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Strategic Communications in UN Peace Operations: From an Afterthought to an Operational Necessity

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Executive Summary

United Nations peace operations are increasingly recognizing strategic communications as essential to implementing their mandates and managing expectations about what they can and cannot achieve. While the use of strategic communications in UN peace operations is not new, it has taken on added importance due to changes in patterns of violence and in the technological landscape. These changes are being exploited by armed groups and other stakeholders to shape perceptions of the political landscape, undermine confidence in missions, and mobilize violence, UN personnel, and other targets. At the same time, the communications revolution offers UN peace operations new capabilities to share information with the public and gather public input.

In response to these changes, UN missions have been ramping up their communications capabilities and shifting their approach. Nonetheless, missions continue to face obstacles. Many mission leaders do not treat strategic communications as central to planning and decision making. Most missions lack strategic communications personnel with the up-to-date, specialized skills needed, and there is a general lack of training. Missions also lack adequate policy and guidance and systems for monitoring and evaluating their strategic communications activities.

To address these challenges, UN peace operations need to continue adapting their approach to designing strategic communications plans. As a starting point, strategic communications should be directly in service to a mission's mandated objectives. Missions should keep in mind all audiences and constituencies—domestic, regional, and international—and tailor their messages to each of them. These messages should be grounded in evidence, rooted in story-telling, and transmitted through credible messengers. Communications should also be two-way so that missions are not simply informing local communities but also being informed by them. Finally, missions should regularly monitor, evaluate, and learn from their strategic communications.

To effectively adapt their approach to strategic communications, missions need additional and modernized capabilities. This requires both more targeted recruitment and better training. They also need to give communications personnel a seat at the decision-making table as part of a shift toward a whole-of-mission, preventive approach to strategic communications. Toward this end, there is a need for more accountability and guidance on strategic communications, as well as more coordination both within missions and with other actors. Ultimately, peace operations require a cultural shift, with mission leaders seeing strategic communications as a core mission capacity.

Introduction

Strategic communications are increasingly recognized as an essential means for United Nations peace operations to successfully implement their mandates to reduce violence and sustain peace and to manage expectations about what they can and cannot achieve. While public information and communication have long been recognized as important tools for UN peace operations, rapid changes in the communications landscape, including the significant penetration of social media and increased use of smartphones, pose new operational and reputational risks for UN missions. These changes are being exploited by armed groups and other stakeholders to shape perceptions of the political landscape, to undermine confidence in missions, and, at times, to mobilize violence against civilians, UN personnel, and other targets. At the same time, the communications revolution offers UN peace operations new capabilities to share information with the public and gather public input.

In response, UN peace operations are developing their capabilities to communicate with diverse national, regional, and international stakeholders. Their aim is not just to counter misconceptions but to proactively create alternative narratives around their work to improve understanding of what they seek to do and how they intend to do it, to build trust, and to deter potential spoilers. They are developing compelling, timely, purpose-driven, story-based messages tailored to diverse audiences and disseminated through various two-way channels, frequently working with local partners. To do this, they need to understand the media landscape and public opinion and to constantly monitor and regularly adjust their strategy.

This approach is a departure from the top-down, reactive style of traditional corporate communications. It requires a cultural shift, with mission personnel recognizing that effective communica-

> Effective communication is not only the responsibility of a mission's leadership and strategic communications section but of the entire mission.

tion is not only the responsibility of the mission's leadership and strategic communications section but of the entire mission. It also has implications for how the UN resources its missions and recruits and trains its personnel to ensure they have the skills and capabilities they require. To effectively implement this approach, the UN will need to identify and apply lessons from UN peace operations and other actors across the globe.

This issue brief analyzes the current strategic communications practice in UN peacekeeping operations and special political missions. It explores why strategic communications are increasingly important in the contexts where missions are deployed and the external and internal challenges missions face. It also identifies best practices peace operations might adopt or adapt from other parts of the UN system and related fields. The issue brief draws on a virtual, closed-door roundtable organized by IPI and the UN Department of Peace Operations' Strategic Communications Section in April 2021, as well as supplemental research and interviews.

What Are Strategic Communications?

