The Pentagon and Independent Media—an Update
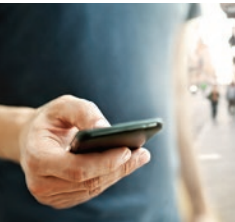
BY PETER CARY

November 2015

CIMA

CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ASSISTANCE

National Endowment for Democracy
Supporting freedom around the world

The Pentagon and Independent Media—an Update
NOVEMBER 2015

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Introduction

T he U.S. Defense Department has long had an uneasy relationship with independent media. On the one hand, it needs the trusted voice of media to portray U.S. military activities in a positive light, both to maintain the support of citizens at home and to help fight its battles abroad. And to the extent that U.S. military intervention serves as a lever to encourage and create democracies, the support of free and independent media in those countries should be part of the plan. On the other hand, an unfettered media may be critical of the U.S. military and its allies, making its operations more difficult, losing it support at home or overseas, and even giving comfort to the enemy.

Such tensions came into sharp focus during the heat of the U.S. military's participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan when the U.S. military felt the need to use media to shape the battlefield. While the U.S. State Department and USAID, as well as European governments and NGOs, were working to create free and independent media outlets in these countries, the U.S. military's information operations at times were at odds with their efforts.

A report issued by CIMA in 2010, *The Pentagon, Information Operations, and International Media Development,* covered in great detail information operations activities of the Department of Defense (DoD) that caused tensions and difficulties for independent media and its developers. The activities included creating "good news" stories under fictitious bylines and placing them in media in Iraq; paying handsome sums to fledgling radio stations in Afghanistan to run military messaging, in some cases eroding their credibility; creating eight news and information websites targeting global conflict regions, an action thought by some to have veered way too far into the realm of public diplomacy, the province of the State Department or the Broadcasting Board of Governors. These and other activities occurred while—and perhaps because—the information operations apparatus at DoD was becoming an octopus with tentacles in a dozen agencies, with no one person in charge, and a budget that was nearly impossible to track and parse.[1]

But since that report was issued in 2010 a lot has changed. Information operations activity in the DoD has been reined in, its structure rationalized. The eight global news and information websites, which seemed too much like public diplomacy, have been taken down. And incidents of working at cross purposes have been significantly reduced
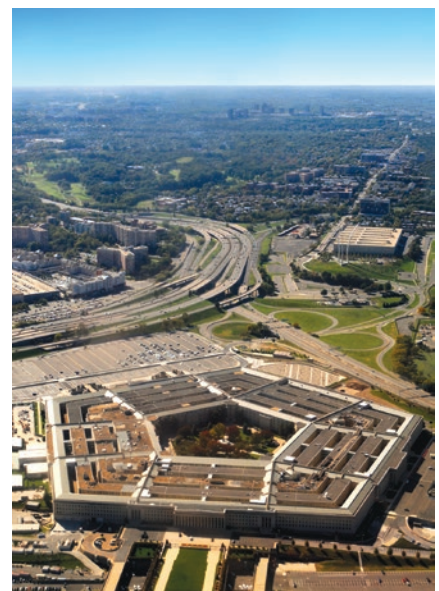
A report issued by CIMA in 2010, covered in great detail information operations activities of the Department of Defense (DoD) that caused tensions and difficulties for independent media and its developers. Since then a lot has changed.

New media challenges for the DoD have emerged. One has been divining how to best use the Internet and social media to combat enemies like al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and the Islamic State (IS or ISIS) in cyberspace.

in Afghanistan and Iraq, partly because of the diminished U.S. military presence there and a decrease in warfighting activities, and partly because the media in these countries are less fragile than before. (It should also be noted that the hot wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were somewhat unique in that battles were being fought in the same places where NGOs were trying to build civil society, making military-NGO conflicts likely, if not inevitable.) It is also likely that the Pentagon paid attention to criticism generated by various media-related blunders and took corrective action.

Yet with the hot wars behind it, at least for the moment, new media challenges for the DoD have emerged. One has been divining how to best use the Internet and social media to combat enemies like al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and the Islamic State (IS or ISIS) in cyberspace. Another has been deciding how to incorporate social media into the personal and professional lives of soldiers and sailors.

