



## **CENS Distinguished Visitors Programme – Seminar Series Dr Steven R. Corman**

- \* Seminar on Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media for Strategic Communication  
(20 September 2011)**
- \* Seminar on A 21st Century Model for Strategic Communication  
(27 September 2011)**
- \* Seminar on The Role of Narrative in Strategic Communication  
(29 September 2011)**
- \* Seminar on Communication Strategies to Counter Extremist Ideology  
(30 September 2011)**

*\* Disclaimer: This report summarises the public lecture(s) as interpreted by the assigned rapporteur(s) and editor of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. The speaker neither reviewed nor approved this report.*

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## About Steven R. Corman

Dr Steven R. Corman (Ph.D. 1988, University of Illinois) is Jeanne Lind Herberger Professor in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University where he directs the Consortium for Strategic Communication, and blogs at the Consortium's COMOPS Journal (<http://comops.org/journal>). He is currently Principal Investigator of an Office of Naval Research grant project to study extremists' use of narrative to influence contested populations, and co-Principal Investigator on a Minerva Initiative project focused on identifying "moderate" Muslims. Since 2001 he has served as an invited participant on numerous national and international workshops and symposia on counterterrorism, strategic communication and public diplomacy. In 2003-2005 he was a member of the Scientist Panel for the Strategic Operations Working Group at U.S. Special Operations Command. He has recently given invited presentations and briefings for the NATO Center of Excellence for Defense against Terrorism, USJFCOM/USSOCOM, Asia Pacific Program for Senior National Security Officers, Marshall Center for European Security Studies, Army War College, and the State Department, among others. Corman is also co-editor of the book *Weapons of Mass Persuasion: Strategic Communication to Combat Violent Extremism* (2008, Peter Lang), and co-author of the book *Master Narratives of Islamic Extremism* (Spring 2011, Palgrave). Corman's other research interests include organizational communication systems, text and conversation analysis, social networks, and computational modelling/simulation.



## **Seminar on Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media for Strategic Communication<sup>1</sup>**

**20 September 2011 (Tuesday)  
Vanda 5, Level 6, Marina Mandarin Hotel**

Steve Corman's presentation focussed on the development of new methods and channels of communication in the last decade. Such outcomes had significantly transformed strategic communication, and many practitioners, according to Corman, were struggling to come to terms with these changes. Corman proceeded to analyse these changes, and in particular, those brought about by digital technology and social media. Corman also discussed new forms of organising, communication dynamics, and opportunities for influence in his presentation.

Corman began the discussion by tracing the historical development of media. Corman argued that media was, in essence, a means of communication. Language and art represented the earliest forms of media in human history. Writing was the next revolutionary medium, and enabled humans to preserve communication. Corman also observed that social behaviour invariably revolutionised as a result of the introduction of new forms of media.

Corman then provided a comparison between old and new media to underscore how new media was changing the way people communicated. With regards to traditional or old media: (a) the technology underpinning it was analog; (b) distribution was one-to-many; (c) participation in old media was passive; (d) access was dependent on supply; (e) control was easy; (f) sharing was difficult as the producer maintained monopoly over distribution. In contrast, new media was: (a) high-speed, mobile and possessed converging technology that allowed capabilities to come together seamlessly; (b) its underpinning technology was digital; (c) its mode of distribution was many-to-many; (d) participation was active; (e) access was on-demand; (f) sharing/dissemination was easy, hence it was difficult to control information flows.

New media had created several challenges and opportunities with regards to: (a) forms of organising; (b) communication dynamics; (c) influence opportunities. In terms of organisation/mobilisation, Corman observed that the flash mob phenomenon was increasing in popularity. A flash mob is the sudden assembly of a group of people in a public place where they perform an unusual and often pointless act for a brief period of time. They then disperse when the performance is over. They do this mainly for the purpose of entertainment, satire, or artistic expression. Corman also noted that social media had been used actively in recent political mobilisations (Arab Spring) as well as in criminal activities (hooliganism in the UK).