Generally speaking, strategic communications are "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission."[1] When successful, a strategic communications campaign informs and influences perceptions of what, how, and why an organization is operating. It seeks to "promote a viable and appealing story and to tell that story in a way that resonates with the target audience as well as to promote dialogue and influence behavior and perceptions" in order to achieve a desired end state.[2] Effective contemporary strategic communications involve two-way messaging (i.e., both messaging and listening) tailored to different audiences (both public and

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1 Kirk Hallahan et al., "Defining Strategic Communication," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 1, no. 1 (2007), p. 1.

2 Nick Birnback, "Under the Blue Flag: Leadership and Strategic Communications in UN Peace Operations," International Forum on the Challenges of Peace Operations, March 2019, p. 11.

private) across different media platforms (radio, TV, print, Internet, social media, etc.) based on data analysis and evaluation of impact.

Within the UN, the shift from public information to strategic communications is relatively new. In the early 2000s, the UN's Department of Public Information (DPI) began reorienting its approach, including by creating a Strategic Communications Division to ensure that "communications is placed at the heart of the strategic management of the United Nations."[3] Despite progress in several areas, this reorientation did not lead to "a coherent, systematic strategy" for communications.[4] It was only in 2020 that the UN developed its first global communications strategy, a move that coincided with the renaming of DPI as the Department of Global Communications. According to the UN, the 2020 communications strategy "represents a cultural shift for the Organization."[5] The goal is to foster a "culture of communications and transparency" that "permeate[s] all levels of the Organization as a means of fully informing the peoples of the world of the aims and activities of the United Nations."[6]

UN peace operations have seen a similar shift toward strategic communications since the mid-2000s. In the context of peace operations, strategic communications are the ability to "explain to key stakeholders and clients nationally, regionally and internationally what the mission is there to do and how it will do it" (its mandate, concept of operations, etc.).[7] Peace operations are political interventions that ultimately rely on building and maintaining the trust and good will of different stakeholders through a mix of community engagement, political engagement, and informational

outreach. Strategic communications play a central role in all of these areas. They are crucial to missions achieving their mandates, both directly and indirectly. They can directly contribute to the mandates of peace operations by helping advance peace and mitigate the risk of conflict and violence against civilians, including by deterring spoilers, dispelling misinformation, and providing clear, accurate, and calming information during crises. They can also indirectly enable mandate implementation by better positioning and branding the mission and enhancing its situational awareness. Conversely, failures of communication have real operational and programmatic risks and consequences.

Today, most peacekeeping operations have strategic communications and public information divisions.[8] The functions of these divisions include conducting media monitoring and sentiment analysis, developing differentiated messaging in support of mission objectives, and advising senior mission leaders on communication, as well as managing media relations, crisis communications, multimedia production, and digital campaigns. Since 2015, several peacekeeping missions have been explicitly mandated to carry out strategic communications.[9]

At the headquarters level, the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO) has a Strategic Communications Section staffed with ten regular personnel.[10] The section provides advice and guidance to missions; builds support for UN peacekeeping through campaigns, outreach, and media relations; oversees departmental crisis communications; maintains all peacekeeping social media channels; and advocates for strengthening depart-

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3   This restructuring of DPI took place in 2002. See: UN General Assembly, *Reorientation of United Nations Activities in the Field of Public Information and Communications—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/AC.198/2003/2, March 7, 2003, para. 17.

4   This was the finding of a 2019 evaluation by the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS). See: UN Economic and Social Council, *Evaluation of the Department of Public Information—Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services*, UN Doc. E/AC.51/2019/2, February 22, 2019, p. 8.

5   UN Department of Global Communications, "Global Communications Strategy 2020," 2020, p. 3.

6   United Nations, "Reforms by Newly Named Department of Global Communication Aim at Outreach 'for Impact,' Under-Secretary-General Tells Committee on Information," April 29, 2019.

7   Birnback, "Under the Blue Flag," p. 3.

8   The size of these divisions varies by mission. Among the four largest peacekeeping missions, MONUSCO has 134 communications staff, UNMISS has 108, MINUSCA has 86, and MINUSMA has 71. Most of these are national staff working for the UN radio station, so the number of general communications staff is smaller. In MONUSCO, for example, 27 of these staff work for the office of public information versus 107 for the UN radio station. See the latest budget for each mission: UN Docs. A/75/769, A/75/762, A/75/760, and A/75/767.

