

Navigating through the Internet Cultural Terrain

When every action has the ability to be scrutinized by the world, we must change how we think about every aspect of our next war, from combat to humanitarian operations

by Maj Christopher Jasperson

Fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan for the last couple of decades has shown the country many constants and variables in our enemies. On one hand, opposing forces remain just as determined and cunning as ever. On the other, we have seen an evolution of their tactics with an increase in technology. We have understood how important culture is to our operational decision making. Operating in the modern world will have its own set of modern problems. In the future fight against a peer threat, considerations of the internet culture will be just as important as, if not more so than, the traditional culture. The concept of the “global village” has become truer with respect to peer competitors. The rapid dissemination of information across the internet, especially social media, has helped spread common ideas around the world. As these ideas affect our beliefs and therefore shape our decisions, we will find ourselves operating in a hybrid environment where a common internet culture demands social justice but is inherently linked to local customs as well. The internet has irreversibly changed our ability to conduct combat, information, and civil affairs operations.

In the recent wars, we developed the idea of the *strategic corporal*, the young Marine whose once simple actions had the ability to affect the strategic environment. This concept has only grown in magnitude. When we fight against a peer threat, every single human in the civil environment will have reasonable access to a camera, the internet, and therefore the entire world. Emerging

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worldwide internet technologies, such as Starlink, ensure it will be impossible to prevent constant connection to the outside world.¹ Even if we had the ability to jam such communications, is it legal to do so? In 2011, the United Nations declared that disconnecting people from the internet is a human rights violation.² The report goes further to explain that disabling the internet to quell a protest or civil unrest is also a

violation. Syria allegedly cut two-thirds of its internet access that year.

With such broad access to the internet, the idea of “River City” for our own forces will become obsolete. We will need to learn to operate like aviation squadrons after a mishap. There is no authority to confiscate phones, but the whole unit is to operate in a trusted but ultimately unenforceable communications blackout.

On top of individual access, civilian agencies will uncover much about our assets. Commercial entities recently discovered a hidden Chinese submarine base built into ocean cliffs.³ As early as 2009, these companies have stumbled upon U.S. military secrets, like the shape and design of nuclear submarine propellers.⁴



Social media, smart phones, and the internet have magnified the impact of the strategic corporal. (Photo by David Bedard.)

We must assume every action of every Marine will be available for scrutiny in the global popular court. Operational use of classification will essentially end at the line of departure as all maneuvers can be observed and reviewed by billions of eyes. Using force to maintain a cloak of secrecy over our operations will only make the issue worse. Imagine a platoon on a routine search of a neighborhood where four cameras from each home are recording the entire evolution. Such filming actions may have been considered a threat in the 2000s, but under the lens of the common internet culture, this is nothing abnormal and is even encouraged to promote accountability. The prevalence of dash-cams and doorbell cameras with a constant upload to the internet is culturally expected. On a day-to-day basis, this is nowhere near a hostile act or hostile intent. Escalation of force to prevent recording, or confiscation of said devices, would result in a strategic disaster with regard to the trust of the civil population.

Without having a significantly modern military example of this, we can extrapolate an older one. Consider the British intervention in Northern Ireland. It was already a public affairs disaster for the British Government with only verbal reports of its violent searches of homes and soldiers smashing pictures of the Pope. These types of actions in the modern world would have unfathomable consequences for whatever strategy is in place, regardless of its merit.

In June 2017, a video was recorded of white phosphorous artillery shells bursting above a neighborhood near Mosul.⁵ This was months after the United States publicly released information about an artillery battalion arriving in the region to aid in the fight against Islamic State (IS). The IS-linked news agency Amaq also released a similar video with undetermined legitimacy. However, the latter video was distributed throughout the internet to the song “Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” by Mr. Rogers. The ensuing viral spread brought it to the attention of millions who were not necessarily interested in reviewing its validity. The future fight for the nar-

rative will be based on misinformation and flooding of the information space more rapidly than we can keep up.

In an attempt to control the narrative, Russia recently released footage of a burned POW camp, stating Ukraine struck it with the HIMARS it received from the United States. Shortly thereafter, YouTuber Ryan McBeth picked apart the footage and pointed out the lack of identifying shell fragments and building damage inconsistent with a rocket attack. His theory is that Russia locked the doors and deliberately lit the building on fire. This video was viewed over three million times in the first two months of its release. There will be no shortage of professional and amateur analysts ready to screen any footage of the future battlefield.

