



# *NATO's Social Media Strategic Communication in the Making*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Conoscenti (2016) I discussed the problems that NATO faced in 2014 to communicate in terms of a coherent narrative and thematic contexts<sup>1</sup>. I demonstrated that most of these problems were generated in the difficult adaptation process to the social media (SoMe) reality that affects and thus frames the military world. The tenet of this investigation, stemming from that previous research and Conoscenti (2017), is that since 2014 the NATO military have been unable to introduce specific correctives to their SoMe strategy, particularly on Facebook, thus endangering their role and strategic capabilities. In this way adversaries appropriate and exploit NATO's narratives and strategies (Pomerantsev, 2015). The Military are worried about the effects that these new forms of communication have been generating on their organisation and how these affect leadership, even at a dialogic level<sup>2</sup>. In spite of this awareness, they

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<sup>1</sup> Thematic contexts are used in content analysis to determine the narratives that are dealt with through regular patterns, i.e. the "themes" that are observed across data sets that are important for the description of a phenomenon and are associated to a specific research question. It is a way of dealing with data by focusing on the content of communicated material.

<sup>2</sup> The Military are governed by hierarchical ranks. These generate a specific discourse system that considers orders as the only accepted form of communication. Orders, by definition, are normative and, to guarantee the efficiency of the chain of command, do not envisage the possibility of objection and



are stuck in decisional processes that do not allow them to introduce the necessary correctives in a lapse of time that is suitable to the SoMe's pace. The US and their allies thus realise that their language engineering processes (Conoscenti, 2004) are less and less effective, but they are not able, as insiders, to explain why. This paper builds on the chance that I had to attend and lead, as a subject-matter expert (SME)<sup>3</sup>, the NATO working groups that are active in this specific communicative environment. This also offered me the opportunity to be a participant observer and to access specific documents of the discourse community under scrutiny. After clarifying the doctrinal<sup>4</sup> elements that frame the military operations in this field, the current NATO communication on Facebook will be analysed in contrast to their communication in 2014. This will be done in the light of the recommendations that were made by participants during the activities of the workgroups. Since these SoMe activities have been generating an intense dialogue in this specific and rather impenetrable discourse community, affecting power relations within the community itself and its target audience, i.e. public opinion, the paper also aims to document the effort of younger military generations to adapt to this new scenario<sup>5</sup>. However, literature on this topic is scarce (Matejic 2015 and Skirky 2011) and does not explicitly describe the specific problems at stake. To account for this anomaly and this work in progress, an analysis of military discourse methodology, considered as comparable to political discourse, is used. This is necessary because NATO as a discourse community is the result of the interactions between its military and civilian/political components. To achieve this goal I have blended a multimodal analysis approach (Conoscenti 2017; Norris 2011; Kress 2010) with netnography (Kozinet, Dolbec and Earley 2014). Since the NATO Facebook page is a specific case of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)<sup>6</sup> to be analysed with a Discourse Analysis perspective that incorporates content analysis (CA), this can be achieved through an extended paradigm of WebCA. In fact,

...[different] perspectives from other disciplines can be incorporated into traditional CA, while still preserving many of its essential characteristics (e.g., classification and quantification; interrater reliability assessment)[...] [T]raditional CA is referred to as Theme/Feature<sup>7</sup> Analysis to indicate the types of content it is

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thus dialogic conversation. As a consequence, forms of communication that encourage dialogue are considered a potential threat to the specific discourse system.

<sup>3</sup> This is the Military definition.

<sup>4</sup> Doctrine is defined as "Fundamental principles by which the military forces guide their actions in support of objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgement in application." Definition in *NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions used in NATO Documents and Publications* (AAP-06), 2013 edition.

<sup>5</sup> Since 2014, thanks to a turnover at Chief of Staff level, some younger officers have been serving in the specific branches object of this research. They are currently trying, with the help of civilian subject-matter experts, to introduce a different approach to this peculiar informative environment and have it accepted by senior officers, who are unfamiliar with these tools of communication.

<sup>6</sup> Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic (2004) argue how, in CMC, the boundaries of political and organisational communication are blurred.

<sup>7</sup> Please note the similarity between Herring's definition and that of *thematic contexts*.



typically used to address. Both narrow and broad CA approaches can be useful in analysing web content (Herring 2010: 239-240).

Attempting to describe this particular instance of CMC with the tools of WebCA should clarify that the current difficulties NATO is facing are generated both at the organisational and political level and are affecting the very nature of its communication. This situation derives from the doctrinal definition of NATO's Strategic Communication, confirming Risso's hypothesis (2014) that the Alliance has been unable to effectively communicate since its founding because of the lack of a specific coordinated strategy. It will be shown that this generates a conversational incoherence that is detected in its Facebook page. Since NATO's target audience on the SoMe are the millennials, an effort will be made, as recommended by Herring (2011: 345), to use an interpretive lens that considers the perspectives of this demographic group.

To achieve these goals I collected two multimodal corpora. Each of them covers the posts produced by the NATO's Facebook page during a six-month period in 2014 and 2017. Afterwards, 150 of them, for each corpus, were selected considering the number of likes, the kind of comments and the interaction, if any, generated. This paper, out of the 300 posts collected, investigates, with the tools of a multimodal analysis approach and netnography previously described, those that represent evidence of the problems that NATO's Strategic Communication in the making is currently facing. To achieve this goal it also draws on both a social semiotic multimodality approach and a DA/CA one. The selected posts, my interpretation of them and the possible correctives to be introduced, both at doctrinal level and an operational one, were then discussed with the NATO's dedicated working groups, of which I am the academic coordinator, in a number of specific seminars. Since this discourse community is very sensitive to the circulation of information and face issues, part of the data will be disclosed under the Chatham House Rule (CHR):