9   These include the missions in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), Mali (MINUSMA), and South Sudan (UNMISS).

10 Eight posts are funded through the UN peacekeeping support account and two through extra-budgetary funding from donors. The section also has a few UN volunteers, interns, and consultants at any given time. Written communication with UN officials 1 and 2, July 2021.

ment-wide strategic communications capabilities both at the mission level and at UN headquarters.[11] Strategic communications and public information divisions in peacekeeping missions also receive headquarters-level support from the Peace and Security Section of the Department of Global Communications' Strategic Communications Division, which is responsible for global communications campaigns.[12]

In 2016, the UN developed a Strategic Communications and Public Information Policy to provide guidance to UN peacekeeping operations.[13] An update of the 2006 Policy on Public Information for Peace Operations, the policy officially introduced strategic communications to peacekeeping for the first time to better reflect "the proactive, strategic nature of modern-day communications activities."[14] According to the policy, the aim of strategic communications is threefold: (1) to increase confidence in peace processes and enable missions to understand and respond to public sentiment; (2) to build support for missions' mandates and objectives among host-state populations and international audiences, including through reputation management; and (3) to manage threats, including by countering "inaccurate and/or antagonistic media" that may put personnel at risk, establishing relationships with and providing timely warning about potential threats to host communities, and communicating about crises to minimize their impact.[15] The policy is scheduled to be updated in 2021–2022, with more focus on addressing mis- and disinformation and on ensuring military and police public information officers, like their civilian counterparts, are strategic communications professionals.

> Strategic communications can help advance peace and mitigate the risk of conflict and violence against civilians.

In addition to the UN Secretariat, UN member states have also shown support for improving strategic communications in peace operations. Under the 2018 Declaration of Shared Commitments, part of the secretary-general's Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative, member states have "commit[ed] to improving strategic communications and engagement with local populations to strengthen the understanding of the peacekeeping missions and their mandates."[16] Strategic communications are also one of seven priorities identified by "A4P+," the 2021–2023 implementation plan for A4P.[17]

By comparison, fewer resources tend to be devoted to strategic communications and public information in special political missions (SPMs). Larger, field-based SPMs more closely resemble their peacekeeping counterparts, with the greatest communications capacities in the missions in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Somalia (UNSOM), and Iraq (UNAMI). Other SPMs, including envoys' offices, tend to have only two or three communications staff. The UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs' (DPPA) headquarters-based communications capacity is also much more limited than that of DPO. DPPA has only two full-time communications staff, both funded by voluntary contributions from member states. This comparatively small team dedicates much of its time to helping craft the secretary-general's daily media messaging on events and developments around the world.[18] Especially following the reform of the UN's peace and security pillar, the communications teams of DPPA and DPO have stepped up their coordination and cooperation.[19]

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11 In 2018, the Public Affairs Section of the then–Department of Peacekeeping Operations was replaced by the Strategic Communications Section, reflecting the increased prioritization of communications. UN General Assembly Resolution 72/262 (July 5, 2018), UN Doc. A/RES/72/262 C, July 18, 2018.

12 Kseniya Oksamytna, *Advocacy and Change in International Organizations: Protection, Communication, and Reconstruction in UN Peacekeeping* (on file with authors), forthcoming book manuscript dated April 2021. The chapter "Public Information and Strategic Communications" highlights some of the challenges associated with this arrangement.

13 The policy does not apply to special political missions but "may serve as a guide" for them. UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), Department of Field Support (DFS), and Department of Public Information (DPI), "Strategic Communications and Public Information Policy," Ref. 2016.11, January 2017, para. 3.