There are two main ways we can maintain a foothold in the future information space. First, we must maintain a strong reputation for honesty and honor and build upon it in the new operational area. Second, we must develop a decentralized means of releasing authority. We cannot necessarily wait for the regiment to publicly respond to the live actions of a squad.

On 8 December 2008, a Marine jet crashed into a community a couple of miles west of MCAS Miramar, destroying a few homes and killing four civilians—all part of a Korean-American family. Immediately, Marine aircraft firefighting equipment was dispatched. Both San Diego and Marine firefighters are seen working together in the aerial photos of the incident.⁶ Marine leaders described to the media the chain of events that led to the mishap and the punishments of those responsible at each step along the way.⁷ The entire process after the mishap was incredibly effective at maintaining trust with the residents of San Diego. *The San Diego Tribune* put it most aptly that “residents were startled that the Marine Corps readily took responsibility for the crash.”⁸ A leader of the local organization calling for the shutdown of Miramar even said, “After the General’s briefing today ... I think we’re out of business.”⁹

Phrases such as, “I am unable to comment as it is an ongoing investigation”

are correct but not necessarily the best response when operating in the internet culture. The social media leaders will release their “real” story an hour after the incident. The Marine response to the mishap was exceptional and highlights how we need to handle mistakes in the future. The communication early on with the media showed that the Service was sincere and open. In the end, it did not matter who was more at fault between the pilot, CO, or maintenance officer. Just like it will not matter which Marine made a mistake. It is the entire Corps that did in the public eye. Providing that early transparency with 70 percent of the information will be more important than releasing the 100 percent accurate story a few months later.

In many regions, the information operations capability of the Marine Corps has a greater ability to bring forth our desired end state than high explosives do. It is becoming more and more critical to incorporate these effects into the same plans. Some units already utilize the fires and effects coordination cell model. In the future, we need to do it on a deeper level. The fires officer needs to integrate physical targeting, and ground and air assets. They should also be equal to the information operations officer, who integrates the information operations, cyber, and public affairs capabilities. Together, they fall under the effects coordinator, and all integrate do deliver information concurrently with explosives.

Beyond that integration at the command level, we need a more rapid way to operate in the information environment. It may not be effective to wait for a colonel or general to approve a message. Just like every unit has the authorization to employ certain ordnance with respect to the rules of engagement, a platoon or company should have access to the equipment and ROE with which to engage in their small area of responsibility.

Civil Affairs will play an integral part in the information age battlefield. Our successes and failures can change the narrative as much as the front-line actions. Therefore, we must internalize economic considerations. Both natural and manmade disasters are destructive

to local economies. Without proper forethought, our actions in the name of aid can make it worse. I once heard an interesting story about the aid sent to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. So many Americans were eager to support people that had lost everything, that they sent everything. Every day, truckloads of clothes were dropped on the beach for Haitians to pick through. At the end of the day, the clothes were shipped to the dump and the process was repeated. This type of aid ruined the once robust textile economy of Haiti. The lack of demand for manufacturing was worsened by the type of aid sent. This created a greater unemployment crisis.

We must understand how and when we will be utilized in a civil affairs response. The goal of USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance is to reestablish the affected economy as soon as possible. When we use our heavy lift assets to deliver supplies at the wrong time, we remove the opportunity for a local trucker to be paid for the same service. If we use our Ospreys to drop a few pallets of food into a local crowd, we lose the ability for non-governmental organizations to put the able-bodied to work in their own areas in exchange for the same food. Using military equipment to fill a role reasonably filled by a local entity will result in an initial public relations benefit but will be a long-term detriment to our mission. We will run the risk of initiating a welfare state. When speaking about his experiences with providing welfare, Dale Renlund argues, "The greater the distance between the giver and the receiver, the more the receiver develops a sense of entitlement."¹⁰ In other words, aid provided from the far-off U.S. Government can have a negative effect long term. The Marine merely handing over the aid does not have a personal connection. By working together, this connection develops and helps prevent that sense of entitlement. It may not be the Marine Corps' place to conduct these exchanges of work for food, but when the disaster is large enough that the role falls to us, will we be prepared? Perhaps the ideal situation is an engineer platoon integrated with a local civilian work-



Marines delivering humanitarian aid have the chance to connect with the population and make the power and influence of the United States real to them. (Photo by LCpl Caleb Stelter.)

force with everybody working together. While the legal issues of this idea are at the DOD level and above, there may be a way for the Corps to contract with locals in our area of operations immediately after a disaster to establish some form of economic development. If we provide refugees shelter and sustenance, we can then hire them to help build more shelters for incoming displaced persons. Things like this are generally outside the realm of acceptable conduct during a crisis for a Marine unit, but when anticipating a disaster displacing millions of people, it is the most effective way to provide security and dignity to those affected.