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With regards to communication dynamics, Corman firstly discussed crowdsourcing, which referred to leveraging the wisdom of a group of people or community to solve problems. The US government's challenge.gov website, which encourages the general public to suggest ways of improving government policies, was a case in point. Secondly, he argued that new media had given rise to the creation of the noösphere, or global consciousness, which emphasised accountability and transparency. Attempting to hide or obscure information was no longer an option for organisations and governments in the contemporary environment. The Wikileaks incident underscored this point.

Third, opportunities for influence created by new media included: (a) engagement; (b) counter-messaging. Corman observed that Islamists had, in the past, been able to freely disseminate radical messages and ideology online because US counter-terrorism efforts had little or no online presence. The introduction of "digital diplomacy" during the Bush administration sought to rectify this problem.

Corman concluded his presentation by drawing attention to three noteworthy issues regarding new media and digital technology. First, gamification was likely to increase. Gamification uses game design techniques and mechanics to solve problems and engage audiences. Second, curation or expert filtering would become more popular. Third, Multiplayer Online Games (MOG), such as World of Warcraft, could increasingly be used by terrorists as a means to recruit new members and communicate with existing ones.

## **Discussion**

A participant wanted to know if social media had indeed played a significant role in mobilising the Arab Spring protests. Corman replied that both social media and word-of-mouth communication had served as tools of communication and dissemination during the protests. People were mobilised to act because they were already discontented with the regimes, and were waiting for an opportunity. Thus, social media can be said to have played a facilitating role in the protests.

A participant asked how government communication could be prevented from being perceived as propaganda. Corman suggested that governments had to act competently, communicate openly and develop goodwill among their citizenry in order for them to appear more credible. Once this was achieved, the public would most likely be less sceptical of their communication efforts and messages.

Another participant asked Corman how to respond to insensitive comments that were made online. Corman suggested establishing policies to regulate user conduct on websites, and when necessary, to remove comments/posts that violated these policies.



Corman was asked whether there would be a further decline in traditional media. He answered affirmatively, and noted that current readership for newspapers comprised mainly of the older generation rather than the younger generation.



## **Seminar on A 21st Century Model for Strategic Communication<sup>2</sup>**

**27 September 2011 (Tuesday)  
Vanda 5, Level 6, Marina Mandarin Hotel**

Corman's presentation discussed how a 21st century model for strategic communication was necessary given the recent changes in communications and communications technology that had given rise to a more rugged landscape. Corman compared the Old Message Influence Model (OMIM) with the Pragmatic Complexity Model (PCM) in order to underscore the advantages of using the latter in contemporary strategic communication. He then looked at several approaches for developing more effective messages, and finally, examined several implications for strategic communication in the 21st century.

Corman began by observing that most government strategic communication was, at present, based on the Source, Message, Channel, Receiver Model (SMCR) that was developed in the US in the 1950s. The SMCR regarded communication as a simple transmission process where the source encoded a message, sent it over a channel, with the receiver obtaining the message at the other end. This model made several assumptions: (a) the message was simply a vehicle, and how well it resonated in the mind of the receiver was due primarily to the skills of the communicator; (b) communication only occurred when the message was successfully sent; (c) communication failure resulted from noise, i.e. communication was expected to succeed unless something interfered with it; (d) a simple message, controlled distribution and repetition for reliability could ensure fidelity of the message through the transmission process.

Corman believed that this Old Message Influence Model (OMIM) still underpinned much of the US government's current strategic communication efforts. Several examples underscored this point: First, there was still widespread belief that communication was primarily about sending messages as reflected in many U.S. government statements. Second, recommendations in the 9/11 Commission Report and the Defense Science Board's (DSB) Report on Strategic Communication, attributed communication ineffectiveness to a lack of control and a failure to correctly develop the message transmission system. Third, it was observable that many US government communicators, such as those from the Office of Global Communication, believed strongly in consistent repetition as the most effective way to make messages stick in the minds of the audiences.