14 Ibid., para. 5.

15 Ibid., para. 9.

16 United Nations, "Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations," 2018.

17 United Nations, "A4P+: Priorities for 2021–2023," 2021.

18 As the UN's political department, DPPA has a global remit that extends beyond the approximately thirty SPMs.

19 Interview with UN official 3, May 2021.

The different level of emphasis on strategic communications between peacekeeping operations and SPMs reflects, in part, differences in their mandates, composition, and institutional culture. The leaders of SPMs generally recognize the importance of effective communication, but, as one UN official observed, "Many are involved in delicate discussions and negotiations and don't want to communicate all the time."[20] While all UN missions are often involved in sensitive political work, the approach to strategic communications in an envoy's office focused narrowly on mediation or the facilitation of a political process behind closed doors will inevitably differ from that in a mission with a multidimensional mandate and personnel on the ground. For example, an envoy's office engaged in mediation might avoid public messaging, depending on the style of the mediator, the phase of the talks, the opportunities and risks of visibility, and the privacy and safety of those with whom the mediator is engaged.[21] Regardless of their size and mandate, all missions would benefit from greater understanding of when, how, and with whom to communicate.

Box 1. Strategic communications in peacekeeping operations versus national militaries

Strategic communications in UN peace operations share some similarities with those in traditional military operations. For both military operations and peace operations, strategic communications involve the coordinated use of multiple channels to convey the operation's objectives to different audiences. For both, they can "act as a 'force multiplier' and in the service of 'force protection.'"[22] For both, they involve a contest with adversaries to control the message and shape public opinion. Yet there are important differences. Although peacekeeping operations typically include large military and police components and may use force in a time-bound, localized way, most missions employ a range of civilian, military, and police efforts to achieve *political* objectives. UN peacekeeping operations need to use a wider, less militarized lens for strategic communications.

Peace operations may employ techniques similar to those of military information operations ("info ops"). In the context of peacekeeping, Dan Lindley defines info ops as "the use of media… to help a peacekeeping operation to accomplish its mandate," including public information and outreach.[23] By this definition, much of what peace operations' strategic communications and public information units do is info ops. In the case of peacekeeping, however, the aim is "to inform local and global audiences truthfully and comprehensively about [the] mission's role, activities, and plans."[24]

By contrast, military doctrine for warfare goes a step further. The US doctrine on strategic communications describes info ops as efforts "to influence, disrupt, corrupt or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own."[25] This could include, for example, targeting communications systems vital to command and control. As part of their strategic communications, national militaries also use info ops as tactical tools, which can stretch the normative, doctrinal, and ethical limits of peacekeeping.

These limits are even further stretched by psychological operations ("psyops"), often considered to be a subset of info ops. NATO defines psyops as "planned psychological activities using methods of communications and other means directed to approved audiences in order to influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, affecting the achievement of political and military objectives."[26] Their goal, according to the US

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20 Ibid.

21 Interview with UN official 4, July 2021.

22 Kevin Avruch, James L. Narel, and Pascale Combelles Siegel, "Information Campaigns for Peace Operations," C4ISR Cooperative Research Program, March 2000, p. 19.

23 Dan Lindley, "Untapped Power? The Status of UN Information Operations," *International Peacekeeping* 11, no. 4 (2004).

24 Kseniya Oksamytna, "Policy Entrepreneurship by International Bureaucracies: The Evolution of Public Information in UN Peacekeeping," *International Peacekeeping* 25, no. 1 (2018), p. 12.

25 US Department of Defense, "Strategic Communications Joint Integrated Concept," October 2009.

26 NATO, "NATO Strategic Communications Policy," NATO Doc. SG(2009)0794, September 14, 2009.

Department of Defense, is "to induce or reinforce foreign attitudes and behavior favorable to the originator's objectives."[27] Psyops, particularly deception and disinformation campaigns, have been "hugely problematic in peace operations, where 'transparency' is valued, and the credibility of the intervening third party (to the disputants) is deemed crucial to the mission's success."[28] They are especially problematic considering that UN peace operations' public communications and actions already face scrutiny from host-state governments and conflict parties wary of bias or of being negatively portrayed.