A recent historical example provides insight into some economic considerations when conducting these civil-affairs operations. The *New York Times* published an article highlighting the brutal but surprisingly effective rule of IS. After IS captured Mosul, Iraq in 2014, their immediate goal was to maintain a functioning government and society while they enforced the standards of their faith. All government workers were forced to return to their jobs under the threat of punishment. In one part of the article, they describe how IS streamlined the agriculture department. They took the weeks-long process for a civilian to rent a plot of government land for farming and reduced it to an afternoon task. Under the threat of violence, roads were repaired and cities were cleaned of trash. In another

Iraqi city, IS forced a group of electrical engineers to upgrade the power grid into a very reliable system. When the Iraqi government finally took control of that city in 2017, one of the first things they did was remove IS-installed circuit breakers. The reliability was lost, and power shortages continued: "The irony that it had taken a terrorist group to fix one of the town's longstanding grievances was not lost on its citizens."¹¹

The challenge for us in the future of civil affairs is finding a way to address these grievances and keep the population at work without the same brutal tactics. If we can accomplish those actions, we will build an incredible level of trust that will give unusual access to the cognitive civil environment.

Conversely, the U.S. decision to disband the Iraqi army and rebuild it from scratch in the early days of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM contributed to the formation of IS from the newly unemployed, militarily trained, young men.¹² Obviously, there are considerations of the true loyalties of the soldiers of the Iraqi Army after it was defeated by U.S. forces. But just like we help rebuild countries after a conflict, we cannot lose sight of the individuals. When we say we are concerned about an unstable government, we are mostly concerned with what the people will do. Providing them with the security of employment is the biggest step we can take.

The Marine Corps needs experts. But how many do we have? The oft-

quoted requirement of 10,000 hours shows that it takes roughly five years' worth of full-time work to attain expertise. More recent studies show that the way one practices has a significant impact on expertise.¹³ Executing high-quality training must be a priority for our supporting establishment. For a few times throughout the last couple of decades, the Navy and Marine Corps benefitted from sending medical personnel to intern at Los Angeles emergency rooms where they were exposed to gunshot and stab wounds as they would encounter in a combat environment.¹⁴ Similar programs should be created across the Marine Corps. The MOSs that would benefit from such internships are far-reaching.

The role psychology plays in the advertising world is immense. Certain colors invoke different emotional responses and help sway opinions one way or another. The way a picture is portrayed can lead your eyes across the page. This can be soothing or jarring depending on the direction in which you learned to read. These reactions are also related to local cultural aspects. Internships at an advertising firm for information operations Marine would allow for the development of these information operations skills. Likewise, the study of local film may allow messages to be more pertinent to a particular population; they would be more relatable than what is typically released.

In a large-scale humanitarian crisis, refugees will be traveling with minimal personal belongings. In a peer environment, however, many of them may have their assets in digital banking. Our civil affairs Marines must be prepared to incorporate this into a future refugee camp. Incorporating systems like our Eagle Cash and Navy Cash Card will provide a higher level of stability as crimes around physical money will be reduced. Training these Marines at banking or business institutions may be an effective way to bring that expertise into financial distribution.

When training is not available, we should source experts. I deployed once with a foreign-born Marine who grew up in his home country until he was a teenager. He routinely spoke to friends

there via social media. On this deployment, he proved to be a critical asset well above a typical translator. His intimate knowledge of local slang, both spoken and written, proved invaluable when designing messaging operations within the country. Consisting mostly of Marines reservists, the civil affairs community is well suited to these tasks. Tailoring our recruitment for the civil affairs MOS to those already employed in these desirable fields is a step in the right direction.

In a peer-based environment where the large scale is such that we find ourselves fulfilling roles well outside the typical Marine missions, we need to be prepared to accomplish those things usually done by civilian entities. The only way to stay ahead of the cumulative narrative is to build a strong reputation of trust and honesty. We must be sincere and demonstrate our concern by providing more than refugee camps. We need to economically stabilize our areas of responsibility. In the truest and most sincere way, Marines love to help. We are mentally ready to respond to any civil affairs threat in the world right now. We must ensure that we are doing the best in the most appropriate way.

Notes

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