When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

This rule will apply to views, comments and information offered by Officers who want their identity protected and also to documents that are part of the doctrinal and theoretical framework but have not yet been publicly released<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. MILITARY DISCOURSE, INFORMATION ACTIVITIES AND THE DOCTRINE

Because of the very nature of their job and the need to guarantee the security of their members, the Military are a difficult community to study. This is why a search of the

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<sup>8</sup> In Conoscenti (2016) I discuss in more depth the methodology used to elicit and interpret data from these working groups and from the NATO's Facebook page.



main publications databases will return only a handful of titles that focus on military discourse. However, none of these are based on a direct observation of this discourse community or attempt an analysis of military CMC. In June 2013, because of my continuous interest and research activity on this topic since 1999, I had the opportunity to take part, as an SME, in a number of workshops, seminars and conferences organised by the NATO Bilateral Strategic Command<sup>9</sup> Information Operations (Info Ops) and Psychological Operations (PsyOps). Although these two branches of the military activities are considered important by the community itself, since their sphere of action is in the domain of what can be defined by the 'enemies' as propaganda, the definition of the activities themselves is not easily tracked in the NATO Official Publications. As far as Info Ops are concerned, they are not mentioned in the *NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions used in NATO Documents and Publications* (AAP-06) 2013 edition, although they are indicated as an acronym in the 2013 edition of the *NATO Glossary of Abbreviations used in NATO Documents and Publications* (AAP-15). The US Department of Defense *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (March 2017, 223) defines 'information operations' as

[t]he integrated employment, during military operations, of information-related capabilities in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision-making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own. Also called IO. See also electronic warfare; military deception; operations security; military information support operations. (JP 3-13).

The *Joint Doctrine Publication 0-01.1 United Kingdom Supplement to the NATO Terminology Database* (September 2011 edition) defines them as

[c]oordinated military activity undertaken to affect decision-makers in support of political and military objectives by influencing their will, affecting their decision-making processes and shaping their understanding, while protecting our own decision makers and processes. (JDP 3-80.1)

It is important to note the absence of the concept in the NATO doctrine since it indicates a topic on which a common definition has not yet been agreed<sup>10</sup> since the field is undergoing, given the impact of SoMe on the military side in this kind of activities, an incredible effort of adaptation to the new information environment. The United States, for example, in 2013 issued a Field Manual, the FM 3-13 *Inform and Influence Activities*, that for the first time tried to unify the Info Ops and the PsyOps under a common denomination and conceptual framework. The only official NATO

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<sup>9</sup> This Command unifies the Supreme Allied Command in Europe, based at SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe), in Mons, Belgium, and the Supreme Allied Command Transformation (ACT) in Norfolk, Virginia.

<sup>10</sup> It must be remembered that the North Atlantic Council (NAC), is the principal political decision-making body within NATO. Policies decided in the NAC are the expression of the collective will of all member countries of the Alliance since decisions are made on the basis of unanimity and common accord.



publication that offers a definition of Info Ops is the *BI-SC<sup>11</sup>NATO Information Operations Handbook* (March 2010 edition):

Information Operations (Info Ops) is a military function to provide advice and coordination of military information activities in order to create desired effects on the will, understanding and capability of adversaries, potential adversaries and other NAC approved parties in support of Alliance mission objectives.

As is evident from the NATO and national definitions, although legitimate, each country stresses the concept of *our own*, thus establishing an obstacle to a unified doctrine. This is why the wording of the NATO handbook is more general and thus palatable to the different sensitivities of the members of the Alliance.

PsyOps, on the contrary, have been present in the AAP-06 since 1994, although their definition was reviewed and modified in January 2013, when they were defined as

[p]lanned activities using methods of communication and other means directed at approved audiences in order to influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, affecting the achievement of political and military objectives (AAP-006, 2013, 2-P-10, 166).

The discrepancies present in these definitions, i.e. a non-univocal doctrinal definition of the informational environment and the desired way to manage it, is the reason why NATO's communication on the SoMe is ineffective in spite of the strategic role it attaches to the Info Ops and PsyOps. In the next section some Facebook posts published in the NATO page will be analysed.

### 3. THE NATO FACEBOOK PAGE

In a previous research (Conoscenti, 2017) I analysed the 2014 NATO SoMe communication and discussed the fact that the Alliance's message was not coherent with the medium. This emerged from my analysis and participation in closed-door meetings and workshops with key military decision-makers. The goal of these activities was to enable them to improve their communication processes while keeping in mind the characteristics of the target audience and the needs of the Alliance, namely, the necessity to build, from scratch, a new form of trust that considers engagement at the widest level possible. This must be obtained within a framework that deems the SoMe a key-element of all-encompassing strategic communication. In order to achieve this goal NATO needs not only to re-brand itself, but to be perceived as a reliable partner.

As a consequence, one of NATO's first objectives was to increase the number of its followers and improve the quality of its interaction with them. Over a two-year

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<sup>11</sup> Bilateral Strategic Command.



period (2014-2016<sup>12</sup>) the NATO Facebook page registered a 38.2% increase of followers. This figure, if considered as an absolute value, could make the day of a marketing manager. Unfortunately, in the same period, the SoMe market recorded an increase of 118.7%. Even considering the 13.8% increase of the page in 2017, figures show that the NATO Facebook page is largely underperforming and unable to generate communication that is attractive, 'influencing' and in line with the doctrinal definition of Info Ops and PsyOps. We can better understand this dynamic if we analyse single posts. Since the military need to control their accountability, in 2014 I proposed a parameter to measure it tangibly. Given that this kind of communication is a form of Public Diplomacy with the intent of influencing public opinion, I proposed the use of the 'redemption' index. In marketing terms this is the percentage that expresses the ratio between the answers/feedbacks obtained by a given 'promotional' action and the number of messages sent out. The lower the percentage, the less effective the action/message is. A reasonable benchmark for redemption in traditional marketing activities is 3-4%, while in the SoMe domain it is 8-10%.<sup>13</sup> In the specific case, the redemption is calculated dividing the 'likes' every single post is able to elicit by the total number of 'followers' present on the NATO Facebook page and transforming it into a percentage. This way of measuring the effectiveness of a message is acceptable because there is a tendency in end-users to believe that a follower is per se someone who appreciates your page or website. But this is not so. "A 'like' or a 're-tweet' is not an endorsement" is the creed of professional bloggers. In theory and ideally, every follower, the universe targeted by the page, is a potential 'like' for every published message, but it is the redemption that measures the success of the message. In fact, and especially with pages related to this kind of institution, a reasonable number of followers may be practising Open Source Intelligence, that is to say, an 'enemy' may observe and monitor the SoMe activity of the adversary in order to obtain information. Figure 1 shows a 2014-post whose redemption is very low. There are several reasons to explain why.