Corman then demonstrated how this approach had actually undermined the strategic communication efforts of the U.S. government through the analysis of several case studies. These included the Zarqawi Bloopers video released by the Multinational

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Force in Iraq (MNF-I) in 2006 and the 'echo chamber' strategy of Karen Hughes, former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs under George Bush. Such debacles, according to Corman, underscored the limitations of the OMIM approach, which were: (a) it did not account for three realities that characterised contemporary communication – it was two-way and interactive, there was context-dependence, and variable meanings existed; (b) it did not consider the effects of interpretation and attribution; (c) over-control threatened credibility; (d) repetition bred dysfunction; if a message was not working and was constantly repeated, it would serve only to discredit the communicator.

Corman subsequently discussed the Pragmatic Complexity Model (PCM), which sought to rectify the aforementioned problems by adopting a complex systems view of communication. The model posited that communication was not a simple transmission process but more a situation of simultaneous, mutual interdependence. It also viewed communication as the interpretation and attribution of action, not merely the implantation of messages in the minds of the audience. Unlike the OMIM where communicator skill was the constraint, the constraint in the PCM was the double contingency: the communicator's effectiveness depended on how the other party interpreted what the communicator was doing, and how the other party interpreted what the communicator was doing depended on what he/she was actually doing. According to the OMIM, communication required intent, whereas in the PCM, non-communication could also be interpreted as a message. In terms of message control, the OMIM posited that the message could be effectively controlled, whereas the PCM argued that it could not. Success was probable in the OMIM unless there was noise that significantly interferes with the transmission, however, in the PCM, success was not always guaranteed given the complexity of the system.

In Corman's opinion, if one subscribed to the PCM model, then the best way to optimise the process of finding the right message was to analyse 'fitness landscapes'. In strategic communication, the shape of the landscape was defined by different components of the solution, such as messages, sources, audiences, channels, timing, and culture. These components combined together to define fitness.

There were two types of landscapes: the simple and the rugged. In terms of the simple landscape, there was a single fitness peak, which meant that the use of a simple search procedure was adequate for finding the optimal solution. This simple search was commonly used by the U.S. government: It determined the message it wanted to convey, defined what it wanted the audience to believe, developed a message according to these criteria, and then determined the optimal means to transmit the message.

With regards to the rugged landscape, which Corman felt was closer to reality, there were many fitness peaks. This resulted from the highly correlated and connected variables that defined fitness. As the variables were inter-connected, a change/shift in one variable would lead to changes in other variables. Corman argued that a



random search rather than a simple search would be more effective in reaching an optimal solution in a rugged landscape.

Corman concluded his presentation with a discussion of several key implications for contemporary strategic communication. First, in a complex system with a rugged landscape, control over the message was virtually impossible. Control only inhibited variation and invited bad attributions, which suggested that complex systems should be embraced and not rejected. Second, repetition should be replaced with experimentation. Third, complex systems could experience inertia and become stuck in patterns of interpretation. Disruption, although useful in shaking the system out of inertia, could also worsen the situation. Fourth, there was a need for communicators to simplify structure in strategic communication as the primary cause of a rugged landscape was the tight coupling between components of the system. Finally, there was a need for communicators to plan for failure.

## Discussion

A member of the audience asked if Corman could provide recent examples of where and how the PCM was used. Corman replied that most communicators in the US government still preferred the OMIM model, and were opposed to trying this new approach, which they believed could lead to failure. However, he noted that the State Department had formed digital outreach teams that identified themselves as State Department employees and posted comments on extremist forums to counter what they considered to be the dissemination of inaccurate information regarding U.S. policies. He added that this was an effort to bring about variation in strategic communication, and was a step in the direction of the PCM.

Corman was asked to elaborate how random search could be used to find the optimal message in communication. He replied that one way was to change the message, for instance, from promoting democracy to promoting self-determination. Another method would be to have different people deliver the message. Also, different means to deliver the message – television, the Internet, Facebook, Twitter – was also a way of varying the search. All these different variables could then be used to randomly generate sets of choices, with the results evaluated, and the best combination chosen.

A participant inquired as to how the US could fix the infamous Say-Do-Gap, that is, saying one thing but doing another. Corman argued that the US government only thought about strategic communication when things went awry, and the major problem with this approach was that communicators were never involved in the formulation of policy let alone a contentious one. As such, their role was limited only to damage control, which could prove extremely difficult given the contentiousness of the policy. A possible solution, according to Corman was to get communicators involved in the policy planning process.