Concerns by those in the media development business have shifted also. Gone are the days of complaints about information operations and psychological operations (PSYOPS) undermining media development being pursued by USAID and its contractors. But those have been replaced by broader concerns that the U.S government overall may now be too focused on counter-messaging at the expense of independent media development. "We are concerned that there is an increasing shift away from supporting genuinely independent media towards what might be termed counter-propaganda and promoting counter narratives," says James Deane, director of policy and learning at BBC Media Action.[2]

The Information Operations Footprint Shrinks...

When the Defense Department presented its budget for 2010, some congressional staffers wondered whether DoD had lost control of its information operations. Just for starters, the budget was packed with terminology such as "strategic communications," "information operations," "psychological operations" that were not well defined. In addition, when the DoD totaled its needs in this field it came up with $988 million, but it quickly revised the number to $626.2 million upon questioning from Congress.

A close look at the budget suggested a reason for the confusion—a plethora of information activities scattered across a dozen different commands, with no single designated overseer. Meanwhile, contractors hired by the various information operations commands were producing work that too often was clumsy or embarrassing, some of which undermined the work of independent media developers, and some of which strayed into the arena of public diplomacy.[3]

On January 25, 2011, Defense Secretary Robert Gates issued a memorandum that tightened the reins on these activities. It set aside the use of the term "strategic communications," clarified the definition of information operations, assigned its various branches to specific commands and it placed the entire realm under the oversight of one person, the under secretary of defense for policy. The branch of information operations that had historically collided with independent media and media development—psychological operations or PSYOPS— was re-named Military Information Support Operations (MISO) and was put under the control of one agency, the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL.[4]

In 2011, psychological operations (PSYOPS) was re-named Military Information Support Operations (MISO) and was put under the control of one agency, the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM).

Change in Information Operations (IO) Budget from 2009 to 2016

2009 $580 MILLION

2016 $159.1 MILLION

0       $100M $200M $300M $400M $500M $600M
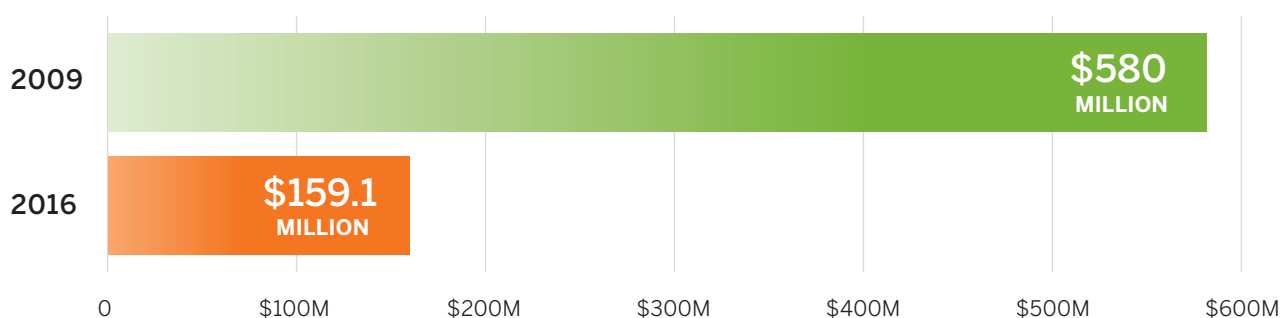
Information Operations (IO) 2016 Budget Allocations

