WHAT SHOULD PSYOP DO NEXT?

BY ERINN McQUAGGE, SHAWN CHENOWETH AND RUSS CHADICK

With the first 100 years of psychological operations officially in the history books, it is a suitable time to ask, "What do we do next?" Revolutionary events within the past 20 years and their follow-on effects have fundamentally altered the information environment, giving an asymmetric advantage to small networks (e.g. extremist organizations), and competitor states (e.g. Russia). The pace of these alterations is blindingly fast, and larger democratic hierarchies struggle to contest the information space while balancing legitimacy, transparency, responsiveness and volume.

REVOLUTIONARY CHANGES IN THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Five revolutionary changes over the past 20 years have fundamentally altered the information environment. Understanding these changes is necessary to provide a prescriptive conclusion (i.e. what should PSYOP do next?) because PSYOP functions within this medium. For this article, a revolutionary change is defined as an event that upends the status quo or introduces an unprecedented method of information exchange. These revolutionary changes are significant because they enabled state and non-state actors to challenge U.S. influence.

The Internet Revolution of the late 1990s connected average citizens across the globe in real time — a phenomenon in communication.[01] The advent of email and chat rooms are memorable products of these early days, connecting geographically disparate peoples in an unprecedented way. As the capabilities expanded, global trade migrated to the digital space, bringing finances into the picture. The combination ushered in an ability to interact on a global scale and a commensurate requirement to be proficient or risk falling behind in society. This was especially evident in developed nations with robust IT infrastructure where business made a rapid transition to the online space. The developing world was similarly impacted, with people and business gaining rapid access to markets and information outside of their immediate spheres. The Internet café was a ubiquitous symbol of connectivity in the United States, Canada and Europe by the mid-1990s, and central African nations before the end of the decade.

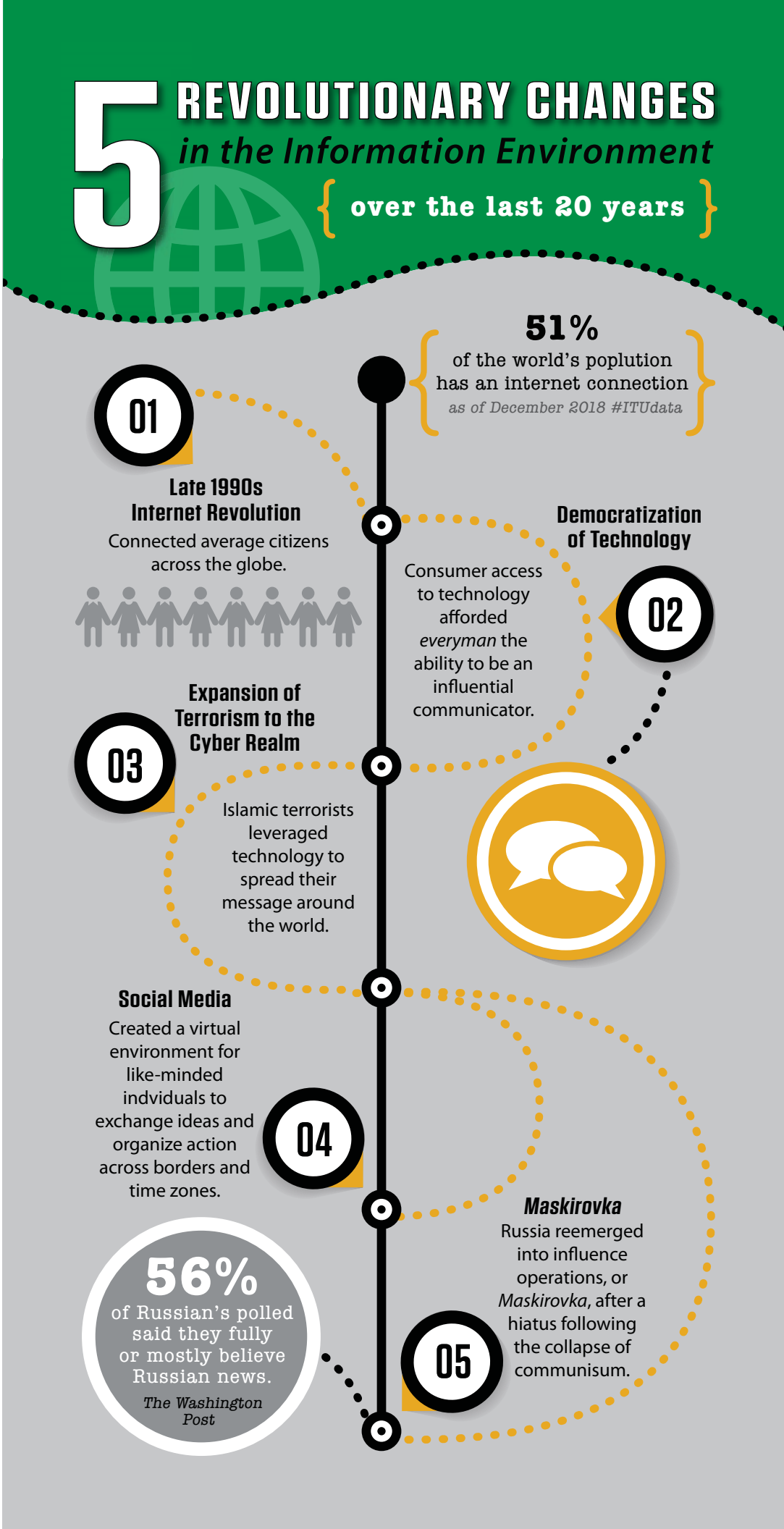
Serious discussion of the changing information environment must also include the role of the democratization of technology. Consumer access to technology, in terms of both availability and price-fueled significant changes in the digital landscape, affording the '*everyman*' an ability to be an influential communicator. Manufacturers, competing to connect the world, introduced computers with annually declining prices and expanding capabilities. Email supported fundamentally new pathways to share multimedia content. Complementary tech developments in digital cameras and scanners appeared on shelves, and prices continued to decline while increasing content generation capabilities in the digital space.[02] Average people could take digital photos or scan their traditionally developed photographs. Before the end of the 20th Century, people could create their own magazine[03] or web page on a home computer; at the beginning of the 21st Century, the same person could edit movies, create computer graphic effects, and distribute them on DVDs or CDs. Not only could people communicate across the world, they could also create and distribute more content than ever.

