. The province borders Pakistan and is home to ethnic Pashtuns, Afghanistan's largest ethnic group. The large Pashtun area in Kandahar and south into Pakistan is historically known as Pashtunistan. British commercial and political expansion divided Pashtunistan in 1893. Foreign Secretary of the Colonial Government of India, Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, established the Durand Line to demarcate British India and Afghanistan.⁶ Today, the Durand Line, creating the border between modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan, is known as one of the most dangerous borders in the world due to political and ethnic tensions and the resulting violence.⁷

The city of Kandahar served as a headquarters for the Afghan resistance against invading Soviet troops in the 1980s. In the wake of the Soviet Union's withdrawal in November 1994, the newly formed Taliban, supported by Pakistan, conquered Kandahar with ease. Kandahar was the Taliban's first strategic victory and began their

⁵ Kenneth Finlayson and Alan Meyer, "Operation MEDUSA: Regaining Control of Afghanistan's Panjwayi Valley," *Veritas* 3 (2007), https://www.soc.mil/ARSOF_History/articles/v3n4_op_medusa_page_1.html.

⁶ Jayshree Bajoria, "The Troubled Afghan-Pakistani Border," Council on Foreign Relations, March 20, 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100525182142/http://www.cfr.org/publication/14905/>.

⁷ Philip Walker, "The World's Most Dangerous Borders," *Foreign Policy* (Foreign Policy, June 24, 2011), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/06/24/the-worlds-most-dangerous-borders/>.

campaign toward Kabul.⁸ Aside from it being the hometown of Taliban founder Mullah Omar, the city was valuable because of its airport, extensive road networks and access to Pakistan.⁹ Since the U.S. invasion in 2001, Kandahar has seen near-constant fighting as control has shifted frequently between Afghan, U.S. and Taliban forces.

When we visited in October, 2018, about half the province was controlled by the Afghan government while the southern portion remained contested.¹⁰ “We’re headed into the heart of Taliban country. Are you ready?” I asked the command photographer with a smile as we prepared our equipment. She was new to combat and hesitant. Rightly so, I would later find out.

During the visit, Miller met with Raziq, whom he had come to know well. Raziq was a complex personality in a complex place in a complex war. He started fighting in 1996 at age 17 when his uncle was a local anti-Taliban commander. Raziq became the police chief of Kandahar in 2011 at age 32 and, after just three years, halted Taliban advances and restored some order and security to the city.¹¹ His list of critics was long, including international human rights groups who accused him of gruesome abuses.¹² American commanders have come under scrutiny for their relationship with Raziq but

⁸ Tamim Ansary, *Games without Rules: The Often Interrupted History of Afghanistan* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012).

⁹ Rusty Bradley and Kevin Maurer, *Lions of Kandahar: The Story of a Fight against All Odds* (New York: Bantam Books, 2011).

¹⁰ Alia Chughtai, “Afghanistan: Who Controls What,” Aljazeera.com, June 24, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2016/08/afghanistan-controls-160823083528213.html>.

¹¹ Declan Walsh, “Powerful Afghan Police Chief Puts Fear in Taliban and Their Enemies,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/world/asia/powerful-afghan-police-chief-puts-fear-in-taliban-and-their-enemies-.html>.

¹² Pamela Constable and Sayed Salahuddin, “‘The Lion of Kandahar’: Was Slain Commander a Hero or Part of the Problem?,” *The Washington Post*, November 29, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the-lion-of-kandahar-was-slain-commander-a-hero-or-part-of-the-problem/2018/11/28/48360198-f25b-11e8-99c2-cfca6fcf610c_story.html.

Afghans, U.S. and NATO commanders celebrated his effectiveness.¹³ Raziq and Miller worked together extensively and developed a trusted friendship. The Kandahar visit was critical to deepening our understanding and continuing our relationship with an important security leader in a strategically important area.

Raziq was a maverick. Just five days before our visit, Raziq got into a spat with Taliban and Pakistani forces along the Durand Line. Pakistan was building a fence along the arbitrary line near Raziq's hometown of Spin Boldak, which would create a hard border separating Pashtun families. Raziq vowed never to let this happen, sometimes destroying the fence himself.¹⁴ Raziq's boldness seemed risky to me, but also refreshing. "He just doesn't give a f*-k," I thought. I noted the international and political concern our meeting could cause; the senior U.S./NATO commander was meeting with a legitimate Afghan leader while said Afghan leader was attacking Pakistani forces and destroying Pakistani border walls. And Raziq was not afraid to speak his mind. In a speech three years earlier, he had warned the Afghan government not to sell out his constituency in a deal with the Taliban. "If I have committed any crime, hang me in this roundabout...other youth have been hanged here too, I am no better," he had said, causing a firestorm. "Don't get us killed by the Punjabis, we cannot surrender to the Punjabis."¹⁵ Raziq's actions in combination with our visit were newsworthy, and I wanted to be sure Miller stayed out of the controversy.

¹³ Katherine Hawkins, "Impunity for U.S.-Funded Warlords in Afghanistan - Just Security," Just Security, February 16, 2018, <https://www.justsecurity.org/52511/impunity-u-s-funded-warlords-afghanistan-case-abdul-raziq/>.

¹⁴ Ahmad Naadem, "Afghan, Pakistani Forces Clash over Border Fence," *Pajhwok News*, October 14, 2018, <https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2018/10/14/afghan-pakistani-forces-clash-over-border-fence>.

¹⁵ Interestingly Raziq did not discuss modern nation-state, regional politics (Afghanistan and Pakistan), his comments are related to the historical friction between the ethnic Punjabis and Pashtuns. "Introducing Governor of Kandahar," Ceremony, *Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*, May 6, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3CDWB8ERco&feature=youtu.be>.

The visit came off well. In keeping with Afghan tradition and Miller's status, our team was warmly welcomed. We held a series of formal meetings with elders and political figures. Miller and the governor held a press conference with the Afghan media. My friend and counterpart in the governor's office, Bari Baryalia, orchestrated the event with ease. His skill and demeanor impressed me. After the press conference, I noticed a group of particularly well-equipped and professional-looking Afghan Police. I walked up to them to get a closer look. They stopped talking and gave me their attention. They were battle-hardened, serious but appeared trusting. "Raziq's guys, huh?" I said with a smile. The leader smiled back and pointed at his shoulder patch, which included a full-color picture of Raziq's youthful-looking face. These guys were the real deal, I thought.



Figure 1. A shoulder patch similar to the one worn by Raziq's personal security team¹⁶

During the meetings, Raziq was visibly disinterested in political issues but lit up during any discussion of security. He sat off to the side, uncommonly detached from the rest of the leaders. Based on the discussion, it seemed Raziq had his Kandahar and the other Afghan leaders had theirs. In situations like this, it is difficult to know if perception is reality or whether the layered fabric of Afghanistan eludes our base-line perceptions— a question I would continue to ask myself for months to come. It occurred

¹⁶ Raziq shoulder patch provided by Maj. Angel Tomko, public affairs officer

to me that a rift between Raziq and the other leaders was going to be a challenge for us.

During the few hours of meetings, we snacked on Afghan raisins, pistachios, and pomegranates. Pomegranates were in full harvest in Kandahar and are internationally recognized for growing large and juicy.¹⁷ As the formal meetings closed and we started to leave, the governor made the gesture of giving each of us a large farmer's box of the luscious fruit. Simultaneously attempting to stay alert as we walked toward the helicopters, look ready, and carry a box of pomegranates was difficult. I offloaded my box to the first American security truck I saw. "Umm, thanks, Sir," a soldier hesitantly said as he lowered the box into the armored truck, looking for a place to stow it.

As we gathered near an open field to wait for the helicopters, an insurgent who had infiltrated into the governor's security detail staged himself near the main group of leaders. High spirits continued; the Afghans and Americans joked, embraced, and laughed. Then the insurgent stood, pointed his weapon directly at Raziq, and fired several times. Miller was standing next to Raziq, only a few feet away. An American soldier killed the shooter immediately. In the confusion, Afghan and American security guards fired their weapons. Bullets were flying from several directions. I made the first of several mental notes: "A U.S. soldier killed the shooter, that is going to be news."