Nonetheless, the tactical use of strategic communications may be increasingly relevant where peacekeepers are the target of attacks or of disinformation or hate speech spread on media. Some observers have argued that "the closer 'peacekeeping' gets to 'peace enforcement,' the closer UN troops come to engaging in combat," and the more conflict parties use sophisticated information campaigns, the more pressure there is from participating member states for missions to resort to tools traditionally used by national militaries.[29] The relevance of info ops to peace operations may even extend beyond such kinetic environments, as "traditional" Chapter VI peacekeeping operations in places like the Middle East and Kashmir are also susceptible to mis- and disinformation campaigns.[30]

The development of a UN peacekeeping-intelligence policy and structures, while contested by some member states, also demonstrates a growing acknowledgement of the role of info ops capabilities in certain peacekeeping environments, particularly to ensure the safety and security of peacekeepers.[31] For example, missions may need such capabilities to trace an attack back to its origin to target the perpetrators. However, the UN has no doctrine to regulate these capabilities. According to one UN official, this lack of doctrine raises risks, as certain activities are not explicitly prohibited: "The UN should draw a red line around anything that can be construed as disinformation…. The UN shouldn't do anything that is dishonest. That is not true for the military."[32]

Why Strategic Communications Matter to Peace Operations

The use of strategic communications in UN peace operations is not new. Recently, however, it has taken on added importance due to changes in patterns of violence where missions are deployed and in the technological landscape, as well as a greater recognition of the importance of advocacy and outreach. These changes, together with internal obstacles within missions themselves, present challenges to effective strategic communications.

The Growing Importance of Strategic Communications

Most missions began using public information to engage local populations after the Cold War. Prior to operations in Namibia and Cambodia, communicating with host-state populations was not viewed as a necessary function. Well into the 1990s, the approach to public information was inconsistent, with variable success.[33]

Following the Brahimi Report in 2000, a new approach to managing information in peacekeeping contexts emerged under which public

27 US Department of Defense, "Strategic Communications Joint Integrated Concept."

28 Avruch, Narel, and Siegel, "Information Campaigns for Peace Operations," p. 21.

29 Ibid., p. 30.

30 Written communication with UN official 1, July 2021.

31 Sarah-Myriam Martin-Brûlé, "Finding the UN Way on Peacekeeping-Intelligence," International Peace Institute, April 2020.

32 Interview with UN official 1, May 2021.

33 In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Rwanda, for example, "the UN was unable to communicate effectively and counter hostile propaganda." Oksamytna, "Policy Entrepreneurship by International Bureaucracies," p. 18.

information and communications capacity was viewed as "an operational necessity."[34] Despite the inclusion of public information units as a standard component of peacekeeping missions, the 2015 report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) observed that "United Nations peace operations often struggle to communicate their messages to the local population and the broader global community."[35] It argued, therefore, that "the outdated public information approach of the United Nations must be transformed into more dynamic communications efforts." This required missions to better understand key audiences, make better use of national staff, embrace technology, train leaders in effective communication, proactively engage with local populations, and tailor both the message and means of communication to particular audiences.[36]

More recently, three factors have made strategic communications even more important to a mission's success. The first is the complexity of the environments in which most contemporary peace operations deploy. Civilians are frequent targets of violence, raising expectations that missions will provide them protection (see Box 2). Peacekeepers mandated to extend state authority and support state security forces face perceptions of bias and the threat of direct attacks by armed groups. Host-state officials resent pressure and criticism from their UN counterparts. UN missions also work alongside a diverse set of partners engaged in mediation, training, humanitarian assistance, development activities, and peace enforcement, increasing the likelihood that they will engage in cross-messaging, if not work at cross-purposes. Moreover, regional and global powers, whether involved in conflicts directly or through proxies, have launched sophisticated information operations that the UN and

most troop- and police-contributing countries (T/PCCs) are unable to counter, as seen in the Central African Republic (CAR) in the run-up to the 2021 elections.[37] In such environments, missions need to be able to tailor their outreach and messaging to different local communities, armed actors, government officials, and regional and international partners to communicate their objectives, build trust in political processes, raise awareness of potential threats or upcoming operations, quell rumors, and mitigate negative perceptions.

Second, the dramatic global shift in the scope, scale, and speed of communications is having an impact in the contexts where UN peace operations are deployed. While many communities, particularly in more remote areas, continue to rely on radio and other traditional forms of media, Internet access and the use of social media and smartphones are increasing exponentially. This accelerates the spread of information, fragments content and how it is consumed, and creates "closed loops" through the use of point-to-point applications such as WhatsApp, resulting in different perceptions of what has or has not taken place and its import. In some cases, these changes may have a positive impact, motivating people to act in ways that promote peace and stability in a community or region; in others, they may be detrimental, particularly when it comes to the spread of misinformation or disinformation (see Box 3).