After 9/11, Islamic terrorism expanded into the cyber realm, creating the third revolutionary event. The expansion allowed al-Qaeda to move bin Laden's influence further and faster through the Internet and the increase in technological consumer peripherals. The 2003 invasion of Iraq advanced the usage of another step with insurgent groups filming their attacks on digital cameras and exploiting the imagery to

build material and financial support, and communicate tactics to global audiences. Finally, the most recent step is inspiring people abroad, with little to no physical connection to a terrorist group, to conduct attacks wherever they are and against whomever they have access. Individuals or small groups, who are ideologically aligned, are replacing the close-knit terrorist cells of the pre-9/11 era.

The rise of social media (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) is the fourth revolutionary event. Unlike email that moves from point to point, social media is network-based, media heavy and interactive. It created a virtual environment for like-minded individuals to exchange ideas while transcending national borders and time zones. Anyone or group could organize for action online. The most visible impact was the 2011 Arab Spring where bands of activists traded information and organized events largely via social media across North Africa and the Middle East.

Finally, Russia's reemergence into influence operations altered the information environment, because they have a formidable history of the craft, significant national assets and critically, a willingness to aggressively participate at a scale that dominates enough of the media share to have measurable effects. Russia's long history of influence operations, known as *maskirovka*,[04] began well before their October 1917 Revolution.[05] Russian influence operations took a hiatus after the collapse of communism but they are a focal point of contemporary Russian national strategy. Russian Information Operations strategy is generally focused on undermining institutions and fostering divisions to weaken transatlantic partnerships and consolidate Russian geopolitical gains.[06] Furthermore, Russian IO campaigns are coordinated to degrade or deny decision-making through frequent use of disinformation. Russia fuels debate amongst western populations that inhibits risk-adverse western leaders from taking decisive actions. Russia's concerted efforts to manipulate cyberspace and enthusiastic usage of troll farms to shape social media platforms have produced outsized results.



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WHAT SHOULD PSYOP DO NEXT?

Initiate change at the detachment level.

Change should originate at the detachment level to influence the current information environment, since they are the building blocks of PSYOP. Planning and implementing PSYOP occurs within detachments and feeds upwards to higher echelons. Changing the building block and allowing the shift to flow upwards is more effective than starting at the top and implementing change downward.

Become better at the craft of PSYOP.

Improving at the craft of PSYOP requires a combination of education and experience. Education alone produces a soldier without practical skills. Experience alone requires extensive time and experimenting to learn techniques. There is no guarantee that the techniques are correct. A soldier could become proficient with ineffective techniques.

PSYOP is comprised of social sciences, marketing and some statistics, thus ongoing education within the regiment should include these fields. Each supports the overall mission, meaning as skills in each field increase, there should be a corresponding increase in effectiveness. The Target Audience Analysis Worksheet draws on political science, sociology, economics and psychology to develop a concise understanding of the target audience. Series and product development is marketing renamed, but with a couple differences. Evaluation is heavily reliant on statistical data to test effectiveness. These fields are common courses at local community colleges, making access easy for any soldier.