After the shooting stopped, U.S. and Afghan security guards were racing around, the perimeter guards moved large armored vehicles with machine guns were moving closer. Medics rushed about. A chubby Afghan police officer ran from the scene and appeared in front of the truck we were crouched behind. I rose to shoot him; he saw me

¹⁷ Daud Qarizadah and Harun Najafizade, "Afghanistan: Can Pomegranates Power the Economy?," *BBC News*, December 3, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30246121>.

and threw his hands up in the air and dove to the ground. I let the tension off the trigger, and Miller yelled at the Afghan to keep moving past us. The Afghan got up and ran away, hands still awkwardly in the air. Army Staff Sergeant Sheila Hakeem, Miller's photographer, crawled over. Blood was dripping from her camera. She was holding the camera in one hand and her weapon in the other, cursing. A bullet had grazed her hand, but it was not life-threatening. She was too pissed to realize how lucky she had been. "U.S. wounded, another headline," I thought.

Many things were happening in several different directions. The four-star general seemed to be taking it all in. Smashed boxes of pomegranates were mixed with the blood of the dead and wounded. "This makes an interesting scene, and the story that follows will surely include pomegranates," I thought. And it did.¹⁸

A group of wounded U.S. soldiers and Afghan government officials came from behind us. The original shots came from our front, and this did not make sense. We wondered if there was another shooter. An SUV sped onto the scene; it was Raziq's men. They scooped up their commander's bullet-riddled body, threw him into the back, and sped off. More pomegranates smashed under the squealing tires, blood-red juice running down the street. Miller wondered if the general would survive. "When Raziq was evacuated, was he alive or dead? The press will ask," I thought.

Most public affairs officers would have been in the headquarters office, miles away, waiting to receive a report of the firefight. I was living it. Miller believed that my presence on all his battlefield trips was required because our message to the U.S. and

¹⁸ Mujib Mashal and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "NATO Soldier Killed as Concern Rises Over Afghan Insider Attacks," *The New York Times*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/22/world/asia/afghan-insider-attacks.html>.

international public was essential to the success of the mission. Consistently hearing him speak would help me convey the message in his words. My presence had other benefits such as speed and accuracy of information. The Joint Publication on public affairs says, "The speed of modern communications and the disparity of multiple audiences increase the importance of quickly and agilely synchronizing communication."¹⁹

In battlefield reporting, we never trust the first report. The facts become clearer once the "fog of war" has lifted. I was an eye-witness to this attack and knew as much context as anyone else, but I knew that I didn't have all the information. And yet I knew I was going to be telling the world about it— and soon. Based on military guidelines, I knew I would release the number of casualties.²⁰ I knew reporters would ask about timelines, positions, and leaders' actions. In their book, *Political Risk*, Secretary Condoleezza Rice and Dr. Amy Zegart write, "The first step in crisis management is to get a better handle on what is happening. Early moments of a crisis are swirling with uncertainty...don't jump to conclusions. Assess the situation."²¹ Reporters would be coming up with their own assessments of the situation – to analyze what it meant – and with the right information I could guide them.

The scene began settling down. The medics were treating the wounded. The soldiers pulling security cleared the area. Apache helicopter gunships flew closer to our position and scanned for threats. Transport helicopters were inbound ready to take Miller and the wounded, though Miller would later refuse to board until we were able to

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, "Joint Publication 3-61 [Public Affairs]," August 19, 2016.

²⁰ U.S. Department of Defense.

²¹ Condoleezza Rice and Amy Zegart, *Political Risk: How Businesses and Organizations Can Anticipate Global Insecurity* (New York, Ny: Twelve, Hachette Book Group, 2018).

evacuate all wounded. The global media, from reporters based in Afghanistan to the Pentagon beat reporters many time zones away, would want to know every detail of this. I was attempting to understand so I could delineate what we were going to say.

"Sir, we're going to have to get ahead of this," I said to Miller. He knew what I meant and agreed. We were going to have to take control of the public narrative by putting out the facts before anyone else did. This was a major event and soon a large portion of the Afghan population would be talking about this, our adversaries will surely look to gain advantage and across the western world pundits would be casting judgement based on any information available. This is what our doctrine indicated: "For information to have an impact, the audience must receive the information in a timely fashion, multiple times, and from multiple sources. Continuous public engagement throughout an operation provides the best chance of success in supporting strategic narratives and themes and in achieving operational objectives."²²

There was no need to check with our higher headquarters before informing the public. U.S. Army regulations designated me as the primary public affairs officer. "If a crisis or emerging event occurs in an area of PA responsibility, the first PAO contacted or on the scene will ensure appropriate information is released as quickly as possible to pertinent audiences."²³ For authority within the command, I had Miller's trust. To do this right, I was going to leverage the training and experience of my public affairs team.

I contacted the press desk, which was based at our headquarters in Kabul, using my government-issued iPhone. News of the attack hadn't made it to the headquarters yet. We had to get formal reporting to our higher military headquarters flowing because

²² U.S. Department of Defense, "Joint Publication 3-61 [Public Affairs]," August 19, 2016.

²³ U.S. Army, "U.S. Army Field Manual 46-1 [Public Affairs Operations]," May 30, 1997.

we did not want them, let alone Washington or NATO, finding out about this on Twitter. They put me on speaker phone in the operations room and I relayed formal tactical reports to the entire operations staff. I told Miller what I was reporting and the operations chief knew I had Miller's permission to provide official reports.

The public affairs team in Kabul and I hastily planned our communication approach. We knew news alerts would start coming in any second. The social media, newswire system in Afghanistan was fast. Social media posts about a firefight in Kandahar began to populate in minutes. A Kabul-based journalist from Reuters called first, 18 minutes after the first shot was fired. Sergeant First Class Deb Richardson, who was in charge at the press desk, used the statement we developed.²⁴ As the queries poured into the press desk in Kabul, I holstered my weapon and tweeted.

"Update on the Kandahar palace today. This was an Afghan-on-Afghan incident. Three Americans were wounded, have been medically evacuated and are stable. General Miller is uninjured. We are being told the area is secure. The attacker is dead. Send queries to our press desk."²⁵ I sent two more updates via Twitter from the scene.²⁶

²⁴ U.S. Forces- Afghanistan responded on-the-record at 18 Oct 2018 1550hrs (1120Z). This statement was provided to more than 50 global media outlets. Additionally, USFOR-A confirmed Kandahar PGOV being treated at RS facilities.

"We can now clarify initial reports. In fact, three coalition personnel were wounded - one U.S. service member, one American civilian and one coalition contractor. All three have been medically evacuated and are stable. There was a situation at the Kandahar palace today. Initial reports indicate Afghan officials were the targets. Americans were wounded in the cross-fire. General Miller is uninjured. We are being told the area is secure. Initial reports also say the attacker is dead. We don't have any more details at this time. When we have more information we will contact you."

²⁵ David Butler, "U.S. Forces Afghanistan Twitter," Twitter, October 18, 2018, https://twitter.com/USFOR_A/status/1052932810967867392.

²⁶ David Butler, "U.S. Forces Afghanistan Twitter," Twitter, October 18, 2018, https://twitter.com/USFOR_A/status/1052936151932313600.



Figure 2. My first tweet from the scene of the incident²⁷

I spoke on the phone with multiple members of the U.S.-based Pentagon press corps and updated the western, Kabul-based journalists via the messaging application, WhatsApp. The global press erupted. Barbara Starr, the military reporter from *CNN*, went live from Washington. All of the major outlets carried our official statements and few speculated beyond the initial facts. This was the best we could hope for in this situation.



Figure 3. *CNN* reporting on the incident and cites my comments.²⁸

We were aware that we were communicating in a crisis, one with the potential to impact our mission in a ripple effect extending far beyond the event itself. The enemy got close enough to kill an American four-star general and instead killed a celebrated Afghan security official. Our forces' ability to militarily create favorable conditions for negotiations with the Taliban was grounded in strength. Unaddressed, this tactical

²⁷ Butler.

²⁸ Nick Paton Walsh, Barbara Starr, and Ryan Browne, "2 Americans Wounded in Afghanistan," *CNN*, October 18, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/18/politics/afghanistan-police-attack/index.html>.

vulnerability could have strategic consequences. A public event like this could put our civilian decision makers in a situation where they feel forced to make abrupt decisions.

The military recognizes a communications crisis as "any situation that has the potential to affect your audience's long-term opinions and feelings about your organization."²⁹ W T Coombs recognizes a crisis as "...the perception of an event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can impact the organization's performance. Crises are largely perceptual."³⁰ The Defense Information School uses the framework of Kathleen Fearn-Banks to define the steps of crisis communication: detection, prevention/preparation, containment, recovery, and learning.³¹ Containment refers to the efforts to minimize the duration of the crisis or to prevent it from spreading to other topics or parts of the organization.³² Containment was foremost in my mind.³³

We believed that the greatest threat to our organization in this communications crisis was the perception of vulnerability and insecurity signified by the attack. Internal to Afghanistan, we thought the risk would come from Afghans' fears that this incident would cause a negative political reaction in Washington, calling into question our commitment to current policy.