## **Seminar on The Role of Narrative in Strategic Communication<sup>3</sup>**

**29 September 2011 (Thursday)  
Vanda 5, Level 6, Marina Mandarin Hotel**

Corman introduced the idea of narratives by drawing attention to Walter Fisher's book *The Narrative Paradigm*. Fisher distinguishes between two paradigms: the logical and the narrative. According to the former, humans are thinking beings, life is a series of logical problems, decisions are based on best arguments, and the basis of validity is knowledge and understanding. According to science and technology we live in such a world. But, as Fisher claims, most people live in a narrative world. Under the narrative paradigm, humans are story tellers, life is a continual recreation of stories, decisions are made according to history and culture, and the basis of validity is not arguments but good reasons that make sense when incorporated in a convincing story.

Corman proceeded to discuss the persuasiveness of narratives. The strength of a narrative depended on its coherence, or on how well the story hung together. Its fidelity, or how well the story made sense in the context of other stories that we know or what we think how the world worked, was equally important. The effects of persuasive narratives on the reader or listener is more cognitive response, more self-referencing, more positive evaluation of the main characters, more story-consistent beliefs and attitude changing, and less tendency to counter-argue. Narratives are especially effective for people who are emotional.

The next sub-topic of the seminar was the distinction between stories and narratives. A story was an account of a sequence of related events resulting in a resolution (or potential resolution). In contrast, a narrative was a coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organised stories that shared a common desire to resolve a conflict as narratives often revolve around conflicts. A narrative trajectory starts with the desire (e.g. to resolve the conflict) and contains a system of participants, actions, and events, that provide a plausible path from the desire to a state of satisfaction. The stories that build up the narrative often share standard patterns of form (as in rags to riches stories in which a champion rises from difficult circumstances to a state of wealth), action and sequences, as well as archetypal characters with given motives and actions.

A master narrative was a transhistorical narrative that was deeply embedded in a particular culture, widely known by the members of that culture, often premised on history and religion, and applied to broad groups. They were often recounted in fragmentary form, because people know the narrative and a complete recount was unnecessary. Islamists, for example, often refer to the master narrative of the

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oppressive Pharaoh who pursues Moses and the Israelites to the Red Sea, and is eventually defeated through God's intervention. Islambouli, who assassinated former Egyptian president Anwar Sadaat, had reportedly exclaimed after he shot Sadaat: "I have killed the Pharaoh!" Islambouli was insinuating that Sadaat was a Pharaoh-like ruler who oppressed his people and deserved to die. According to Corman, the Singapore story was not yet a master narrative but had the potential to evolve into one. This would be accomplished through teaching it to school children and as the narrative grew older over time. Master narratives were not strategic as they were not created with a purpose. However, they could be drawn upon and used strategically to justify or make sense of events.

Corman presented twelve additional narratives that were commonly used by Islamist extremists:

- The concept of Jahiliyya describes a decline of Muslim societies after the death of the Prophet similar to the situation before his coming, implying that the era of Prophet had to be revived.
- The Battle of Badr, in which the early Muslim community defeated, with the help of God and his angels, a larger and much better equipped army of unbelievers from Mecca.
- The Hypocrites master narrative warns of treacherous people who pretend to be Muslims but are not in reality.
- The Battle of Kaybar recounts a pagan siege of Medina after which the early Muslims accused the Jewish tribes of treason.
- The Battle of Karbala is a Shia narrative in which Hussein made a noble sacrifice against the evil Yazid.
- The Shaytan's Handiwork narrative describes how the devil sits on your shoulder trying to divert you from the right path.
- 72 virgins are promised as rewards in the afterlife for those who sacrifice themselves for the faith.
- The emergence of the Madi is another Shia narrative, in which the 12th imam restores the world.
- The narrative of the Crusades recounts the invasion of holy lands by unbelievers who are on a mission to destroy Islam.
- The Tatars-narrative is about the invasion of Arab lands by the Mongols.