Gaining experience is more difficult than education given dwell time requirements and limits on deployment lengths (179 days). Both contribute to continuity issues because PSYOP officers[07] can only deploy at the detachment level for a limited time and short deployments limit the amount of change a detachment can observe. Maintaining continuity on deployments maximizes the use of the limited time to gain experience. Under the current model, entire detachments rotate out requiring a couple months of on the ground experience before the incoming detachment is familiar with the situation. The initial months are lost. To remedy the issue, PSYOP could adopt an overlapping deployment model- eliminating the need for Relief in Place. Individuals or small groups could intersperse their deployment dates while still maintaining 179 days. The difference is that experienced soldiers would always outnumber newly arriving ones. This would assist in continuity and allow the soldiers with greater time on the ground to assist newer ones, instead of spending the first two months becoming situated.[08]

Expand the MTOE at the detachment level to Cyber and Intelligence soldiers.

PSYOP occurs mostly at the detachment level, with higher echelons maintaining the force and directing aggregate efforts. Aggregate efforts are only as good as the detachments' operations. Thus, improving the ability to execute operations will pay dividends to higher echelons.

While the PSYOP soldier can improve their ability at the craft, there

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Psychological operations teams pitch civic engagement plans to role-players during Operation Warrior Anvil, a validation exercise held in Key West, Florida, by 7th Military Information Support Battalion, 4th Military Information Support Group. The exercise validated teams through unparalleled training with joint, inter-agency, and civic partners in real-world urban environments that reinforced PSYOP fundamentals, fostered teamwork, and strengthened character. U.S. ARMY PHOTOS BY CAPT. STEPHEN VON JETT

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IMPROVING AT THE CRAFT OF PSYOP REQUIRES A COMBINATION OF EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE. EDUCATION ALONE PRODUCES A SOLDIER WITHOUT PRACTICAL SKILLS. EXPERIENCE ALONE REQUIRES EXTENSIVE TIME AND EXPERIMENTING TO LEARN TECHNIQUES.

is a distinct need for more specialized skills due to technological advancements and demands on the regiment as a whole. Internet access and social media are expanding in Africa and other regions that were previously disconnected. The result is an information landscape unlike any other media that PSYOP employs. While the potential and capabilities are substantial, the technical knowledge required to navigate the Internet[09] and social media requires a specialized set of skills. Adding MTOE[10] slots at the detachment level for a cyber operations specialist (MOS 17C) meets that requirement with an existing pool of soldiers.

Second is greater fusion of operations and intelligence at the detachment level. Historically, detachments rely on Intelligence soldiers at the battalion or company level, but they often lack familiarity with the unique requirements of PSYOP and the specific needs of the detachment. Consequently, intelligence assets are often unused for operations. Assigning Intelligence soldiers to detachments alleviates this problem. Like Cyber, this is a field best left to already existing practitioners.

Match competitors on the Internet.

The Internet is a terrain greater than air and land for PSYOP, yet PSYOP has not ventured into it with persistence. Competitor states, such as Russia, along with non-state actors (e.g. ISIS, al-Qaeda), are en route to dominating cyber terrain.

Al Qaeda was an analog organization before 9/11. Osama bin Laden's 1996 and 1998[11] fatwas, where he declared and justified war against the U.S., were originally published in a small London newspaper.[12] CNN's Peter Arnett was the first Western journalist to interview bin Laden and introduce the English-speaking world to him in 1997.[13] When the U.S. military eliminated his safe haven in Afghanistan, the simultaneous loss of physical space, and rise of cyberspace, provided a venue to continue their jihad. Al-Qaeda did not conduct cyber terrorism, but information operations where bin Laden's messages could be disseminated to millions in chat rooms (the precursor to modern social media) that connected ideas across physical space.[14] The recruit who had to be found, vetted and transported to training camps in Afghanistan was dying. In his place was a loosely connected adherent to the ideology who was less trained, but inside the West.[15]

Conversely, competitor nation states utilize synchronous efforts in the digital environment to frame information for global audiences. Competitors desire a sort of 'tactical parity' in cyberspace, to counterbalance the overwhelming lethal superiority of the U.S. Frustratingly, this arena is comparatively uncontested by U.S. PSYOP forces, with regard to countering malign state actors' storylines and narrative. Whether due to inexperience, apathy or misplaced concern over the sensitivity of IO in the diplomatic space, in general, U.S. PSYOP forces have not implemented effective strategies for countering competitor states messaging in cyberspace.

To match competitors online, PSYOP will need to have a long-term presence. Although conventional means (e.g. TV, radio, leaflets) remain effective, the Internet and social media now dominate how many people receive and pass information. Allowing any competitor to propagate their agenda and recruit to their cause without opposition is foolhardy.

Master the Relief in Place.