Soon, we would discover we were wrong.

²⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Information School, "Crisis Communication," 2018.

³⁰ W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, eds., *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444314885>.

³¹ U.S. Department of Defense.

³² Kathleen Fearn-Banks and Routledge, *Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach* (New York ; London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, Cop, 2017).

³³ In *Political Risk* the authors charge, "do not fan the flames" during a crisis. Containment means bringing closure to crises by communicating or not communicating the right things at the right time. Condoleezza Rice and Amy Zegart, *Political Risk: How Businesses and Organizations Can Anticipate Global Insecurity* (New York, Ny: Twelve, Hachette Book Group, 2018).

Outside of our view at first, another story was gathering steam. When he heard rumors that the U.S. was being blamed for Raziq's death, Miller expressed concern and asked whether the claims were catching on. We initially discounted his concern. In the places we were looking, we saw nothing aside from what we deemed outrageous, unbelievable social media posts. Our Afghan-American media analysts and cultural advisors shrugged off the claims as nonsense. Our social media scraping tools and cutting-edge technology were incapable of grasping the rapid spread and believability of the rumors. Miller's intuition proved correct. Less than four days after the attack, when an Afghan soldier murdered a Czech soldier, officials said the Afghan was grieving the death of Raziq and blamed U.S. and NATO forces.³⁴

To understand better what was happening, we turned for help from Central Command's Web Operations. The 120-person, multimillion-dollar operation based in Tampa, Fla. conducts media and social media monitoring and activity for military information support operations [formerly known as psychological operations].³⁵

Our teleconference with Central Command brought us no closer to an effective response. It ended heatedly after a doctorate-level cultural expert said the social media they were seeing caused no reason for alarm. "Well, a soldier is dead because of it, so thanks for your expertise," I said before shutting off the call and walking from the room.³⁶

³⁴ Mujib Mashal and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "NATO Soldier Killed as Concern Rises Over Afghan Insider Attacks," *The New York Times*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/22/world/asia/afghan-insider-attacks.html>.

³⁵ Karen Parrish, "Centcom Counters ISIL Propaganda," U.S. Department of Defense, June 6, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/827761/centcom-counters-isil-propaganda/>.

³⁶ William Dixon, Media Desk Operations, interview by David Butler, October 18, 2019.

Within two weeks after the attack, the story of the conspiracy theory had gone global. *The New York Times* reported in early November, “Across Afghanistan, a rumor has spread that the United States must have been behind the killing of General Raziq. That rumor began immediately at the scene of the attack and spread to social media pages, the streets, and even among the country's top leaders.”³⁷

And, in fact, former Afghan President Hamid Karzai told U.S. Ambassador John Bass that most of the country believed the U.S. was responsible for Raziq’s death.³⁸ We were blind and unable to affect what we could not see. The population of Afghanistan was falling prey to a damaging and rapidly spreading conspiracy theory, which could result in even more significant loss of life and risk to mission. We had to change the way we looked at and understood the information environment. The urgency could not have been greater.

Misinformation, Disinformation, Conspiracies, and Fake-News

To understand the phenomenon we saw unfolding in Afghanistan, we needed to define it. Popular terms for false information include disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, conspiracy and fake news. These concepts have been in existence for many years, but have gained new currency with the rise of social media and state-on-state information manipulation.³⁹

³⁷ Mujib Mashal and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “How a Taliban Assassin Got Close Enough to Kill a General,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/02/world/asia/taliban-attack-raziq-alliance.html>.

³⁸ Mujib Mashal and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “NATO Soldier Killed as Concern Rises Over Afghan Insider Attacks,” *The New York Times*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/22/world/asia/afghan-insider-attacks.html>.

³⁹ U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Combating Foreign Influence,” *Federal Bureau of Investigation | What We Investigate*, 2019, <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/counterintelligence/foreign-influence>. “Foreign influence operations—which include covert actions by foreign governments to influence U.S. political sentiment or public discourse—are not a new problem. But the interconnectedness of the modern world, combined with the anonymity of the Internet, have changed the nature of the threat and how the FBI and its partners must address it. The goal of these foreign influence operations directed against the

Dr. Claire Wardley and Hossien Derakhshan offer useful definitions. They describe “misinformation” as false information shared without an intent to harm. “Disinformation” is false information knowingly shared to cause harm. “Malinformation” is accurate information shared to cause harm.⁴⁰ Separately, Dr. Michael Shermer, a leading scholar on conspiracies, defines a conspiracy as “two or more people plotting or acting in secret to gain an advantage or harm others immorally or illegally.” A conspiracy theory, Shermer says, “is a structured belief about a conspiracy whether it is real or not.”⁴¹

Communicators cannot ignore conspiracy theories. They are not limited to fringe populations, specific religious affiliations, or nationality.⁴² The FBI outlined the threat of conspiracy theories in a 2019 intelligence bulletin, warning they “very likely will emerge, spread, and evolve in the modern information marketplace, occasionally driving both groups and individual extremists to carry out criminal or violent acts.” Conspiracy theories linked to extremist actions are predicted to proliferate during the U.S. 2020 presidential election cycle.⁴³

Conspiracy theories often implicate the military. In one example, a domestic training exercise in 2015 named Jade Helm, portions of the U.S. population believed the

United States is to spread disinformation, sow discord, and, ultimately, undermine confidence in our democratic institutions and values.”

⁴⁰ Claire Wardley and Hossien Derakhshan, “Information Disorder; Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking” (Council of Europe, September 27, 2017).

⁴¹ Michael Shermer, “Conspiracies & Conspiracy Theories; What We Should and Shouldn’t Believe,” *Audible Great Courses Series* (Audible Original, September 17, 2019).

⁴² Joseph E Uscinski and Joseph M Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://www-oxfordscholarship-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199351800.001.0001/acprof-9780199351800>.

⁴³ U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Intelligence Bulletin,” May 30, 2019, <https://www.justsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/420379775-fbi-conspiracy-theories-domestic-extremism.pdf>.

Army was preparing for a war against the U.S. public.⁴⁴ The conspiracy theory became so widespread it was featured on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.⁴⁵ Abroad, U.S. service members have worked alongside people who believed that the Islamic State was a deliberate U.S. creation to justify ongoing occupation of traditionally Islamic areas of the world, a conspiracy theory which has been propagated by Iran and Russia.⁴⁶ In 2015, one-third of Iraqis believed the U.S. was actively supporting the terror group we were fighting against.⁴⁷ The most stubborn conspiracy challenge for Americans in the Middle East is the belief that American foreign policy is intrinsically hostile toward Islam and the region. As former National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, “First, we must work to dispel destructive myths about American society and American policy. Second, we must dramatically expand our efforts to support and encourage the voices of moderation and tolerance and pluralism within the Muslim world.”⁴⁸

In the conspiratorial information world, truth does not prevail on its own.⁴⁹ Bad information can defeat good information. “In real crises, there are often opponents— a

⁴⁴ Kyle Jahner, “Six Head-Scratching Jade Helm Conspiracy Theories,” *Army Times* (Army Times, July 15, 2015), <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2015/07/15/six-head-scratching-jade-helm-conspiracy-theories/>.

⁴⁵ “The Daily Show - To Shoot or Not to Shoot & Fear and Absent Danger,” YouTube Video, *YouTube*, May 5, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xhn7FHHQbVw>.

⁴⁶ Liz Sly, “Iraqis Think the U.S. Is in Cahoots with the Islamic State, and It Is Hurting the War,” *The Washington Post*, December 2, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraqis-think-the-us-is-in-cahoots-with-isis-and-it-is-hurting-the-war/2015/12/01/d00968ec-9243-11e5-befa-99ceebcbb272_story.html.

⁴⁷ U.S. Department of State, “Evaluation of Embassy Baghdad’s Implementation of Line of Effort 6 in the President’s Strategy to Counter ISIL: Exposing ISIL’s True Nature,” <https://www.Oversight.Gov/Sites/Default/Files/Oig-Reports/lsp-i-16-10.Pdf> (U.S. Department of State, Inspector General, March 2016).

⁴⁸ Condoleezza Rice, “Remarks by Political Strategy of War Against Terrorism,” *Mtholyoke.Edu*, (August 19, 2004), <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/bush/usip.htm>.