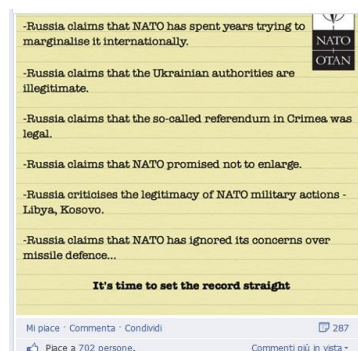


Figure 1. Redemption for NATO post = 0.16%

<sup>12</sup> This is the only measurable period since figures for 2017 are not yet available.

<sup>13</sup> This figure was indicated by Bob Pearson of W2O during a roundtable we participated in at the NATO-US Special Operations Command, Joint Senior Psychological Operations Conference, Tampa, 6 – 9 December 2016, entitled *The Psychology of Social Media*.



The content uses a language that is reminiscent of the Cold War, echoing biased old style propaganda. Moreover, it is not aligned with the target audience of *digital natives*, i.e. the 80% of Facebook users who are below 30 years of age. These are labelled *prosumers* by Anderson (2006), i.e. proactive consumers who are sophisticated analysers of content and are not happy with pre-prepared goods and solutions, even at a communicative level. At the same time they can be identified with Bennet's (2008) *actualizing citizens*, people who have a diminished sense of government obligation, a mistrust of mainstream news media and politicians, and a higher sense of self-purpose. Furthermore, the graphical treatment of the information is primitive and out-of-date for the communicative style the target audience expects from this kind of medium (Van den Broek et al. 2012). Things do not improve even when the post is about a strongly emotional event such as the one in figure 2.

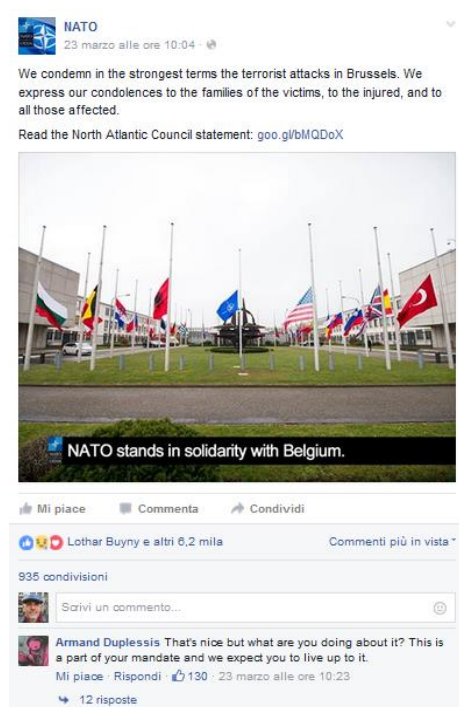


Figure 2. Redemption for NATO post = 0.56%

The post refers to the 2016 Brussels bombings. Its redemption is better than the average ones measured in 2014 that had ranged between 0.16% and 0.49%. With the new figure for followers in 2016, the average drops to a range of 0.03–0.35%. In this case the image of the flags at the NATO HQs is meant to convey the idea of grief, but in a detached and decontextualized way, since it could be an image taken for any other sad event. Furthermore, the text is but an official routinely generated one for this kind of occasion and identified by prosumers as unemotional and void of meaning. This is confirmed by the comment made by a follower who says, in a challenging way: "That's nice but what are you doing about it? This is a part of your mandate and we expect



you to live up to it.” I will later discuss NATO’s ability to properly interact with its audience; for the time being it is enough to note that none of the 12 comments this topic generated are by the page manager.

The Working Group 2 of the 2016 NATO-US Special Operations Command, Joint Senior Psychological Operations Conference, mentioned in note 10, worked on the theme: “How Can PsyOps Best Leverage Social Media in Peacetime (no Article 5) and During Military Operations?” Among its recommendations to the NATO nations the working group listed: a) To create current presence in SoMe relevant to current and potential target audiences and b) To have a NATO shared policy on SoMe. It is worth noting that the recommendations are addressed to the NATO members and not to the NATO HQs. Is this the evident expression of a hope that national practises will influence the NATO doctrine? This could be the case given that section 6 of the Conference Report<sup>14</sup> states that:

Specific recommendations were made [...] on how NATO nations can work together to mitigate and counter the negative effects of SoMe that permeate the global information environment and our respective areas of interest. Within the 28 nations of NATO [...] the challenge is that each country must individually determine how they might apply or use the recommendations to the benefit of their nation’s interests. Understandably, there are vast differences amongst nations in terms of social media policy, capabilities and capacities.

#### 4. #WEARENATO<sup>15</sup>, BUT #ISNATOSOCIAL?

This section analyses if the recommendations made to the Commanders by the working groups had effects on the production of the messages and their effectiveness.



Figure 3. Redemption for NATO post = 0.03%

<sup>14</sup> The Conference report is available at <http://www.shape.nato.int/nato-joint-senior-psyops-officers-conference-2016-/final-conference-report> (last accessed 03/11/17).