- 1924 recounts the dissolution of the Khalifat by Ataturk.
- The Nakbar, Arabic for catastrophe, describes the loss of Palestine to Israel after WWII.



Some of these master narratives are unresolved by form, and by local versions. One could make the argument that the unresolved ones are especially powerful in calling for personal action. They fall under two top story forms: Either, a deceiver executes a plan to harm believers, or a powerful army invades Muslim lands and kills believers upon which a champion emerges to defeat the aggressors. The two archetype characters are, firstly, the impostor who harms believers, and secondly, the champion who saves the believers through great personal sacrifices. The latter is either rewarded in this life or in the afterlife, if he dies in his struggle. According to all these master narratives, the world is a dangerous place for Islam as impostures and barbarian invaders try to damage the community of believers.

Corman suggested five strategies to counter these narratives:

*I. Do not reinforce the extremists' narratives by speech, symbols or action.*

*II. Use counter-narrative principles:*

- Dissolve analogy by proving invalidating it.
- Dissolve and replace the analogy by proving that it is wrong and that another analogy is right.
- Use disnology if you cannot or do not want to prove that their analogy is wrong, by making the argument that their analogy seems to be true but the facts do not obey its structure.
- Counter the analogy, by pointing out that the analogy seems to be true but another one explains the situation better.

In the case of the crusade analogy for example, one could argue that the crusades were led by Catholic Europeans, and that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were led by secular states, and that the US did not want to occupy these countries. An example of a counter-analogy may be to portray the West's engagement in Afghanistan as closer to how the Ottomans crushed a Wahhabi rebellion during which the Wahhabis were killing innocent people.

*III. Decompress time*

Extremists depend on the idea of an enclave culture that seems to be continuously under attack from outside, and the past is compressed to few events in time. Historical details that are "inconvenient" to the extremists need to be emphasised. For example, Saladin as the archetypical champion who worked to defend Muslims did not lead the Muslims into a clash of civilization. Rather, he entered alliances with the Byzantine Christians against the Catholic Europeans. Furthermore, as an Asharite, he followed a school of Muslim theology which extremists today consider heretical.



#### *IV. Deconstruct binaries which extremists depend upon*

One could cast doubt about the idea of a clash-of-civilization-view by pointing out that Christians and Jews are people of the book.

#### *V. Recast archetypes*

One way to do this was to portray the Taliban as hypocrites. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan issued a report that estimated that approximately 80 per cent of the civilian casualties were caused by anti-government forces. One could argue that a Muslim champion would not kill other Muslims and point out that the Taliban did not achieve anything tangible.

Another way to recast archetypes is to reframe the archetype itself. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a Pashtun follower of Gandhi, for instance, fought British colonial oppression with non-violence. He commanded a 100,000 strong non-violent army. Ghaffar Khan could be portrayed as a champion who actually accomplished something for Muslims by non-violent means.

### **Discussion**

A participant asked whether there was an inherent one-sidedness in the search for narratives, that is, individuals in search of extremist narratives would most likely not pay attention to other contradictory narratives. Corman agreed that confirmation-biased could occur but stressed that developing and promoting counter narratives were still necessary. This was because failing to challenge extremist narratives by developing or advocating alternate ones enabled extremists to monopolise the conversation and frame messages according to their worldview.

Corman was asked what the master narrative of the Western world could be, since it was difficult to develop a counter a narrative if one did not know which values one stood for. It was suggested that the West's master narrative could revolve around science, technology, development, as well as pragmatism.



## **Seminar on Communication Strategies to Counter Extremist Ideology<sup>4</sup>**

**30 September 2011 (Friday)  
Vanda 5, Level 6, Marina Mandarin Hotel**

Corman began by discussing three different interpretations in social theory of the term 'ideology'. The critical view argues that it is an instrument of state control that maintains class structure and systems of domination. The transformational view posits that it is an agent of social change, while the cultural view suggests that ideology is the discourse system in which ideas unfold. To Corman, ideology was the combination of the critical, transformational and cultural, and as such, was a system of ideas about the way things are or ought to be that circulates in discourse.