⁴⁹ Michael Shermer, “Conspiracies & Conspiracy Theories; What We Should and Shouldn’t Believe,” *Audible Great Courses Series* (Audible Original, September 17, 2019).

mirror image of your own crisis management team—that want to torpedo you,” writes Eric Dezenhall in his book, *Damage Control*. “These opponents don’t care whether you ‘do the right thing’; they care about defeating you.”⁵⁰ When the false information feeds a virulent conspiracy theory, when the narrative is contested and the population is vulnerable, the truth is seen as nothing more than another opinion. And everyone has an opinion.

The Vulnerable Population

Afghanistan is fertile ground for conspiracy theories. The country has experienced 40 years of uninterrupted conflict, more than twice the median age of Afghans. Instability and insecurity are endemic. They come with the territory. Afghanistan is, “the land-in-between, the land squeezed between mighty powers wrestling for stakes much bigger than Afghanistan,” writes Tamim Ansary in *Games Without Rules*.⁵¹

Several factors make a person or group vulnerable to conspiracy theories and accelerate their spread. Individuals seek to understand their environment, be safe and to control the environment, and maintain a positive image of their selves and their social group.⁵² The Afghan population in 2018 was challenged on all these fronts. Massive trauma and emotional tumult had contributed to rampant depression and post-traumatic

⁵⁰ Eric Dezenhall and John Weber, *Damage Control: The Essential Lessons of Crisis Management* (Westport: Prospect Press, 2011).

⁵¹ Tamim Ansary, *Games without Rules: The Often Interrupted History of Afghanistan* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012).

⁵² Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka, “The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26, no. 6 (December 2017): 538–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261>.

stress.⁵³ The powerlessness of people in such circumstances increases the allure of conspiracy theories. Research shows, “people who lack agency and control may reclaim some sense of control by believing conspiracy theories because they offer the opportunity to reject official narratives and allow people to feel that they possess a better account.”⁵⁴

Afghanistan’s distinct ethnic identities, localized economy, rugged geography, and linguistic diversity make people more prone to rely on local or social groups.⁵⁵ Throughout history, Afghan culture retained “and aggressive sociability that had always characterized Afghan life at ground level, no matter what sultan was currently abiding his hour or two upon the country’s thrown,” writes Ansary.⁵⁶ More broadly, in region and culture-specific research focused broadly on “Iranian-Arab-Middle Eastern Cultures” Marvin Zonis and Craig Joseph found that “Middle Easterners are more ready and more able to engage in conspiracy thinking than are members of many other cultural groups.”⁵⁷ Although not specific to Afghanistan, we can relate these findings to Afghanistan giving the close proximity and assimilation in the region.

Afghanistan in Mourning

⁵³ R Srinivasa Murthy and Rashmi Lakshminarayana, “Mental Health Consequences of War: A Brief Review of Research Findings,” *World Psychiatry: Official Journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)* 5, no. 1 (2006): 25–30, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1472271/>.

⁵⁴ Karen M. Douglas et al., “Understanding Conspiracy Theories,” *Political Psychology* 40, no. S1 (February 2019): 3–35, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568>.

⁵⁵ Olga Ladygina, “Features of Identity of the Population of Afghanistan,” ResearchGate (ResearchGate, 2018), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328239407_Features_of_Identity_of_the_Population_of_Afghanistan.

⁵⁶ Tamim Ansary, *Games without Rules: The Often Interrupted History of Afghanistan* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012).

⁵⁷ Marvin Zonis and Craig M. Joseph, “Conspiracy Thinking in the Middle East,” *Political Psychology* 15, no. 3 (September 1994): 443, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3791566>.

Raziq's death was undoubtedly a traumatic event for many Afghans. He was widely mourned. Posters, photos, and stickers of Raziq's face, photo-shopped with blood, sold rapidly in local markets. Kabul residents decorated their cars with pictures and signs in memory of him. Raziq's funeral services were nationally observed and attended by the most prominent Afghans. Kandahar province parliamentary elections were put on hold until the south could regain order and security.⁵⁸ Raziq was a nationally known, powerful figure whom Afghans recognized for his service in protecting his people.⁵⁹

The people mourned and tried to make sense of this tragedy. Humans consciously and subconsciously work to create patterns, reduce complexity and make sense of things. This ability is part of our natural defense against the environment. Real or imagined patterns lend to understanding and allow for a human to react.⁶⁰ Crisis, emergency, and threat increase this predisposition to create real or unreal patterns. Research explains this phenomenon: "When individuals can no longer make sense of their worlds, when the realities of change outpace their capacities to rearrange the components of their cultural systems to account for those changes, such a crisis may ensue. These crises induce regression in mental processes and facilitate the eruption of more primitive ideation, including conspiracy thinking."⁶¹

⁵⁸ Mujib Mashal and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "NATO Soldier Killed as Concern Rises Over Afghan Insider Attacks," *The New York Times*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/22/world/asia/afghan-insider-attacks.html>.

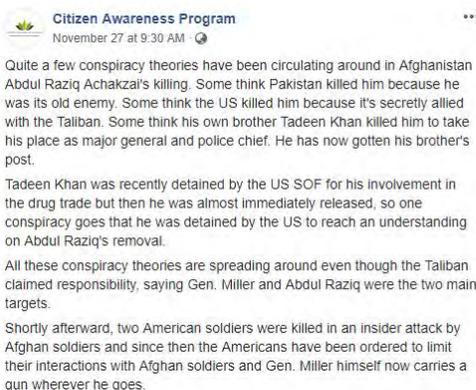
⁵⁹ Taimoor Shah and Mujib Mashal, "An Afghan Police Chief Took On the Taliban and Won. Then His Luck Ran Out.," *The New York Times*, October 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/18/world/asia/kandahar-afghanistan-attack.html>.

⁶⁰ Michael Shermer, *The Believing Brain : From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies--How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths* (New York: Times Books, 2011).

⁶¹ Marvin Zonis and Craig M. Joseph, "Conspiracy Thinking in the Middle East," *Political Psychology* 15, no. 3 (September 1994): 443, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3791566>.

We eventually concluded that there was no tangible evidence that the Raziq conspiracy theory was actively propagated for nefarious purposes. Though the tools are lacking and further discussion of our capability would go beyond the classification of this paper, we could not determine that Pakistan, Iran, or even the Taliban were responsible for the creating or spreading the rumors. Our team's best evidence indicated simply that confusion at the scene allowed for a rational conspiracy theory to develop. In other words, it was fueled by misinformation rather than disinformation.

Many Afghans still believe the U.S. was responsible for Raziq's death.⁶² The conspiracy theories that supported this belief vary, but the primary rationale held that the U.S. intended to negotiate with the Taliban, Raziq was a staunch opponent of the Taliban, therefore the U.S. must have killed Raziq to remove an obstacle to future negotiation. Even urban, educated people have trouble believing the Taliban would choose to kill Raziq instead of Miller. Raziq's death "did not make sense" to many Afghans. The public "drew on points of evidence around the event to build a narrative to find it easy to digest."⁶³



⁶² Anonymous, Afghan Kandahar Provincial Council Member, interview by David Butler, January 25, 2020.

⁶³ Mujib Mashal, Mujib Mashal Perspective, interview by David Butler, January 18, 2020.

Figure 4. Facebook post, more than a month later, by a Pakistani counter-propaganda group⁶⁴

We had failed to anticipate the genesis of this powerful narrative. But soon our team went to work to determine how we could better understand the information environment and build an effective response.

Relationship-Based Understanding and Communication

By the time we realized we had a problem, the Raziq conspiracy theory had already put our mission and force at risk. A Czech soldier was dead. Nearly every public photo and news article online featuring American or NATO forces in Afghanistan drew public online comments and discussion about Raziq. In an attempt to limit the spread, prominent Afghan officials publicly rejected the theory.⁶⁵

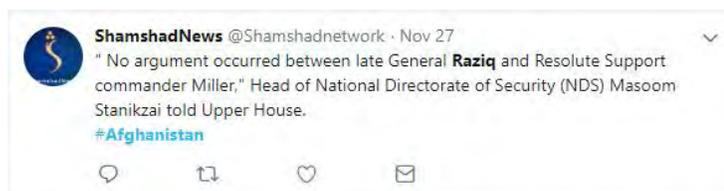


Figure 5. A Pashto network tweets comments about the incident by Afghan officials⁶⁶

Our communication team vowed never again to allow this to happen. We began making changes immediately.

Our most obvious problem was our blindness. Though we had useful tools to look at the internet, read the news, and see social media, we didn't understand it in

⁶⁴ Citizen Awareness Program, "Raziq Conspiracies," Facebook.com, November 27, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=Citizen%20Awareness%20Program%20raziq%20conspiracy&epa=SEARCH_BOX.