<sup>15</sup> At the time of writing this is the hashtag for the NATO Facebook page.





Figure 3 shows an unchanged situation. Redemption is still not significant and the result is discouraging since the post is associated to a video, an element that normally triggers attention and is a 'like'-generator. The text accompanying the caption in the post is a brief summary of the content of the video. Both are based, again, on a kind of neo-Cold War narrative<sup>16</sup> that is ineffective. The script of the video is mainly based on a traditional narrative that alternates static images of the Deputy Secretary General (figure 4) with black-and-white archive images from the years of the cold war (figure 5) that, together with the monochord voice of Ms Gottemoeller, make the narrative institutional, but unfit for this kind of SoMe.



Figure 4. Image from NATO Video post



Figure 5. Image from NATO Video post

Furthermore, the last twelve seconds, devoted to a kind of feminist statement on the role of women in NATO key-places<sup>17</sup> turns out to be unnatural because of the video editing and director's cut that compress the narrative and relegates it to an irrelevant position, since the most important statement is suppressed by the fading image of the Deputy Secretary General substituted by the NATO logo (figure 6 captures the transition of the two images).



Figure 6. Transition effect on key-statement on women's importance

<sup>16</sup> In Conoscenti (2017: 439-446), Section 6, *Reverse language engineering and the quantum physics rationale*, I discussed why spin doctors are transforming themselves into 'timeline engineers' and why the re-emergence of the 'Cold War' narrative in the media is only partially appealing to younger generations.

<sup>17</sup> "In many places they don't have a lot of women working at higher professional levels. I'd go to meetings and usually be the only woman at the table. I hope that those young women who are sitting behind in the second row before too long will come to the front of the table because that's where they belong."



The bad performance of this post is also confirmed by the fact that the video, by November 3, 2017, had been viewed by 14,000 followers (redemption = 1.11%). This means that, in spite of the curiosity generated by the video and, probably, by the specific topic, the synergy of the information strategies did not work in favour of a higher redemption. Since a contact with 14,000 users was established, it should have triggered and generated an equivalent number of likes.

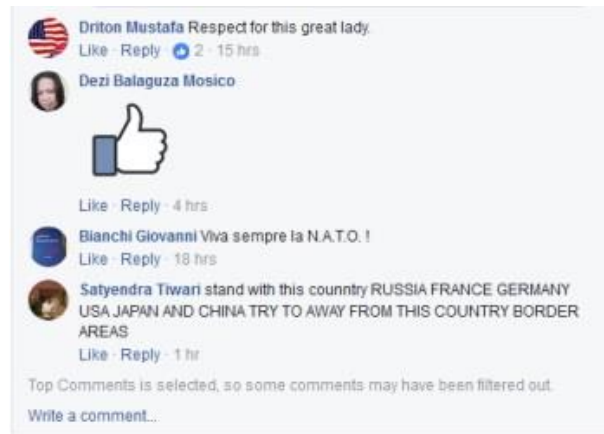


Figure 7. Comments on the Deputy Secretary General post

The comments on the post show that only the first two are aligned with its content, while the other two are generic or off-topic. Another aspect to be considered is the rarity of likes that comments receive. The SoMe netiquette prescribes that it is good for the person who posts, when s/he receives a comment, to reciprocate at least with a like or a short comment. Thanks to the Facebook algorithm, this guarantees that your posts will be displayed in a higher position in the 'liker' page for a certain amount of time. On the contrary, should the comment be negative or a troll<sup>18</sup>, then an immediate response is requested or, in the worst cases, its deletion from the dashboard. These elements are the basic guidelines of a sound SoMe strategy (Matejic, 2015) and they entail the capacity to control your page 24/7 to avoid an information crisis or attack. Not only does NATO rarely likes others' comments, but is unable to effectively control its pages as the following image shows.

<sup>18</sup> Troll: the act of antagonizing (others) online by deliberately posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content. Merriam Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/troll>.



Figure 8. Off-topic advertising comment

While writing this section and double-checking the post, I found the ‘advertising’ comment shown in figure 8. The problem is that it had been there for more than two weeks. This comment should be banned because of its nature. It represents a misuse of the information space for advertising purposes and, given the nature of this particular institution, one can imagine what the effect could have been if the comment were one by an adversary with an aggressive intent. Or it could also be a coded instruction to someone with a criminal intent. The worst part of this example is that, after discovering this comment, I published, on two specific NATO ‘secret’ group pages devoted to the SoMe, a provocative post showing figure 8 and accompanied by the following text: “So grateful to NATO FB page that is offering another example of uncontrolled and unattended posts. PS: It has been up for more than 24 hours.” In one case the post is still pending approval. In the other case 2 hours later<sup>19</sup> a key-figure of NATO SoMe activities commented on my post. The exchange is shown in figure 9 (the identity of the Officer has been kept anonymous).

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<sup>19</sup> I quote the response time because 42% of consumers expect a response on social media within 1 hour. 32% expect a response within 30 minutes and 57% think response time should be the same during weekends/weeknights as it is during business hours (source <http://summitmountainmedia.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Social-Media-Marketing-Tip-Consider-Response-Times.jpg>). The response time is a typical benchmark of ‘engagement’, a key-term for the military, that is now very common in the social media world, too. See Nicole Klemp’s *Salesforce* blog and her “10 Rules of Engagement: How to Respond to Social Media Complaints”. Number 1 on her list is: “Always respond (and try to do it within the hour)”.

<https://www.salesforce.com/blog/2017/03/respond-social-media-complaints.html>.