The majority of PSYOP missions are long-term efforts with a sizable investment in time to produce results. The

transition to the incoming unit is the most critical event of a deployment. During this period, the gains of the outgoing unit (normally six months) can either be passed to the incoming unit or lost in transition.[16] A successful transition bolsters continuity and makes use of gains from the outgoing unit's deployment at no cost to the incoming. In contrast, an unsuccessful transition wastes the gains from the outgoing unit and leaves the incoming with little understanding of their situation and disposition. As a result, the incoming unit may waste time figuring out and recreating the gains.

From observing transitions between PSYOP units, two factors influenced the success: the total time of the transition and the attitude of the incoming unit. The time of the transition should consist of regular communication between units, while the incoming unit is preparing for deployment. Regular communication ensures that the incoming unit understands the situation before it deploys. Once the unit deploys and begins the RIP, it can focus its time on minute details required for success, versus understanding a complex situation. At a minimum, RIPs should be two weeks, allowing the incoming unit to observe and lead with a counterpart from the outgoing. Better techniques for RIP include redeploying key leaders to assist the incoming unit with pre-mission training and having some key leaders remain with the incoming unit for one to two months in theater. As overlap increases between units, so does continuity, making a long-term effort achievable.

The second factor, the attitude of the incoming unit, is abstract by comparison to transition time. The best attitude for incoming units is humility in understanding that they will not "win the war" during their deployment, but rather make progress toward long-term goals; and respect for the programs and progress made by the outgoing unit. Done right, the incoming unit assumes control of established plans and programs. Any gains from the outgoing unit transfers to the incoming unit, who then continues progress before their own transition out of theater.

Read and Write.

PSYOP should reinvigorate professional reading to increase comprehension, critical thinking and writing skills. The Army in general lost a lot of analytical prowess due to the past 17 years of constant combat and increasing reliance on PowerPoint.[17] Training for deployment, combat operations and redeployment occupied a lot of previously free time.[18] Combined with increasing hardware capabilities to create and distribute PowerPoint briefs, the bullet point replaced the paragraph. Distilling complex ideas into single sentences makes an efficient brief, but on that is missing pertinent details.

Writing is the desired result of professional reading; regular contributions to professional journals reflect the regiment's intellectual health. Writing requires research, organization of thought and analysis of evidence to produce. All of these are vital skills that benefit PSYOP soldiers regardless of rank or time-in-service. Additionally, the regular rotation of troops in and out of jobs limits continuity. Writing and publishing experiences, within the limits of security classifications, ensures one's experience can become another's knowledge. Finally, publishing in professional journals makes PSYOP a contributor to strategic-level discussions within the military. As more PSYOP soldiers become the source of discourse, the overall regiment increases its control over the PSYOP narrative.

CONCLUSION

Psychological Operations has progressed a long way since its beginnings. As we continue to move forward, it is always prudent to ask, "What should we do next?" Continual improvement, with debate involved, is crucial to progress. Not everyone will agree with the prescriptive conclusions, but the larger debate of what to improve, how and why should be brought to the forefront. SW

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NOTES **01.** Micha Kaufman, "The Internet Revolution Is the New Industrial Revolution," *Forbes Magazine*, 5 Oct 2012. **02.** Moore's Law, "Moore's Law or How Overall Processing Power for Computers with Double Every Two Years," Moore's Law, http://www.mooreslaw.org. **03.** "Desktop publishing" was the term where a consumer could create multi-page documents. **04.** Brian D. Bailey and Patrick J. Parker, *Soviet Strategic Deception*, 1st edition ed. (U.S. and Canada: Lexington Book, 1987). **05.** Ladislav Bittman, *The Kgb and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's View* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, 1985). **06.** The Economist, "Russian Disinformation Distorts American and European Democracy," *The Economist*, 22 Feb 2018. **07.** PSYOP NCOs have more deployment opportunities at the detachment level, especially when arriving as a junior NCO, compared to officers. Captains move into staff positions about 12-18 months in detachments. **08.** SGM Rob Weel (8th MISG S-3 SGM) came up with the idea of an overlapping deployment model in 2012 during the shift from nine to six month deployments, which were expected to create continuity problems in MISTs. **09.** Including surface, deep, and dark web platforms. **10.** Modified Table of Organization and Equipment. **11.** Usama bin Laden, *1998 Fatwa* (Al Quds Al Arabi: World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders, 1998), Islamic Fatwa. **12.** "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," *Al Quds Al Arabi* (1996). **13.** Interview by Peter Arnett, 1997, Video. **14.** P.W. Singer and Allan Friedman, *Cybersecurity and Cyberwar: What Everyone Needs to Know* 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2014), Non-fiction. **15.** Ibid. **16.** David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). **17.** Elisabeth Bumiller, "We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Powerpoint," *New York Times*, 26 April 2010 2010. **18.** Other issues such as skyrocketing divorce rates, domestic issues, mental health issues, and more also contributed to the decline in professional reading and writing during this period.