⁶⁵ Phillip Wellman, "Conspiracy Theories Abound over US Role in Kandahar Police Chief's Killing," *Stars and Stripes*, October 26, 2018.

⁶⁶ *Shamshad News*, "'No Argument Occurred between Late General Raziq and Resolute Support Commander Miller,' Head of National Directorate of Security (NDS) Masoom Stanikzai Told Upper House. #Afghanistan," Twitter @Shamshadnetwork, November 27, 2018, <https://twitter.com/Shamshadnetwork/status/1067344356737253378>.

context. We failed to see cultural nuance or recognize the passion throughout the commentary. We did not understand the factors that could make an idea go viral or the mechanisms to quash a narrative. We also could not track word-of-mouth or deep internet discussions via closed groups, chat rooms and message boards. In previous years, Coalition Forces relied on high-priced surveys and contracts which reported statistics on population atmospherics, these produced mountains of lagging statistics but were not useful in driving action. In this communications contest, we had to redefine who the experts were. We could no longer depend on the Afghan-American contracted media advisors or cultural experts. We had to get as close to the information front lines as we could to better understand and communicate with the people who influenced the narrative. We resolved to be less passive in determining what an Afghan with moderate influence was thinking about. We left the safety of our bases and met with Afghans. To gain more contact with people who could help us understand public sentiment, Sgt. 1st Class Richardson advised me to meet with an Afghan any day I was not traveling with Miller.

For the remainder of my tour, nearly one year, I met several times per week with a journalist, an Afghan government official, a community influencer, or any other Afghan who could provide new insights. We began with Afghan government communication officials and leaders of Afghan media outlets. Each meeting led to recommendations and opportunities to connect with others. Soon we had the beginnings fruitful relationships across a large part of Afghan society. Our appetite to connect was large; one day we would meet with a communication official from the Afghan Ministry of Defense, the next day we ate lunch with Afghanistan's most popular morning television

show, and the next we visited the highest rated pop-radio station in the country. Community activists, informal influencers, news personalities and media executive directors would sit with us, drink tea and help us understand the narratives and trends in and around Afghanistan's capital and throughout the country. We met with community activists from the south who sympathize with the Taliban. In our first meeting they refused to eat our food and blamed me for the terrible situation their people are in. As the meeting ended, we promised to continue to communicate. As I write this paper, I receive regular updates on their community activism and he assures me he carries our mutual message of peace. Some time was wasted: we were often led to meet with people only interested in U.S. contracts or support for citizenship. Some relationships never came to fruition. The value of the contacts and relationships we built far outweighed the lost time and fatigue resulting from the less valuable meetings.

Public affairs officers at subordinate headquarters throughout the country were empowered and expected to build their own networks of understanding and influencers. One particularly effective public affairs officer, Maj. Angel Tomko, stationed in Kandahar and responsible for much of southern Afghanistan, built useful relationships with the region's leadership. Angel's relationships allowed her immediate access to Afghan leaders during crisis. As if she was a close member of the Afghan staff, they called her for consultation, reported their population influence concerns and even shared their official social media accounts. In line and in coordination with her American commander, she advised the Afghan commanders on possible messaging while simultaneously communicating with the Afghan media in the region. She became an

interlocutor that encouraged Afghan military leaders to speak to the Afghan media.⁶⁷ As we built these relationships across the country, public affairs officers throughout the organization, Afghan influencers, and Afghan officials maintained regular contact through WhatsApp.

We stayed in daily contact with hundreds of Afghan influencers through several WhatsApp groups. We shared our thoughts and concerns on matters of the day. We shared facts about U.S. and Afghan operations. Each morning we sent a daily update which included the night's operations, Taliban setbacks, Taliban atrocities and other reports. In the event of a U.S. or Afghan success, mishap or controversy we used this network to get the information out fast.⁶⁸ We tailored groups to individual organizations or clusters, and maintained these separate groups because we found Afghans did not readily communicate on open channels. Afghans regularly messaged in these groups and requested more information or a statement, they asked about local grievances and Taliban claims, sometimes they just wanted to talk. Sgt. First Class Richardson, the public affairs non-commissioned officer in charge and operations desk leader dedicated time to foster and manage these relationships.

This process enabled us to communicate to key audiences quickly in an authentic and believable way. Through these groups we had an early warning network on developing grievances. These groups were instrumental in reacting before information-related events became problems. These relationships proved useful, not

⁶⁷ This account validated by Maj. Tomko February 27, 2020.

⁶⁸ We used a firm no attribution policy; Afghan media would confirm facts through an official Afghan source.

only to detect and address conspiracy type concerns but to communicate our truthful information with speed and accuracy.⁶⁹

We stopped issuing mass press releases and generic social media postings and instead relied on relationship-based communication – personal cross-talk individually tailored to the needs of each audience.⁷⁰ Although it's uncommon for military public affairs offices not to use press releases, we found them an ineffective, one-way communication with audiences that affected our authority and support. Through personal relationships audiences would learn, challenge us, ask questions, disagree, support us, and ideally turn into third-party advocates who would communicate with their own audiences.

General Miller was our example for partnerships. He directed subordinate commanders to closely partner with, meet and listen to their security and governance counterparts. In the case of his direct subordinates this meant commanders would work closely with Provincial Governors, Provincial Police Chiefs and Afghan Army Corps Commanders. Though this partnership is how the mission is defined and was an expectation before Miller took command, the expectation for speed, regularity and sharing was new. In turn, the subordinate commanders directed their subordinates to do the same at the level where they operated. I made the same expectation clear to public affairs officers across the country. Subordinate command public affairs officers were expected to intimately work with their Afghan counterparts at the provincial level as well as the local and regional Afghan media.

⁶⁹ Prior to building this network we maintained superficial relationships with media leaders. We conducted meetings and responded to media queries by standard, formal procedures. The description here relates a less formal, but deeper and wider network of communicators and influencers.

⁷⁰ The only press release we continued to use was the official announcement of a U.S. or Coalition death.

Then we shared across every facet of the organization. We lived by the mantra “everybody, knows everything, all the time.” Miller echoed his intent, “Build shared understanding to enable action.” We established a network for sharing information more rapidly and collaboratively than is common in traditional military organizations, which often depend on a clear chain of command with specific, bureaucratic reporting requirements and rules. Using the collaboration applications Slack and WhatsApp, we pulled commanders, public affairs officers, information operators, operations officers and many others into common channels of rapid sharing. Different than intelligence, which has an expectation of process and analysis, the expectation here was for speed and collaboration based on raw information. Within a few weeks, unclassified operational information was being kludged against news updates and atmospheric information gained from conversations in near-real time. While Miller was pressing the organization to be more agile and operationally effective by sharing widely and quickly, I was using this data flow to understand and take action in the information environment.⁷¹ When an incident occurred such as a Taliban offensive, a checkpoint attack or an accusation on social media of civilian casualties, information was shared rapidly across the country. Commanders and operations officers gathered details to confirm or deny. A picture of the battlefield was painted using our phones, wherever we were, with immediacy and the accuracy of informed crowd-sourcing. This picture was later enhanced and complemented through classified reporting and directives which took place on the classified network and are limited to stationary computers in secure areas.

⁷¹ This may beg the question, “what about information operations?” Miller appointed me as the lead communicator, he trusted us (the staff) to determine the differences between pure information operations, influence and public communication. The Psychological Operations Battalion Commander, Lt. Col Eric Johnson and I worked closely and directly together.

We Must Compete

The understanding we gained from relationship-based communication and rapid sharing across our organization became instrumental in our ability to communicate. Greater understanding enabled action. But what was the right action? Academia does not provide agreed-upon best practices on how to deal with conspiracies. “Researchers call it the million-dollar question,” according to *Time Magazine*.⁷² Our team had to be creative to answer it.

The Race for Belief

Research on human belief systems has found that people easily believe the first information they are exposed to and change their minds only with difficulty. The first belief becomes the strongest and subsequently serves as a lens to interpret additional information. Additional information is often interpreted with bias to confirm the first belief. If contradictory to the first belief the additional information is more likely to be discounted or ignored.⁷³

The human brain creates belief through assigning patterns and meaning to sensory data; these meaningful patterns are the basis for belief and define a person’s reality.⁷⁴ In a compilation of belief research, Daniel Gilbert summarizes human belief systems this way: “People are credulous creatures who find it very easy to believe and

⁷² Melissa Chan, “Conspiracy Theories Might Sound Crazy, But Here’s Why Experts Say We Can No Longer Ignore Them,” *Time* (Time, August 15, 2019), <https://time.com/5541411/conspiracy-theories-domestic-terrorism/?amp=true>.

⁷³ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus And Giroux, 2015).