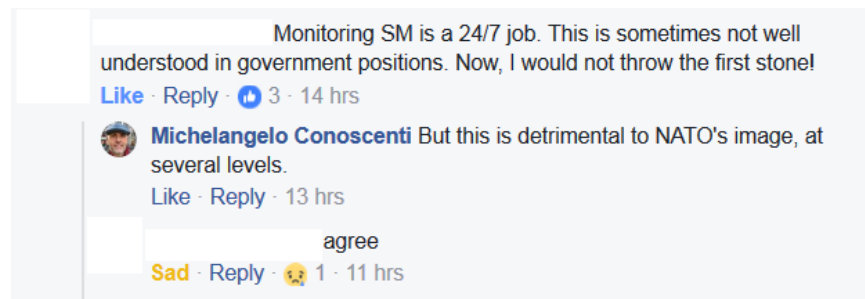


Figure 9. Comments on the author's post on a 'secret' NATO SoMe group

The comment is interesting for two reasons. The first is that, after stating the correctness of the 24/7 on guard duty principle, the Officer mitigates the impact of the off-topic comment. Following my reply to his comment, he briefly agreed.<sup>20</sup> The sad emoticon was added by me. The second and more important reason is that after *two weeks* and the 'heads-up' to the people who have responsibilities for the SoMe in NATO, the comment is still there. This shows how little attention NATO pays to their communication in a vital communicative environment. The reasons for this will be discussed in the section *NATO StratCom and the Discourse Trap*.



Figure 10. Redemption = 0.02% for NATO Facebook page post

<sup>20</sup> The reason for this attitude is discussed at the end of this section.



Figure 10 shows another example of a good intention gone haywire. The topic should generate a positive reaction by the audience but the redemption figure and the comments in figure 11 show another critical aspect of this specific kind of CMC.



Figure 11. Comments on post in figure 10

The first comment is critical towards the topic of the post and deserves an appropriate response from the page administrator, but it is left unattended. Luckily for him/her, it did not generate a thread, thus limiting the damage to a 'dissenting voice' that is indirectly criticising NATO's actions. The second comment offers several interesting elements for analysis. First of all, it should be noted that the post is a reposting of a sibling website, namely the *NATO Review Magazine*. Reposting is a practice that should be limited because it entails two points: 1) little control on the original content, 2) endorsement, unless otherwise stated, of the published content. In this case the user takes the opportunity to highlight the fact that the image is portraying some Kurds and consequently trolling the discussion. The disruption of the main topic is witnessed by the comments of other users and by the long, inflammatory exchange between Twana Bahman and Marco Schwarz that is still going on at the time of writing.



Figure 12. Trolling exchange between followers generated by a re-used image

The problem was, first of all, generated by the image used in the post.

You can't simply reuse and re-spin images with different meanings to suit new, crisis-led purposes. Your social media audience will spot the reused image and will call you on it... [Furthermore, you look] extra silly because you've just portrayed your organisation as having little regard for attention to detail, or worse, trying to pass an old image as a new one...It's also worth noting that for the same reasons, the use of stock imagery can be problematic (and insincere) (Matejic, 2015: 140-141).

Figure 8 and 12 show that the NATO Facebook page threads of commentary are unattended and out of control. The first evident risk is that the organisation is unable to control its own social narrative and that, when a crisis occurs, it will be forced to be on the defensive, as figure 9 demonstrates. Let's not forget that that was a bland, constructive 'attack' in a controlled and friendly environment, i.e. the 'secret' group of NATO SoMe practitioners. There can be many reasons for these delays, although the commonest is that NATO's presence on Facebook is the job of someone already employed in other activities and with this one as an adjunct to his/her job description. Since this is not his/her only priority, the risk of a SoMe failure is evident. Furthermore, "nothing annoys people more than being ignored. Don't provoke them with slow (no) response or poor customer service" (Matejic, 2015: 77).



Figure 13. Redemption for NATO post = 0.03 %

Figure 13 shows a recent trend in NATO SoMe pages, namely the one attempting to generate more 'friendly' communication. This post relies, again, on information generated by a sibling site and thus proposes what was previously discussed in terms of content reuse. The problem here is that the image used to accompany the text is completely off-topic. It is clear that the author of the post, since it is the NATO Allied Air Command, considers this image aligned with its professional goal, but, while it could be suitable for a *Top Gun*-like competition, it is not coherent with the content of the post. Figure 14 shows how variegated and uncontrollable the thread of comments can be when you offer on an international website a prize that is hardly redeemable by contestants not living in the immediate vicinity of the event. Furthermore, the text is associated with an image that is far from what Hollywood movies have fed our imagination with. Although the thread is funny and it is evident that it has been generated by 'insiders', humor is normally an element that is difficult to manage since its effects are unpredictable. This is why content managers, especially if they are in the military, tend to avoid posts that could generate comments like those shown in figure 14. They clash with the institutionalized image of soldiers generated through the years.

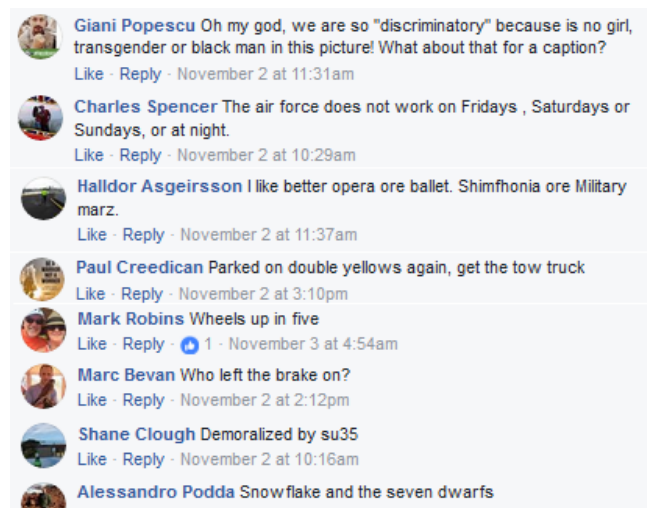


Figure 14. Thread of comments for NATO Facebook post

In recent years, NATO SoMe managers have also tried to balance the need for institutional communication that, on the one hand, must be strictly controlled and approved by the commanders, who are the repositories of the doctrine and, on the other hand, should try to offer a perception of the military as being as close as possible to civil society. This blend between institutional and 'lay' language is not easy to achieve and this is even more complex for NATO, since it is the result of a complex balance between 28 different nations' military and political entities and professional cultures. The *Allied Command for Transformation*, given its name, is trying to find this balance through the activities of its *Innovation Hub*. Nonetheless, since the engagement activities on the SoMe are quite recent in this discourse community, the result is frequently contradictory. Figure 15 shows a Happy Halloween greeting sent out by the Command on the eve of the festivity in 2016.