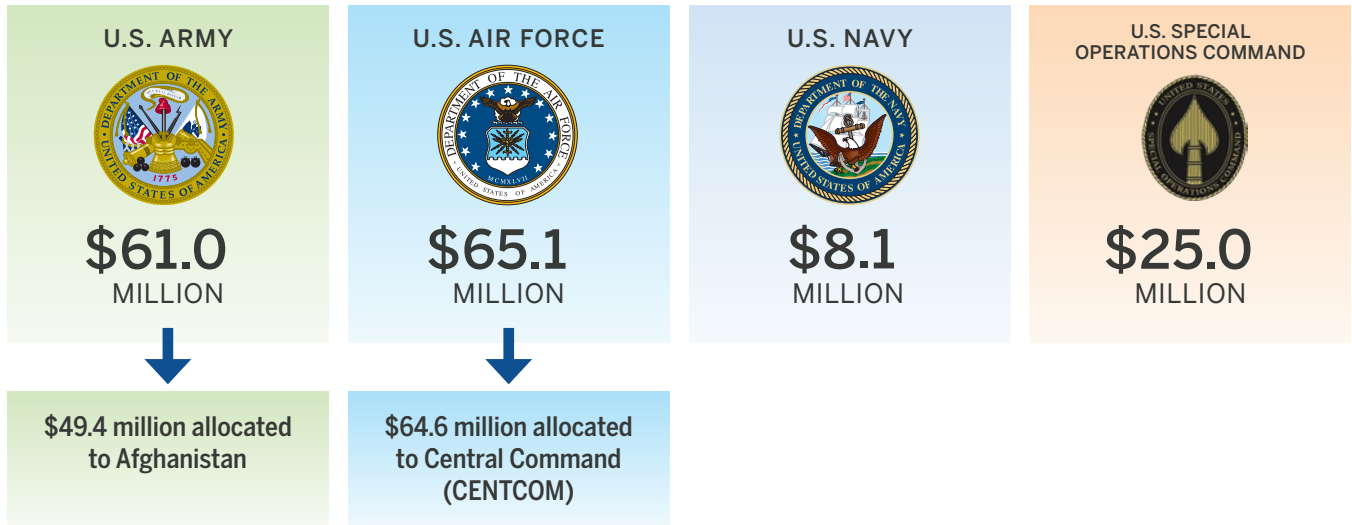| U.S. ARMY	U.S. AIR FORCE	U.S. NAVY	U.S. SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND
$61.0 MILLION	**$65.1** MILLION	**$8.1** MILLION	**$25.0** MILLION

$49.4 million allocated to Afghanistan

$64.6 million allocated to Central Command (CENTCOM)

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The organizational tightening coincided with the drawdown of U.S. troops from both Iraq and Afghanistan, and both resulted in a shrinking of the information operations (IO) budget. From a peak of about $580 million in 2009, IO funding declined to $159.1 million in 2016. For the 2016 budget year, funds are allocated as follows: $61.0 million for the Army, $65.1 million for the Air Force, $8.1 million for the Navy, and $25.0 million for U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM or SOCOM). The greatest part of the Air Force allocation—$64.6 million—goes to Central Command, or CENTCOM. The greatest part of the Army's IO budget—$49.4 million—was allocated for Afghanistan.[5]

Meanwhile, the number of, U.S. troops has shrunk from a peak of 170,000 in Iraq to 3,400 this year.[6] In Afghanistan, the international force once known as ISAF has gone from a peak of 140,000 in 2011 to 13,195 in 2015 (the U.S portion went from 100,000 to 6,840) and has moved into a non-combat "train, advise and assist" role.[7] This means that few U.S. forces are involved in combat and fewer Military Information Support Operations are actively supporting them.

...As Independent Media Mature

At the same time, the media outlets developed by NGOs in these war-torn lands have matured. Iraq, where the DoD spent $200 million in what was considered a wasteful and somewhat ineffective attempt to refurbish a national media network, now has a fairly vibrant and independent commercial media sector, with "hundreds of publications and scores of radio and TV stations," BBC News reports.[8]

Iraqi media are sometimes criticized for being too partisan, but no media outlets are said to be under the thumb of the military. The state-funded Iraqi Media Network (IMN) remains more of a state broadcaster than a public service broadcaster.[9] The International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX), which had trained and supported journalists in Iraq under grants of about $25 million through 2012, is no longer working there. Leon Morse, IREX's deputy director for media development, says he has no information that any Pentagon activities are undermining media in Iraq these days.[10]