⁷⁴ Michael Shermer, *The Believing Brain : From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies--How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths* (New York: Times Books, 2011).

very difficult to doubt. In fact, believing is so easy, and perhaps so inevitable, that it may be more like involuntary comprehension than it is like rational assessment.”⁷⁵

Changing beliefs is hard. Emotions, cognitive bias, and social factors reaffirm beliefs, cementing personal definitions of truth. Once a belief is created, people will defend those beliefs despite contradictory evidence or counter-logic.⁷⁶ “[People] start out with an emotional commitment to a certain idea, and then they use their formidable cognitive powers to organize facts to support what they want to believe anyhow,” said Francis Fukuyama, a political scientist at Stanford on a Freakonomics Podcast, *How to Change Your Mind*.⁷⁷ Too many communicators spend too much time and resources attempting to change the minds of a population that has emotionally invested in a belief.⁷⁸

More than a year after Raziq’s death, a young Afghan woman told me she believed the U.S. was behind Raziq’s death. Her comments demonstrate the problem of belief clearly: “This is my belief. Maybe it is not true. It doesn’t matter, this is my belief and you can’t change that.”⁷⁹

Maximum Disclosure, Minimum Delay

The idea that people believe the first thing they hear or see supports the military’s principle of maximum disclosure, minimum delay. According to the Department

⁷⁵ Daniel T. Gilbert, “How Mental Systems Believe.,” *American Psychologist* 46, no. 2 (1991): 107–19, <https://doi.org/10.1037//0003-066x.46.2.107>.

⁷⁶ Michael Shermer, *The Believing Brain : From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies--How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths* (New York: Times Books, 2011).

⁷⁷ Stephen Dubner, “How to Change Your Mind (Ep. 379) - Freakonomics,” Podcast, *Freakonomics* (Freakonomics, May 29, 2019), <http://freakonomics.com/podcast/change-your-mind/>.

⁷⁸ Eric Dezenhall and John Weber, *Damage Control : The Essential Lessons of Crisis Management* (Westport: Prospecta Press, 2011).

⁷⁹ Anonymous, Afghan Kandahar Provincial Council Member, interview by David Butler, January 25, 2020.

of Defense's publication on public affairs, "By adhering to the principle of 'maximum disclosure, minimum delay,' public affairs is a critical component for defending, maintaining, and when necessary, repairing the reputation of the DOD. The application of transparency, especially during crises, is essential to maintaining public trust."⁸⁰

Dealing with conspiracy theories is a common problem while operating abroad and even while training in the U.S. Often conspiracies drive public affairs officers to make repeated public statements. Our training and doctrine directs us to publicize the facts as broadly as we can. The effectiveness of these repeated statements are unknown and hard to measure.

In response to conspiracy theories that the U.S. supports the Islamic State, Col. Steve Warren, the spokesman for Operation Inherent Resolve, said, "It's beyond ridiculous. There's clearly no one in the West who buys it, but unfortunately, this is something that a segment of the Iraqi population believes."⁸¹ The effectiveness of his repeated statements are unknown. A large segment of the regional population believes the U.S. supports the Islamic State, and our adversaries continue to propagate the conspiracy.⁸²

In America, Army Special Operations Spokesman Lt. Col. Mark Lastoria answered questions for two hours at a public forum in 2015 about the training exercise named Jade Helm. He seemed to change few minds suspicious of the military. "It's the same thing that happened in Nazi Germany: You get the people used to the troops on

⁸⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, "Joint Publication 3-61 [Public Affairs]," August 19, 2016.

⁸¹ Liz Sly, "Iraqis Think the U.S. Is in Cahoots with the Islamic State, and It Is Hurting the War," *The Washington Post*, December 2, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraqis-think-the-us-is-in-cahoots-with-isis-and-it-is-hurting-the-war/2015/12/01/d00968ec-9243-11e5-befa-99ceebcbb272_story.html.

⁸² David Brennan, "America Created ISIS, Top Iranian Official Claims," *Newsweek*, June 22, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/america-created-isis-top-iranian-official-claims-990634>.

the street, the appearance of uniformed troops and the militarization of the police. They're gathering intelligence. That's what they're doing. And they're moving logistics in place for martial law. That's my feeling. Now, I could be wrong. I hope I am wrong. I hope I'm a 'conspiracy theorist,'" said Bob Wells, a resident where special operations soldiers planned to train.⁸³ Mark spent several weeks travelling through Texas, holding town-hall meetings and making statements, but we can't determine if he changed belief with the people who believed this conspiracy. Although the Jade Helm exercise continued, the training was changed and doubt lingered about the intentions of the U.S. military.

These examples help illustrate that speed is essential. When the information is first (or near-first) audiences are more receptive. As military doctrine explains, "Maintaining legitimacy through disseminating rapid and accurate information helps disarm the enemy's propaganda and defeats attempts by the adversary to use negative information against friendly forces."⁸⁴

Doctrine is Only a Starting Point

The public affairs fundamental, 'maximum disclosure, minimum delay' should not be interpreted to mean the military should aggressively and repeatedly release truthful information regardless of the environment. Nuance and deep understanding is required to communicate effectively.

Military doctrine does not discuss what to do when we are not first. Military public affairs regulations and training consistently directs being first and repetitive with

⁸³ Sean Collins Walsh, "Meeting Does Little to Sway Critics of Army Training in Bastrop County," *Austin American-Statesman*, September 23, 2016, <https://www.statesman.com/NEWS/20160923/Meeting-does-little-to-sway-critics-of-Army-training-in-Bastrop-County>.

⁸⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, "Joint Publication 3-61 [Public Affairs]," August 19, 2016.

information but does not address actions to take when the narrative is already formed. Simply releasing more information quickly will not change already formed beliefs, these actions may even cement negative, already existing beliefs. As we've determined, if an audience already believes an alternative version of the truth, a denial of their belief, especially by a perceived authority can be counter-productive. Intervening by countering a conspiracy theory may backfire. "The problem with condemning conspiracy theories is that it plays into the conspiracy theorist's mind," said Viren Swami, a social psychology professor at Anglia Ruskin University in the U.K..⁸⁵

Research is mixed and does not definitively determine how best to intervene in a conspiracy.⁸⁶ As Mujib Mashal points out, "Relationships in this context matter so much." It matters for communicators to be taken seriously and to be trusted because "proving proud people wrong from behind the podium is unlikely."⁸⁷ Communicators must have exceptions for maximum disclosure, minimum delay. In a contest for belief, communication must be nuanced, creative and sensitive to the environment.

Challenge Early

Widely quoted and rarely interviewed in person, my adversary-counterpart was the Taliban's Zabihullah Mujahid. Most Afghan and western journalists consider this moniker an alias shared by as many as three people acting as the primary spokesperson. Zabihullah is widely considered an effective spokesperson for his ability to stick to the organization's primary message and to spread both accurate and false

⁸⁵ Melissa Chan, "Conspiracy Theories Might Sound Crazy, But Here's Why Experts Say We Can No Longer Ignore Them," *Time* (Time, August 15, 2019), <https://time.com/5541411/conspiracy-theories-domestic-terrorism/?amp=true>.

⁸⁶ Karen M. Douglas et al., "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," *Political Psychology* 40, no. S1 (February 2019): 3–35, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568>.

⁸⁷ Mujib Mashal, Mujib Mashal Perspective, interview by David Butler, January 18, 2020.

propaganda to his audiences. He was responsive to media queries via WhatsApp and telephone but rarely appeared in person. His proactive communication with the regional and western media often put US/NATO communicators on the defensive. Zabihullah was consistent. He stuck to the messages that U.S./NATO forces were invaders, Afghan government officials were puppets and nothing would be solved until the occupying force left Afghanistan. The tendency for communicators to label him as a mere propagandist was a mistake; he was widely quoted in the media and delivered information necessary to solidify support for the Taliban.⁸⁸ Zabihullah had a team of supporting social media followers, many of whom took more extreme positions than he did. He was savvy and managed to work around social media platforms' policies and avoid being blocked or removed from the platforms. On the rare occasion when one of his social media accounts were deleted, he was able to rebuild his accounts and followership in days.

Simultaneously, the Taliban used techniques to block and remove anti-Taliban propaganda. We considered the Taliban's audience to be their fighters and supporters.⁸⁹ They did not proactively message the average Afghan, though Taliban propaganda was often appearing in the mainstream Afghan media and sometimes in western media. The Taliban would often be the only group to present timely information. *The New York Times'* Kabul Bureau Chief, Rod Nordland, compared Zabihullah's effectiveness favorably to U.S. and NATO Forces: "Rarely are NATO communicators

⁸⁸ David Stout and Sajjad Tarakzai, "Taliban Confront Fake News and Social Media in Propaganda War," *AFP*, February 15, 2019.