Figure 15. ACT Happy Halloween Image





A few hours after it was sent, Senior Officers and other ranks started to post negative reactions to the sinister use of the Command's logo. Most of them did not like the blending of the institutional logo with typical Halloween graphic elements. At the same time, I polled my 60 MA students who were even more severe in their judgement. The kindest ones saw it as a sinister image, while the majority considered it a bad and inopportune use of the NATO 'brand'. "We expect NATO to generate a serious and institutional communication, as transparent as possible in its information processes, but not one that tries to look friendly or humorous" was their final joint declaration. I sent the personal and group answers to the officer in command, but the effects on the production of the posts are yet to be appreciated. In August 2017 the same Command sent out the invitation in figure 16<sup>21</sup>.



When crisis strikes it takes everyone's help to restore stability.  
The NATO Innovation Challenge provides an opportunity for everyone to propose solutions.

**Participate Onsite or Remotely**

For Registration and Information on Prizes, please visit <https://InnovationHub-act.org/challenge>

*The Innovation Hub Staff*

Figure 16. NATO ACT Invitation to the 2017 Innovation Challenge

Setting aside the graphic treatment of the theme<sup>22</sup>, it must be admitted that the language of the invitation, with its "I want you" tone is contradictory. It is evident that NATO is trying to engage and reach out to experts to get help on sensitive and strategic topics, leveraging on a kind of patriotic sentiment. This is presented as an opportunity for the potential contributor, although the message passed by the "For Registration and Information on Prizes, please visit https" statement conveys a totally different idea. The receiver is legitimated to infer that one of the most important and powerful international military organisations is trying to have subject-matter experts' contributions for free and luring them with 'prizes'. Even worse, one gets the feeling that the 'recruitment' and engagement of the experts is staged in a cheap way through a generic mailing list. It must be specified that the author of figures 15 and 16

<sup>21</sup> The invitation was targeted at an audience of subject-matter experts via a private mailing list.

<sup>22</sup> See for example how human beings differ in terms of design and how NATO emerges from the word INNOVATION.



is the same as the one of the mitigating comment shown in figure 9: “Monitoring SM is a 24/7 job. This is sometimes not well understood in government positions. Now, I would not throw the first stone!” His comment expresses solidarity for another officer who is, apparently, making the same mistakes. An excuse that has not been sought? One might be inclined to believe that the officers in charge of these operations are inept and that they, and only they, should be considered responsible for this ineffective and counterproductive communication, but this is not the case. In the next section we will try to understand why.

## 5. NATO STRATCOM AND THE DISCOURSE TRAP

The previous sections have shown that the NATO SoMe communication fails to appreciate some elements that are paramount to strategically addressing public opinion in this information environment. Recent SoMe communicative phenomena, such as the ISIS terror campaign (Conoscenti, 2017) and Russia’s interferences in Western political campaigns (Pomerantsev, 2015), confirm that strategic key-players have left unguarded and thus open to invasion the SoMe information environment. This is possible because the analysed posts show NATO’s inability to engage audiences and build influence effectively. This is measurable in the trust and credibility associated with a specific web site or SoMe page. These must be created during a long-term relationship so that, when crisis hits, the institution can rely on its authoritativeness. This is perceived as such by the audience because of the continuous interaction with the institution that made itself ‘familiar’ with the followers. SoMe, because of their very nature, are a peculiar form of CMC that does not mark the difference of its use for civilian or military purposes. The social network structures, parameters and conversational nuances keep the same characteristics, irrespectively of the discourse community involved, and request the sender to adapt the message to the receiver’s needs and expectations. In fact,

why people express their feelings and emotions on social media is no different from why they express them in real life, only the conduit of expression of those emotions can become any of your organisational social media channels (Matejic, 2015: 126)

Within NATO, the best attempt to cope with the inability to strategically address public opinion is represented by the *Multinational Information Operations Experiment* (MNIOE). Its main achievement has been, so far, the production of the *White Paper on Narrative Development in Coalition Operations*, published in September 2014.



MNIOE was established by Germany<sup>23</sup> as a national initiative to further develop the military Info Ops function in the context of enhancing future coalition interoperability through collaboration in multinational Concept Development and Experimentation.

It is designed to promote the development and implementation of Info Ops concepts, policy and doctrine for use in national, coalition and/or alliance type operations / missions. The aim is to...develop solutions that positively impact on national and multinational Info Ops concepts, policy, doctrine, and related capabilities (MNIOE<sup>24</sup>, 2014: 4).

The document is the result of a multinational multi-group collaboration between the military and academia. Its index shows that all the key issues that are fundamental to develop a proper narrative have been identified and addressed in the best way possible for the target audience it is aimed at. Although the *White Paper* does not expressly refer to the SoMe, one could assume that, given specific guidelines, the webmasters should be able to deliver proper content for this CMC. As we have seen, this is not the case and the MNIOE, indirectly, shows the reason why. At several stages the authors have stressed the importance of the *narrative trajectory* and the way the *narrative should be translated within the hierarchy of narratives*<sup>25</sup>. All these concepts assume that the narrator develops his/her work within a specific and well-identified strategic communication framework.