According to Corman, misconceptions about ideology exist that prevent practitioners from better understanding how to counter it. Such misconceptions include: (a) ideology is coherent and unified. There is, in reality, a noticeable incoherence of values and beliefs within individuals and divisions among groups. For example, Islamists differ in their conceptualisation of *takfir* and whether 'the far enemy' should be the focus of attacks or 'the near enemy'; (b) ideology is static. Ideologies, in fact, change over time. A case in point is the HAMAS ideology which has seemingly become more pragmatic in recent times; (c) ideology is framed around single thought systems so that it is always related to religion, historical incident or political grievance(s). In actuality, ideology is a mix of all these elements.

Corman then talked about the disadvantages of 'over-psychologising' the concept of ideology. This meant treating it as some idea that was implanted in an individual's head that mechanistically guides their behaviour and attributions. Corman argued that external factors, such as historical and cultural events, political and religious circumstances, economic, social and familial realities, everyday exchanges, opinions, rumours, persuasion and propaganda, are instrumental in shaping ideologies. Hence, ideology is something that circulates in discourse and influences people in that manner. Communicators should therefore focus their attention on how these discursive moves function rather than on the content of the ideas in order to develop useful strategies to counter extremist ideologies.

The four functions of ideological discourse were discussed next. These were: (a) Naturalising – turning social constructions into taken-for-granted ideas; (b) Obscuring – Obscure or deny contradictions in on-going systems of meaning; (c) Universalising – Make particularistic interests seem to be universal; (d) Structuring – Create structures that favour reproduction of the ideology. He then provided examples from the US, Singapore and Islamists to elucidate these points.

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Corman suggested several strategies that could counter ideological discourse. These were: (a) Naturalising – Challenge assumptions, beliefs, and meanings; (b) Obscuring – Surface and push contradictions; (c) Universalising - engage keys leaders and groups; (d) Structuring – Breach structures created by the ideologues.

Another important instrument in promoting or disrupting ideological discourses was framing. It referred to the use of rhetorical construction, consciously or unconsciously, to encourage certain interpretations of a situation and discourage others. It was considered essential to social movement mobilisation and widely used in politics. The media plays an important role in the framing of issues through sensationalising reports and using strategic words in its reporting.

The core framing-tasks were identified as: (a) Diagnostic framing for the identification of a problem and assignment of blame; (b) Prognostic framing to suggest solutions, strategies, and tactics to a problem; (c) Motivational framing that serves as a call to arms or rationale for action. According to the research by Benford and Snow, the degree to which framers attended to these tasks determined the level of participant mobilisation.

In countering extremist framing, Corman therefore suggested that: (a) alternatives must be provided for the dominant frame; (b) over-focusing on diagnosis framing must be avoided as it would lead to more confusions and misunderstanding of the core meanings; (c) confusion about prognosis framing must be created to make motivational framing difficult; (d) a lack of motivational framing made diagnosis and prognosis framing less potent. Corman concluded his presentation with a reiteration of the key points.

## **Discussion**

A participant asked about the impact of religious and cultural values on political ideology. Corman acknowledged that religious and cultural values did significantly impact political ideology, and stressed that more efforts should be made to understand the key functions of the ideology, which would enable the development of better counter strategies.

Another participant inquired about the usage of repetition in learning and its effectiveness in strategic communication. Corman replied that at present, repetition and message control were beginning to lose traction especially with the advent of social media. Experimentation would therefore be a more viable approach to developing effective communication strategies.

Corman was asked about ideology and its relation to the self-radicalisation of individuals, and if there were solutions to solve this problem. He suggested that 'inoculation' might be a useful approach. Inoculation theory posits that in order to hinder persuasion, preexisting attitudes, beliefs, or opinions need to be adequately



strengthened. The idea is to make the receiver actively defensive and allow them to create arguments in favour of their preexisting thoughts. The more active the receiver becomes in his or her defence, the more it will strengthen their own attitudes, beliefs, or opinions.

When asked whether the Arab Spring had been effective in countering the Islamist narrative since it was perpetrated by popular and indeed secular forces, Corman replied affirmatively.