In Afghanistan, media developers had complained five years ago that the DoD and Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which were teams of military, State Department, USAID, and other agency officials, were co-opting reporters and some of the new village radio stations they were helping to establish. Internews, USAID officials, and even Wikileaks reported that the PRTs paid large sums of money (up to $6,000 a month) to the new local stations to run their messaging. Media managers in Afghanistan claimed that such practices undermined the station's claim of media independence, put the station operators in danger with the enemy, and played havoc with the business model and learning to run a radio station on a shoestring, or what the Afghan economy and advertising would reasonably support.[11]

But now those fledgling radio stations have grown up. The group of 47 independent local radio stations that Internews helped create have formed their own NGO, a content- and revenue-sharing network known as Salam Watandar (Good Morning Countrymen). It comprises 67 Afghan-owned stations in all 34 provinces. Internews is still working in Afghanistan under a $21 million five-year subcontact seeking to build sustainability and capacity in the media sector, says Josh Machleder, vice-president for Europe, Eurasia and Asia. Machleder and Amy Conlee, Internews's Afghanistan program manager, say they have no knowledge

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As the media in Afghanistan has matured, it appears that NGO work there has shifted away from creating new media outlets and more toward civil society building, media training, media management and capacity-building, and media law work.

The USAID project that Internews is part of, the **Afghan Civic Engagement Program**, is a five-year $70 million program whose goal is to promote Afghan civil society and media engagement to "enable Afghan citizens to influence policy, monitor government accountability, and serve as advocates for political reform," according to a factsheet provided by Internews. (The other partners are the Aga Khan Foundation USA and the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law.)

of U.S. military activities these days that caused concern for the local media that they deal with.[12]

Altai Consulting, in a review of Afghan media published in February 2015, gave Afghan media relatively high grades. While from time to time the government attempts to assert some influence, the report says, "for the most part the media seem untouched by government interference." Self-censorship does take place when reporting on cultural and religious matters, and also on dangerous topics such as government corruption, the report says. Assaults on journalists continue, mostly unpunished, but some commercial radio and TV continue to push the cultural limits.[13]

With more than $49 million allocated by the Pentagon for Army information operations in Afghanistan, one might wonder what it will be used for. Since MISO activities are largely secret, it is hard to know. But various reports from the past suggest the following activities: leaflet drops to reach people in remote areas; the use of radio and cellphone messaging to provide health and safety advice, tell pro-Afghan government stories, and generally connect with Afghans; encouragement of Afghans to report improvised explosive devices; and using social media (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.) to counter Taliban messaging. As ISAF has wound down, a fair amount of this activity has been transferred to the Afghan Army.

Yet with the Taliban ramping up its messaging tactics—particularly to Afghan news reporters—and the Afghan security forces responding in kind, the Afghan news media is somewhat caught in the middle. "Media is a very important tactic in the war for us, and we have to defuse the false information of the enemy," Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid told Stars and Stripes. Bombarded by press releases by both sides, the Afghan Press has grown suspicious of all claims and is reluctant to use such information, says Danish Karokhail, head of Pajhwok, one of the leading Afghan news agencies.[14]

Disappearing RIABs

As Internews was building its network of local radio stations, approximately 100 ISAF military bases in Afghanistan were running their own radio stations. Such a station came to be called a RIAB, for Radio in a Box, as they were simple portable affairs—a transmitter, a laptop, a power source, and an antenna. Often the RIABs served remote communities, providing them with music, news, and talk, and in some cases the bases hired local Afghans to do the announcing.

While the RIABs were unquestionably a main communications vehicle to reach rural Afghans, it has also been observed that Afghanis are sophisticated consumers of media and have pretty good instincts about where their radio broadcasts originate. "We hear the station's messages about the Afghan government and ISAF achievements. It is sometimes good information, but many people here assume [a station called Light FM] is run by Americans. It doesn't seem independent," Ali Mohammad Nazari, 20, a Sharana resident told *The Washington Post*, speaking of one RIAB in his province.[15]

Internews officials said in 2010 that they had hoped there would be a transition of RIABs into independent stations as the U.S. troops withdrew. But several reports indicate that, while some departing commands have given as many as 30 RIABs to the Afghan National Army, transfers to civilians have not happened. In 2012, AfghanWarNews, an aggregator of news reports, referred readers to a Defense Video and Information Distribution System video *"RIAB Disassembly at COP Sharp."* AfghanWarNew's commentary deplored the disassembly and destruction of the RIABs, "rather than turning the inexpensive and outdated equipment over to the [Afghan army] or the local provincial or district government allowing the Afghans to continue the information operations messaging that is so important in a [counter-insurgency] fight."[16]

Internews's Conlee says she had some familiarity with RIABs from a project she had worked on for a different organization in Afghanistan, and she, too, has heard that some might be turned over to Afghans. But she says she had no knowledge if that ever happened.