⁸⁹ After Raziq was killed, the Taliban lauded the shooter and produced a martyrdom video depicting him as a hero. The Taliban never made any attempt (that we could detect) to propagate the Raziq conspiracy. A Taliban supporter said publicly, "One Raziq is worth a hundred Millers."

able to move with that sort of speed, hampered as they are by member nations' competing restrictions on the release of information, as well as by a huge military bureaucracy that is not as nimble as one man, or a small staff, with cellphones — especially when truth is no obstacle.”⁹⁰ Nordland was right. Col. Rich McNorton, who spent nearly a decade in Afghanistan as a communicator, agreed: “Public affairs was hampered by slow fact verification and the expectation of a perfect press release. The Taliban were fast and aggressive.”⁹¹ If we wanted to be effective, we had to make a change.

For years, Coalition Forces avoided directly challenging the Taliban on social media. Avoiding a direct confrontation with a propagandist is a common technique for military communicators.⁹² Instead, NATO rightly invested in the capability of Afghan government sources to provide timely and accurate information to the media to inform the population.⁹³ Regional surveys showed Taliban messaging lacked credibility with the Afghan population. Instead of attacking their credibility directly, the Coalition attempted to beat them to the truth and ignore obvious propaganda.

However, the audiences in Afghanistan, which could affect our ability to continue the mission, often seemed willing to assign some credibility to unchallenged Taliban claims, regardless of how bizarre or improbable. We watched Taliban reports of battlefield victories, Afghan security force losses and allegations of Coalition-caused civilian casualties be picked up in the Afghan media and discussed on social media,

⁹⁰ Rod Nordland, “One Voice or Many for the Taliban, but Pegged to a Single Name,” *The New York Times*, June 14, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/15/world/asia/15zabiullah.html>.

⁹¹ Richard McNorton, Perspectives of a PAO, interview by Dave Butler, January 22, 2020.

⁹² McNorton.

⁹³ Jake Tupman, “War of the Words - Afghanistan’s Information Battle,” YouTube Video, NATO, March 25, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZSKk6HwvGE>.

unchallenged and unquestioned. So we took a new approach: challenge, quickly and relentlessly. With the Raziq conspiracy ingrained in our psyche, the communications team tried to parry any misinformation in the information environment. “Not True,” I would comment on Twitter underneath a false tweet by Zabillullah. I would snap a picture of a primary Taliban propagandist tweet and tweet myself, “This is false.” We needed to address false information as early as possible. Soon, our tweets were making the nightly news in Afghanistan.⁹⁴ Afghan media celebrated this discourse and gave us credit for challenging the Taliban’s false claims. However, the U.S. Forces-Afghanistan spokesman’s Twitter account wasn’t enough to address the mass amounts of false information, rumors and gossip being spread by word of mouth and throughout the information environment. We were finally competing on social media but not enough.

We built a small army of social media supporters using NATO authorities to challenge lower-level claims and bolster the factual narrative. Our social media supporters consisted of repurposed local-Afghan hires formerly employed as writers for the NATO-run radio station. About twenty-five Afghan men gained social media personalities and began propagating factual information and refuting Taliban claims. At varying levels of success, we became more effective every day. These soldiers on the information battlefield became a small but effective operation.

Under Miller’s direction, the relationship-based communication and shared understanding discussed earlier enabled us to succeed. Through relationships, often requested by our contacts through the WhatsApp groups, we started proactively

⁹⁴ Ayaz Gul, “US, Taliban Blame Each Other for Acting Against Afghan Peace,” *Voice of America*, May 19, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/us-taliban-blame-each-other-acting-against-afghan-peace>.

appearing in the Afghan media with purpose. The Afghan people get their news mainly from relatives and friends so we had to challenge country-wide and we needed authentic voices to do it.⁹⁵ In cooperation with the Afghan Ministries of Defense and Interior, I, as the U.S. Forces Spokesman and German Colonel Knut Peters as the NATO Spokesman appeared in Afghan media as necessary. We were purposeful to show support for the Afghan security forces and to directly challenge and refute dangerous false claims by the Taliban and others. We were also careful to ensure the Ministries of Defense and Interior spoke publicly, refuted the Taliban and informed the public of their successes.

After just a few months we were postured to mitigate another Raziq-type conspiracy and we were actively communicating our information in a constructive way. Our technique of relationship-based communication was mature with rich crosstalk between U.S./NATO communicators, Afghan media, Afghan leaders, and Afghan community influencers. Outside of an official spokesperson using traditional and social media, we used these forums to communicate. If the U.S./NATO wanted to convey information to the Afghan populace, we communicated through informal meetings and WhatsApp; commanders would relay the same information as they met with their counterparts. Soon we were taking Taliban disinformation, misinformation and rumors head-on, personally and at their inception. Both international and Afghan audiences received more balanced information, faster.

⁹⁵ The Asia Foundation, "Afghanistan in 2019: A Survey of the Afghan People," https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019_Afghan_Survey_Full-Report.Pdf (The Asia Foundation, 2019).

After a combined U.S. and Afghan Forces mission in eastern Afghanistan in 2019, the Taliban attacked U.S./NATO Forces in the information environment. They made claims the U.S. provided direct support to the Islamic State. Almost immediately Iranian and Pakistani media outlets published the narrative.⁹⁶ Our Afghan media partners used the WhatsApp groups to ask for comment. It's very difficult to find the Taliban's accusations or our retort in the Afghan media; because there is none. Through our relationships, we dissuaded the Afghan media from publishing the Taliban claims.⁹⁷ As we've seen through earlier examples, a public affairs officer would normally boldly and publicly reject these claims. Training, doctrine and experience would compel us to respond, and we should if the Taliban were able to introduce their claims into the Afghan information environment. Using our trusted relationships with Afghan influencers, we contained the information to only Taliban propaganda, which our network could refute without a heavy handed, on the record response. Anecdotally compare this to another like incident months earlier, and we see not only did the U.S./NATO Forces spokesperson respond but also the U.S. Ambassador and U.S. Special Envoy.⁹⁸ We continued to learn; we challenged false information relentlessly. But an even better scenario is to prevent the false information from being introduced at all.

⁹⁶ Iran State Media, "US Troops 'Saved' Daesh Terrorists, Leaders from Taliban Siege in East Afghanistan," *PressTV*, June 22, 2019, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2019/06/22/599128/US-troops-Afghanistan-Kunar-Daesh-Taliban-operation>. ; Pakistan State Media, "US Troops 'Saved' Daesh Terrorists, Leaders Form Taliban Siege in East Afghanistan," *Pakistan Defence*, June 22, 2019, <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/us-troops-saved-daesh-terrorists-leaders-form-taliban-siege-in-east-afghanistan.624332/>.

⁹⁷ In this instance, Sgt. First Class Richardson personally called every Afghan media contact and asked them not to publish.

⁹⁸ "US Envoy, Resolute Support Reject Claims Of Supporting Daesh | TOLONews," *TOLONews*, March 18, 2018, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/american-envoy-rejects-claims-us-supporting-daesh>.

A Communicator's Place

What happens in the information battlespace is often as important, or more important, than what happens on the ground. Strategies are achieved or lost through information. Organizations can no longer afford to consider communication only during times of crisis. In today's ever-evolving information landscape, communication, and the professionals who practice it, are increasingly important to the success of an entire organization. Military doctrine, corporate practice, and academic research conclude that communication professionals should be part of and contribute to the strategic management of the organizations they serve. As a result, increasing numbers of successful corporations and military units include chief communicators in the C Suite or Command Group and consult them in decision making, and allow greater access to information and afford them resources to succeed.⁹⁹

Secretary Condoleezza Rice and Dr. Amy Zegart discuss the political risk organizations face in the modern era due to increased global connectedness and the speed of information. They conclude that organizations that take the risk seriously and apply "a senior driven approach" will better address and recover from inevitable crises.¹⁰⁰ Sean McFate in *The New Rules of War* nicely summarizes the importance of information: "In modern warfare, influence is more potent than bullets...Weaponizing influence and controlling the narrative of the conflict will help us win future wars."¹⁰¹ Miller knew and understood the importance of fast and accurate communication, "Our

⁹⁹ Michael Schoenfeld, Series: Chief Communication Officers (Duke Vice President for Communications), February 11, 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Condoleezza Rice and Amy Zegart, *Political Risk : How Businesses and Organizations Can Anticipate Global Insecurity* (New York, Ny: Twelve, Hachette Book Group, 2018).