On 19 May 2015 NATO delivered the first draft for use (version 9.1.21) of the *Strategic Communications Handbook*. This is a kind of work-in-progress document that has undergone an 18-month test in order to take into account all the lessons identified during exercises and experimentation. The definition of *Strategic Communications* is the following:

The coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities – Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs (PA), Military Public Affairs, Information Operations (Info Ops) and Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), as appropriate – in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims PO (2009)0141, NATO Strategic Communications Policy, dated 29 Sep 09.

In this matrioska-like definition each function apparently evokes another one without clearly defining who does what. This is the reason why a debate

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<sup>23</sup> Generally Info Ops and PsyOps experiments within NATO have always been US-led, while recently the Germans have taken the lead in this field in order to influence the fundamental doctrinal aspects with practical tools. MNIOE is one of these.

<sup>24</sup> The document is available at [http://www.lymec.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Narrative-Tool-v1-0\\_20141113\\_Final\\_Final.pdf](http://www.lymec.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Narrative-Tool-v1-0_20141113_Final_Final.pdf) (last accessed November 10, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Narrative is defined as: "a concise but comprehensive written statement of an organization's situation and purpose, which can stand on its own as the principle context to strategic planning directives or be used to support the creation of individual culturally attuned stories that will resonate with particular audiences and foster cohesion within the organization (MNIOE, 2014: 12).



between all the mentioned functions is currently ongoing to establish the hierarchy entailed by this definition<sup>26</sup>. Probably this was foreseen by the custodian since the definition is followed by this clarification that, actually, introduces another definition:

This is taken to mean the use of vertical interactions between HQs in order to achieve message uniformity and horizontal interactions. Within a headquarters, it should synchronise information activities...to ensure clear, credible and timely messaging aligned with the NATO narrative. These interactions are represented in Figure 1-1.

At the operational level, Allied Command Operations is responsible for synchronising military lethal actions, with non-lethal military and non-military activities. Hence, the ACO StratCom definition is:

“In cooperation with NATO HQ, the coordinated and appropriate use of Military PA, Info Ops and PSYOPS which, in concert with other military actions and following NATO political guidance, advances NATO’s aims and operations.”

Figure 17 illustrates the complex relationship between all the functions.

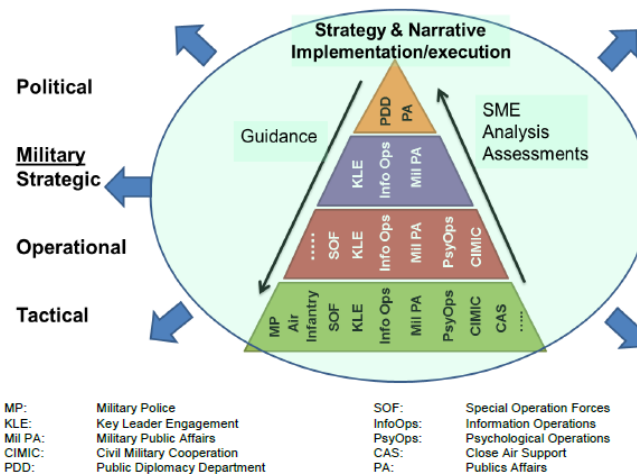


Figure 17. Vertical and Horizontal Flow in NATO StratCom

According to the document:  
NATO’s StratCom policy enables the organization to:

<sup>26</sup> I am grateful to Major Arcangeli, ITA Army, Staff Officer Psychological Operations at HQ ACT, the custodian of the Handbook, who sent me a message informing me that in September 2017 a new version had been issued. Although not yet available to the general public, the new definition, at military level, is: “In the context of the NATO military, StratCom is the integration of communication capabilities and information staff function with other military activities, in order to understand and shape the Information Environment (IE), in support of NATO aims and objectives.” It can be noted that this new military definition tries to make the operational use of the concept easier.



- a. Enhance coherence of its communication mechanisms, both civilian and military.
- b. Communicate better with key audiences including international actors and organizations.
- c. Make best use of its resources.
- d. Enhance internal communications.

Figure 17 makes it evident that, in spite of their good will, NATO is such a complex multinational, multicultural (on the national and civilian  $\leftrightarrow$  military axes) machine, even at communicative level, that its very structure is at the moment the main obstacle to effective communication on the SoMe. The *Strategic Communications Handbook* refers three times to the MNIOE *White Paper* demonstrating the attempt to integrate this approach into a more general framework.

As has been demonstrated, NATO fails to adapt to the dynamic nature of the SoMe virality and is thus unable to take advantage of the opportunities offered by this kind of CMC. The problem also lies in its military organisational structure, the same that generated communication problems during the Kosovo war. These were partially solved, at that time, by the creation of the Media Operation Centre, controlled by civilians, since the military had demonstrated their inability to coordinate (Conoscenti, 2004: 60-89)<sup>27</sup>.

The approval of a message to be released on the SoMe requires a number of procedural steps that is time-consuming and makes the message itself obsolete at the time of publishing. This is the reason why we observe such generic untimely posts. Furthermore, Senior Officers are worried about delegating the decisional power of approval of a message to the page manager, thus making the whole process unfit for the specific CMC. This is a problem not new to the military. For example, a similar case is discussed by Hobson (2007: 1-20) who assessed the Canadian communication problems linked to the Afghan mission. In that case the media were not able to properly inform the public on the wider ramifications of the mission because the Canadian forces were unable to pass information on about how the mission was evolving and transforming over time in a timely manner. Michaels (2013) has demonstrated the existence of a *discourse trap*, a worldwide phenomenon in which the discourses and associated terminology devised for political or military reasons, can entrap policymakers by motivating or constraining their actions. Michaels demonstrates how during the course of a conflict, the politics of terminology can constitute an important battlefield in its own right. He demonstrates that the language of war had a direct impact on US strategy and operations, and not necessarily a positive one. As we have seen, this holds true for SoMe communication. In Conoscenti (2008) I demonstrated that, given the proper authorizations and

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<sup>27</sup> "We should have something like the MOC today. Things would be much easier. But this is impossible with the social media being now fully integrated in the communicative environment", Mark Laity, BBC War Correspondent during the Kosovo war and now Chief Strategic Communications at SHAPE. He made this comment during a private conversation on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2016 at the 3<sup>rd</sup> NATO Engagement Seminar in Pesaro (Italy).



granting autonomy to mid-ranking officers in a given CMC environment, the military can be as productive and timely as a private company. The NATO SoMe communication and websites demonstrate that the changes needed in the information policy in terms of content of the campaigns and of the targeted audiences at any one time are still to be realized. The 2015 ACT white paper *Implementing Strategic Communications Narratives into the NATO Environment* witnesses an effort that is currently underway, as figure 18 shows.