RIABs (for "Radio in a Box")— consisting of a transmitter, a laptop, a power source, and an antenna—were a main communications vehicle to reach rural Afghans, providing them with music, news, and talk.

Websites Taken Down

In a separate and unrelated move, the DoD also dismantled another news and information system—one that aimed for worldwide reach. This was the Trans Regional Web Initiative, a family of at least eight news and information websites directed at eight different regions of the world.

Using the National Defense Authorization Act, DoD closed the Trans Regional Web Initiative, a family of at least eight news and information websites directed at eight different regions of the world.

Each website had its own look and its own web identity. One, offered in English, Spanish and Portuguese, targeted Latin America and the Caribbean. Another, written in Arabic, targeted Iraq. Another was directed at the Maghreb. Some, like the Latin American site, seemed reasonably balanced. Others, such as the one directed at Iraqis, promulgated its news with a decidedly Western slant.

In its 2010 report on the Pentagon's information operations, CIMA pointed out that the sites were raising eyebrows if not hackles at other agencies that thought what they were doing fell under the rubric of "public diplomacy," normally the province of the State Department or the Broadcasting Board of Governors. A restricted GAO report on Military Information Support Operations in April 2013 raised similar questions. According to *USA Today,* which obtained a copy, "the report was critical of the military's limited coordination of its websites with the State Department and local embassy teams." Although some meetings have taken place, officials from the State Department told investigators that "the websites have the potential to unintentionally skew U.S. policy positions or be out of step with other U.S. government efforts in a particular country," *USA Today* quoted from the report.[17]

Not long after, an attempt was launched in Congress to kill the sites, which were costing up to $22 million a year. It failed in June 2013, on a House vote. In July 2013, however, the Senate Armed Services Committee put language in the National Defense Authorization Act to kill the sites and the act was passed on December 19, 2013.[18] President Obama signed the act, even though his administration protested that the sites were needed.

Even after the act was passed, the DoD tried to extend the lives of the websites and some lasted a year longer. The sites were moved from the control of SOCOM to various regional commands until the contractor that built the sites, General Dynamics, was awarded $1.86 million to close them down.[19] As of the writing of this report, none of the eight sites could be found on the Internet.

Social Media, the Enemy Challenge

Yet even as the DoD was getting out of the business of running Internet sites, it was confronting new challenges in the world of social media. First the Taliban in Afghanistan, then al-Qaeda, and now the Islamic State or ISIS, launched major campaigns on the Internet and social media sites to promote their own ideologies, to deliver messages to populations under or threatened by their control, to denigrate the United States and the West, and to attract new recruits to their armies.

The Obama administration reacted by energizing an agency at the State Department known as the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC). The center, created by an executive order in 2011, had mainly been coordinating the counter-terror messaging work of others. But in 2013 its director, Alberto Fernandez, led an effort to crank out anti-terrorism videos. One, released in May 2013, spoofed al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri by showing him speaking but with State-generated words coming from his mouth.[20] Another, the centerpiece of a campaign called "Think Again. Turn Away," was a video with the first line, "Walk, don't run, to ISIS land." The video, which portrayed numerous ISIS atrocities, was an instant hit on YouTube but ran into criticism in other parts of the State Department and even the White House for not coordinating its production with the rest of the government—or even State's public affairs office.[21]

"It was a low-expense, high-profile initiative," says Fernandez of the "Walk, don't run" video. "Some people hated it, some people loved it; whether the jury is in about how effective it was, I don't think it matters. It was worth trying and did not cost a lot of money." He called it a "cheap mashup" that "got a million views…I think it was a huge success if you measure it that way," he says.[22]