¹⁰¹ Sean Mcfate, *The New Rules of War : Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder* (New York, Ny: William Morrow, An Imprint Of Harpercollins Publishers, 2019).

[holistic] efforts are either consolidated or squandered through communication in the information space.”¹⁰²

Most academic research supports the view that, "Excellent public relations requires that the top practitioner in any organization participate in management decision making,"¹⁰³ since public relations practitioners are uniquely positioned to defend and protect an organization's reputation.¹⁰⁴ Military doctrine directs public affairs officers to be part of the commander's personal staff and "...should not be delegated or subordinate to any other staff function below the command group." Public affairs officers are the "primary coordinator for communication integration and alignment."¹⁰⁵

There are many current examples of a communicator's leadership in organizational management. Both the U.S. Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs meet with their communicators several times a day and travel with them, globally. Former Secretary of Defense Mattis' chief communicator, Guy Snodgrass, was the original drafter of the 2017 National Defense Strategy.¹⁰⁶ President Obama's chief communicator, Ben Rhodes, was called "the single most influential voice shaping American foreign policy aside from POTUS himself."¹⁰⁷ Stephen Miller,

¹⁰² Austin Scott Miller, Miller's View of the Information Environment, interview by David Butler, February 6, 2020.

¹⁰³ Jon White and David Dozier, "Public Relations and Management Decision Making," in *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, ed. James Grunig (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1992).

¹⁰⁴ Dirk Gibson, Jerra Gonzales, and Jaclynn Castanon, "The Importance of Reputation and the Role of Public Relations," *Public Relations Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (September 22, 2006), https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A164587500/ITOF?u=duke_perkins&sid=ITOF&xid=2a09859a.

¹⁰⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, "Joint Publication 3-61 [Public Affairs]," August 19, 2016.

¹⁰⁶ Guy M Snodgrass, *Holding the Line : Inside Trump's Pentagon with Secretary Mattis* (New York: Sentinel, 2019).

¹⁰⁷ David Samuels, "The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign-Policy Guru," *The New York Times*, May 5, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html>.

President Trump's communication advisor, is known to be the president's "right-hand policy man."¹⁰⁸

Historical research specifically covering military public affairs has painted an unfortunate scene of inadequate training, poor selection process and insufficient career development.¹⁰⁹ Our military must get this right. Public communication exists to maintain the resources, support and authority to protect our country. Squandering the skills of public affairs officers, or sending poorly trained, ill-equipped public affairs officers to the force puts our country and its citizens at risk.

The military may be changing to use its chief communicators more effectively. In an anecdotal survey of about 100 military public affairs personnel conducted on February 1st, 2020, using SurveyMonkey, nearly 80% reported having direct and easy access to the command, and almost 80% said they participate in the regular decision making or management of their parent organization. This survey data is encouraging and invites more study. Perhaps commanders are waking to the importance of

¹⁰⁸ Stephen Miller, former Communications Director for Senator Jeff Sessions is identified by Secretary Mattis' Communication Director as President Trump's Communications Director. Guy M Snodgrass, *Holding the Line : Inside Trump's Pentagon with Secretary Mattis* (New York: Sentinel, 2019).

"...right hand policy man." Cited from Michal Kranz and Ellen Cranley, "How Stephen Miller Became Trump's Trusted Adviser: Bio, Photos, Career - Business Insider," Business Insider (Business Insider, November 15, 2019), <https://www.businessinsider.com/who-is-stephen-miller-trump-speechwriter-immigration-adviser-2018-1>.

¹⁰⁹ The earliest studies on military public affairs show public affairs practitioners spending more time reacting to communication requirements rather than planning or counseling leadership and management, despite their desire to do so. This finding, nearly 30 years later, is still an issue among military public affairs practitioners today. More recent studies suggest public affairs officers are ill-equipped, due to inadequate development or training. Most recently, Army public affairs officer Chase Spears concluded in a thesis, "the current model of employing [Army] public affairs does not meet the requirements of a formalized profession, leaving commanders without a capability that can be fully competitive with hostile actors, nor that is equivalent to basic capabilities of industry public relations." ; Lowndes F. Stephens, "Political Socialization of the American Soldier," *Armed Forces & Society* 9, no. 4 (July 1983): 595–632, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327x8300900405>. ; Patrick Seiber, "Are Army Public Affairs Officers Trained and Educated to Meet the Challenges of the Contemporary Information Environment?" (2007). ; Chase Spears, "Evaluating the Professional Status of the U.S. Army's Public Affairs Program" (2019).

information or potentially public affairs officers are arriving to the force better ready to compete in the complexities of information warfare. In any case our military must advance this potentially positive momentum.

John Kirby, a Navy public affairs officer who went on to become a rear admiral, the senior Department of Defense and later the Department of State spokesperson, explains the need to prioritize public affairs: “It is time to think of public affairs in a new way. The speed at which the world communicates, the ever-present threat of asymmetric warfare, and the increasingly important role of domestic and international support for military operations make public affairs a real force multiplier. It simply cannot be ignored.”¹¹⁰

That was our experience in Afghanistan. The information battlefield was complex, fast and nuanced; information warfare consistently threatened our strategic ends of achieving a political solution. Our experience started with Miller’s decision to put his communicator in the line of fire. “The public affairs officer should have routine and direct access to the commander; there can be no buffer. They should be in the same space, at the same time.”¹¹¹ During time of crisis, when our mission and strategy was potentially at its greatest threat, Miller positioned the communicators to understand and act. Our communication team, when faced with this crisis, was able to build on our experience and expand our communication ability to defend and bolster the mission.

¹¹⁰ John Kirby, “Helping Shape Today’ s Battlefield: Public Affairs as an Operational Function,” [Http://Www.Ndu.Edu/Inss/Books/Books%20-%202000/Essays2000/Essays02.Pdf](http://www.ndu.edu/inss/books/books%20-%202000/essays2000/essays02.pdf) (Naval War College, 2000).

¹¹¹ Austin Scott Miller, Miller’s View of the Information Environment, interview by David Butler, February 6, 2020.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of Raziq's death we observed a communication crisis which threatened our strategic mission. From the fog of war, we were thrust into the fog of friction and misinformation – where, despite our doctrinally correct efforts to inform with truth, facts lost their place facts lose their place and a population rationalized an unexpected and damaging belief. This event reveals there is a lot we still do not understand. In today's information environment certain anecdotes achieve viral qualities and cement belief; popular beliefs can pose strategic risk. Conspiracy theories and rumors can move quickly from the fringe of a population to the center, no longer confined to simply marginalized groups fighting a losing battle against elites. Already formed beliefs, regardless of their factual merit, are harder to discount. Certain anecdotes, narratives, stories and rumors must be acted upon, some can be ignored. We do not have a formula to determine the empirical qualities that propel an anecdote into virality. We do not have the tools to alert us when this is happening. To decide where to expend resources and take action, communicators must be as close to the information front lines as possible. They must have an intimate understanding of their organization and its operations while simultaneously observing the adversary's communication and be in close touch with popular sentiment. Public affairs officers in combat must operate at the intersection between the free-press, the public, the enemy, influence operations, violence, transparency and spin.

In this case, we learned to operate best through personalized-local relationships as opposed to traditional, formal communication activity. We understood there were limits to the practice of maximum disclosure, minimum delay. We learned that quickly and widely sharing information internally, not only makes operations more agile, but

equips communicators to compete in the information environment. We must continue to invest in the military's communication capabilities, giving commanders the confidence to enable their chief communicator to be successful.

"Belief" is a complicated venue and facts are subject to interpretation. Our military's communicators must be a savvy lot, supported by their commanders and capable of traversing crisis to crisis in a world of unknown variables and infinite competitors. Our nation's defense depends on it.¹¹²

¹¹² As an epilogue, I am submitting this paper during the COVID-19 pandemic, a declared national emergency. As officials communicate to protect the public, nefarious actors attempt to spread disinformation. Public officials responded. The fight for belief continues.

From the *Washington Post*: "The false texts spread so widely that on Sunday night the White House's National Security Council, fearing the texts were an attempt to spook the stock market as it opened Monday, decided to directly debunk the misleading claims in a Twitter post: "Text message rumors of a national #quarantine are FAKE. There is no national lockdown."

Craig Timberg, Ellen Nakashima, and Tony Romm, "In Fast-Moving Pandemic, Sources of Falsehoods Spread by Text, Email, WhatsApp and TikTok Elude Authorities," *The Washington Post*, March 16, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/03/16/disinfo-texts-trump-quarantine/>.