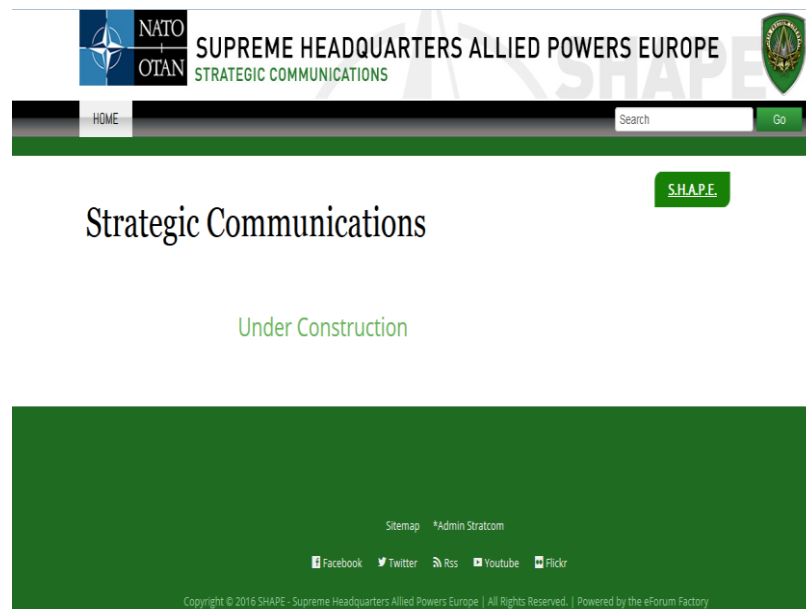


Figure 18. NATO SHAPE StratCom Webpage

The image is self-explanatory. While the NATO *StratCom Centre of Excellence* in Riga, Latvia, is active on several issues such as the way public and private storytelling are the future of strategic communications, the SHAPE<sup>28</sup> equivalent is *under construction*. The problem is thus not only organizational, but rather, political.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Risso (2014) has extensively researched NATIS (the NATO Information System) and she has been able to trace the origin of the problem we have observed.

The history of NATO is further complicated by the fact that different security concerns and diverging views of the role of the alliance dominated successive phases of life of the alliance and shaped its development [...]. Yet different ideas [...] as well as diverging legal traditions, political priorities and security concerns,

<sup>28</sup> Supreme Headquarters Allied Power Europe.



meant a continuous shift of focus [...]. According to the terms of reference of NATIS, in the event of conflict, the western national governments would resume full competences over all aspects of information policy directed towards their own public, and the result could have easily been a heterogeneous list of conflicting viewpoints within the alliance. The inconsistencies and incongruities in the western communication policy could be easily exploited by the communists to feed into conspiracy theories and to undermine the public's morale. Thus, [...] the history of NATIS is the history of a continuous struggle between the need to ensure consistency of all the members' information campaigns about the alliance in times of peace and in wartime, and the determination of all national governments not to delegate to the alliance any power over information policy, which was perceived as a crucial part of national sovereignty and security. (Risso, 2014: 4-6).

The doctrinal elements observed, as well as their practical effects on NATO SoMe and web products demonstrate that the Alliance is still facing this struggle between national interests and the need to give a single, coherent voice to its strategic communication. Once the political and organisational issues are solved, key decision-makers will find civilian subject-matter experts and academics ready to give proper 'linguaging' to that strategic vision and communication. Tools and processes, as described in the MNIOE Whitepaper<sup>29</sup>, are ready to be deployed, to use a term familiar to the discourse community, even in CMC. A solution to the problem might consist of two fundamental steps. The first is the European recognition, both at political and military level, that the Union is targeted by Russia on the SoMe by means of military techniques. The objective is to destabilize Europe and its democratic decisional processes<sup>30</sup>. Once public opinion is aware of this peculiar state of the informative environment, it will be necessary to adapt and draft content and (counter)narratives by means of a specific language, hence the expression 'linguaging' previously used, that is suitable to inform a public that is already influenced by adversaries' InfoOps activities<sup>31</sup>.

Meanwhile, NATO's adversaries, or rather competitors, are exploiting the Alliance's weaknesses and dominate the information environment. As Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014) note, because NATO's adversaries' strategic communication is not under construction, it is in full progress.

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<sup>29</sup> Other tools and processes were identified together with specific doctrinal recommendations during a seminar that took place in Milan, 19-20 June, 2018 entitled: "How to Operationalize the Use of Social Media", organized and hosted by the NATO Rapid Deployable Corps – ITALY – Influence Division. Chatham House Rule applies here.

<sup>30</sup> I discuss these ideas in a forthcoming paper: "Europe as a target of *Inform and Influence* military activities. Implications for the European public debate", *Problemi dell'Informazione*, I, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> The Joint Research Centre of the European Union is currently elaborating a flagship report entitled "Enlightenment 2.0" the purpose of which is to improve the critical strategic decision-making processes of the Commission and to identify the best narratives and modalities to communicate them. Chatham House Rule applies here.



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