By February 2015 Fernandez was out and a new director, Rashad Hussain, took the reins. His boss, Richard Stengel, the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs, told the *New York Times* in February that the center would shift gears and harness and promulgate counter-messaging by others, including the Pentagon, the Department of Homeland Security, as well as foreign governments and Muslim scholars who are critical of the Islamic State. "We're getting beaten on volume, so the only way to compete is by aggregating, curating and amplifying existing content," Stengel says. The main vehicle, apparently, would be Twitter, and CSCC planned to use more than 350 Twitter

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accounts held by agencies, embassies, and individuals throughout the State Department.[23]

When created, the CSCC was given a mission to "coordinate, orient and inform" government-wide communications activities against terrorists and violent extremists. It is supposed to "work closely" with other government agencies. But the office has only a $5 million budget, while the Pentagon has 10 times that amount that can be used for counter-messaging. Meanwhile, by one estimate, ISIS and its online supporters produce up to 90,000 tweets and other social media messages a day.[24] This huge output and the apparent success of ISIS in enlisting new recruits via social media has created a sense of urgency to produce an effective U.S. counter effort.

Thus it would come as no surprise to learn that the Pentagon is doing its own counter-messaging. Central Command, also based at MacDill, was allocated more than $55 million for information operations in 2015. It has its own counter-messaging unit, the 50-person Digital Engagement Team—not unlike CSCC's Digital Outreach Team—which blogs, tweets, and creates Facebook posts in Farsi, Pashtu, Dari, Urdu, English, Russian, and Arabic for its 20-nation area of responsibility in the Middle East.

CENTCOM says these messages reach at least 100,000 people in Central Asia and the Middle East each week and that traffic occasionally peaks much higher. According to a spokesman, CENTCOM has moved from a confrontational approach to a much more conversational style to keep its audience engaged and turn it to a pro-Western point of view. One method that CENTCOM deems successful is to share pro-Western stories in the media with target audiences rather than preaching at them. "Are you aware of this?" "Have you seen this story?" is an approach that will generate interest and conversation, which is the ultimate goal, Army Colonel J.R. Robinson told the American Forces Press Service in 2013.[25]

Since Secretary Gates's 2011 directive, Military Information Support Operations have been run out of SOCOM at MacDill Air Force Base. For 2016, SOCOM's budget request for information operations was $25 million. Budget documents indicate that the $25 million was to be used for several discrete purposes, among them translating and disseminating documents captured on the battlefield, in-depth target analysis, and polling in countries where Military Information Support Teams (MISTs) are present. But the bulk of the funding, more than $17 million, was set aside for the MISTs themselves, which deploy to embassies around the world, as well as other messaging needs generated by the military's regional commands.[26]

The MIST teams deployed by SOCOM are, by most accounts, a useful tool. Various reports put them in anywhere from 22 to 30 countries worldwide. They work with the public affairs teams of the embassies, upon request from the regional combatant commands. Most MISTs are working in Africa, according to *Front Line Public Diplomacy,* a book by William A, Rugh, a 31-year veteran of the Foreign Service. Rugh wrote that MISTs are a boon to embassies not only for their expertise and equipment, but because they can bring with them a budget of $1 million and a team of two to six persons to help an embassy reach its audiences.[27]

While the work of the MISTs is sometimes portrayed as benign—like getting out the message on a U.S.-backed health initiative—messages from embassies requesting their services suggest their main effort is classic psychological operations. A set of State Department cables posted by Wikileaks shows various embassies in the DRC, Panama, Nepal, and even Mexico requesting a MIST to aid with PSYOPS. A typical message, this one from Paraguay in 2009, asks for a MIST team to:

> ...conduct the approved Trans-Regional PSYOP Program to support stability operations whose purpose is to eliminate internal threats and deny conditions that could be exploited by terrorists, drug trafficking organizations (DTOQs), and their enablers. MIST will assist in establishing host nation control over ungoverned and under-governed spaces. MIST programs will focus on disrupting conditions that are exploited by violent extremist/IAGS activities and their enabling networks.

It is interesting that the embassy justifies the request as an enhancement to public diplomacy: "Justification: SOCSOUTH does not have the organic assets to conduct PSYOP planning to support Public Diplomacy and FID efforts."[28]

Running MISTs and other operations would seem like a pretty full plate for SOCOM, but in April 2015, the House Armed Services Committee, chaired by Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-TX), decided that the U.S. military was not doing enough. "The committee expresses concern with the information operations being conducted by the Federation of Russia in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and provides additional authority for a pilot program to support information operations and strategic communications capabilities," legislative documents stated. The committee added $30 million more to SOCOM's budget for this pilot program, and for "U.S. Special Operations Command inform and influence activities."[29] As of this writing, the budget had not yet been approved by the full Congress, however.

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>
> **— Russell Rumbaugh and Matthew Letterman,**
> *The Pentagon as Pitchman*

In CIMA's 2010 report on the Pentagon and information operations, several media experts and even Defense Secretary Gates himself asked whether the DoD was performing work that might better be the province of the State Department. This question is being raised again as MISO activity becomes concentrated in the regional commands like CENTCOM and at SOCOM—and it was raised pointedly when the Trans Regional Website Initiative was active. While those websites have disappeared, it still appears that SOCOM and the commands have latitude—see CENTCOM's Digital Engagement Team—to engage in global messaging.

"The vast bulk of the Department of Defense, particularly the military services, have resisted efforts to expand or institutionalize public diplomacy-like activities," write Russell Rumbaugh and Matthew Letterman in a report for the Stimson Center in Washington titled *The Pentagon as Pitchman.* "Our analysis found where more traditional parts of [the Department of Defense] have shied away from this mission, SOCOM has been willing to embrace it. The truth is SOCOM as such a big player in foreign policy is new, and we really don't know what all the implications of that are." Rumbaugh told *USA Today*.[30]

Social Media, the Inside Challenge

As the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and ISIS presented new challenges in cyberspace for the Pentagon, internal challenges presented themselves as well. One was the desire on the part of soldiers, sailors and civilian personnel to join the social media revolution. This posed an apparent difficulty for the Defense Department, given its needs for security, its resistance to the questioning of authority, and its requirements for secrecy in at least some matters.

As the department struggled with this challenge in the mid-2000s, the individual services adopted their own conflicting policies. And even when the DoD wrote a department-wide policy in 2007, some sites were banned from the DoD networks as being too high-risk. Then, in February 2010, the DoD reversed course and embraced social media use in all its forms.[31]

The road has been bumpy. On the one hand, social media allows military service personnel overseas to connect with their families—exchanging music, stories, and photos, even helping their children with their homework. On the other hand, it presents opportunities for serious embarrassment: criticism of commanders and operations, photos of soldiers desecrating dead enemies, the reporting of the death of comrades before their families are notified. Commanders hope that soldiers will mature into responsible users of social media and most of the problems will diminish.

But, lest anyone forget, this is a war. In January 2015, the CENTCOM Twitter account was hacked by ISIS. The account's profile page was changed to a picture of a person wearing a head-scarf, and a Tweet was published that said : "AMERICAN SOLDIERS, WE ARE COMING, WATCH YOUR BACK. ISIS." Across the top of the page was written, "CyberCaliphate." Also printed were DoD documents with contact information for some members of the military, according to CNN.[32] Some military families took down their Facebook and other accounts fearing they too could be hacked by ISIS and they could be personally targeted by ISIS sympathizers in the United States.[33]

And then there's another use for social media in the war against ISIS and others—targeting them for destruction. Aki Peritz, a former CIA counterterrorism analyst, wrote a column in Slate.com in June, 2015, criticizing the military for leaking this information. The target of his irritation was Air Force General Hawk Carlisle, who, according to Peritz, told a breakfast meeting in Washington about how the Air Force guided three bombs into an ISIS command structure after an ISIS soldier posted a photo or video of himself standing in front of the building and the Air Force determined its location.[34]
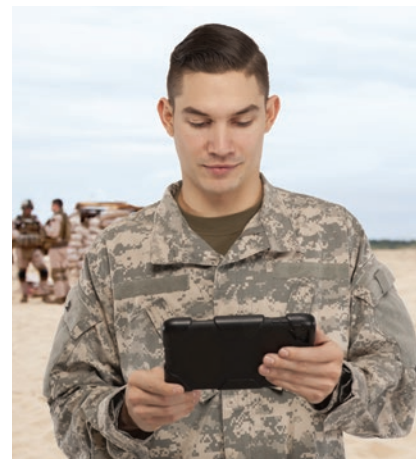
Social media allows military service personnel overseas to connect with their families. But it presents opportunities for serious embarrassment. Commanders hope that soldiers will mature into responsible users of social media and most of the problems will diminish.

New Wars, New Concerns

While the Pentagon undertakes new forays into media—tweeting, Facebooking, Instagramming, and the like—and while it maintains a MISO presence to support troops in battle, the collisions between independent media and Pentagon media operations seem to have diminished. But the new emphasis at the DoD on counter-messaging and its new focus on winning the media wars may have brought new challenges for media developers.

There were ongoing discussions at the State Department about the best approach in Syria: whether to do social media counter-messaging, whether to do more traditional media development, or whether to fund the media efforts of the opposition—or not.

IREX's Morse, for instance, notes that while working on a project in Syria he saw U.S. efforts directed not so much at creation or support of independent media as support for existing media outlets, mainly radio stations that could be counted on for their opposition to the Assad regime. "Parallel to the military conflict has been an intense media war being waged by the different sides in the conflict," states a white paper by the Global Forum for Media Development. The outlets on both sides do not pursue "the essential need for Syrian citizens to have access to accurate, independent and professional news and information," the report says.[35]

Morse says the State Department, starting in 2012, provided direct funding to a number of Syrian media groups, but the funding was short term and was not really for media development. The stations supported—they were given stipends of perhaps five, ten, or fifteen thousand dollars—were ones that were either "opposition or opposition-leaning," Morse says. In their day-to-day news coverage they were reasonably independent, Morse says but asks, "Were they critical of the U.S. or the West in the Syrian effort?" In his view, what the State Department backed in Syria shows a "lack of understanding of what a good fourth estate can accomplish."[36]

Mark Whitehouse, who was an official at IREX during the period Morse was discussing (he is now an independent media consultant) shares Morse's concerns. He says he understood there were ongoing discussions at the State Department about the best approach in Syria: whether to do social media counter-messaging, whether to do more traditional media development, or whether to fund the media efforts of the opposition—or not. In the media development community, he says, "the general consensus is that the most effective approach is for Syrians to talk to Syrians—for moderate Syrian journalists and citizen-journalists to have a voice. That, in the long run, is the most effective strategy to counter extremism."[37]

Similar concerns are voiced by Deane, of BBC Media Action. He says there is a sense, as the United States engages in information warfare from Ukraine to Iraq to Syria, that it has shifted its focus "away from supporting genuinely independent media towards what might be termed counter-propaganda and promoting counter narratives." The source of this effort, he offers, is not necessarily military and likely includes diplomatic and development considerations. In Iraq, it can be seen as support to the Abadi government to get its message out. All this, he says, may fall under the rubric of counter-terrorism and may not actually undermine local media but it is not media development. "We would argue that continuing to invest in people having access to genuinely independent, balanced news and platforms for public debate is a better response to this situation than investing purely in what some would call counter-propaganda. I think that's an argument that is still to be won."[38] Whitehouse's assessment is a bit direr: "The worry in the media development community is that media development is losing out and that counter-propaganda will be winning," he said.

Morse voices one other broader concern—that a country's human rights stance or record could diminish in importance versus its position as an ally in the war against Islamic terrorism. He cites Ethiopia as an example of a country that had passed laws that made it nearly impossible for its NGOs to receive outside funding. Yet Ethiopia provides a base for U.S. drones that overfly Somalia, so it can push back against criticism from the State Department and USAID over its human rights record. In Morse's view, "the war on terror has really undercut our ability to leverage human rights-type work, including media freedom."

> *"The worry in the media development community is that media development is losing out and that counter-propaganda will be winning."*
>
> **– Mark Whitehouse**

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