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, undermining trust between society and the state and fraying social cohesion. In many countries, societal pressures have erupted into protests. Fears about the spread of the virus have also fueled xenophobia, discrimination, and

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34 The Brahimi Report noted that "an effective public information and communications capacity in mission areas is an operational necessity for virtually all United Nations peace operations. Effective communication helps to dispel rumour, to counter disinformation and to secure the cooperation of local populations. It can provide leverage in dealing with leaders of rival groups, enhance security of United Nations personnel and serve as a force multiplier. It is thus essential that every peace operation formulate public information campaign strategies, particularly for key aspects of a mission's mandate, and that such strategies and the personnel required to implement them be included in the very first elements deployed to help start up a new mission." UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*, UN Doc. A/55/305–S/2000/809, August 21, 2000, para. 146.

35 UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, *Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People*, UN Doc. A/70/95–S/2015/446, June 16, 2015, para. 306.

36 Ibid., paras. 307–308. Technology was also emphasized in the 2014 final report of the Expert Panel on Technology and Innovation in UN Peacekeeping: "A more modern approach to strategic communications can enhance the mission's ability to deliver across its mandate. In addition, social media, crowdsourcing, big data and traditional public media sources must also be incorporated into the mix, and peacekeeping should maximize its use of open source information and analysis tools." United Nations, "Performance Peacekeeping: Final Report of the Expert Panel on Technology and Innovation in UN Peacekeeping," 2015. See also: Ingrid A. Lehmann, "Still Caught in the Crossfire? UN Peace Operations and Their Information Capacities," in *Communication and Peace*, Julia Hoffmann and Virgil Hawkins, eds. (London: Routledge, 2015).

37 Jack Stubbs, "French and Russian Trolls Wrestle for Influence in Africa, Facebook Says," Reuters, December 15, 2020.

Box 2. Strategic communications for the protection of civilians

Strategic communications are critical to peace operations' work on the protection of civilians (POC). There is often a gap between local, national, and international public expectations that peace operations will prevent or respond to threats to civilians and missions' mandate, capability, or preparedness to do so. As a recent UN review observed, "Perceived failures of missions to protect civilians are… widely known… and have lasting strategic consequences."[38] Missions can use strategic communications to reduce this gap both by making POC more effective and by managing expectations about the level of protection the UN can provide while emphasizing that POC is the primary responsibility of the state.

The UN's POC handbook identifies several ways that strategic communications can make POC more effective, with different objectives for different audiences, including:

- To reassure communities at risk that the mission will protect them or to refer them to other sources of assistance;
- To support and encourage POC efforts by other protection actors;
- To dissuade armed groups from perpetrating violence against civilians, including by communicating that perpetrators will be held accountable;
- To persuade the host state to fulfill its primary responsibility to protect civilians and denounce its failure to do so; and
- To identify and counter hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation propagated through the media or on social media (see Box 3).[39]

More generally, strategic communications can also contribute to POC by fostering a protective environment, including through efforts to promote social cohesion.

Beyond making their POC efforts more effective, missions can use strategic communications to manage expectations of what level of protection they can provide. This is particularly important when missions are reconfiguring their presence or shifting their approach to POC. The 2019 independent strategic review of the mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), for example, recommended that the mission clearly communicate that its military component would shift to focusing its POC efforts on six conflict-affected provinces, while the Congolese armed forces would be responsible for the rest of the country.[40] Similarly, the 2020 independent strategic review of the mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) observed that "enhanced communication would limit any reputational concerns that could emerge as a result of the decision to redesignate [POC] sites and should include clear, transparent and strategic communication about plans and consultative, two-way communication with internally displaced persons."[41] In practice, both missions have recognized the importance of communicating with local communities about shifts in their approach to POC, but the gap between expectations and reality persists.[42]

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38 United Nations, "Review of Peacekeeping Responses in Four Critical Missions" (on file with authors), November 2020, p. 36.

39 UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Handbook," 2020, p. 70.

40 UN Security Council, *Transitioning from Stabilization to Peace: An Independent Strategic Review of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, UN Doc. S/2019/842, October 25, 2019, para. 179.

41 UN Security Council, *Report on the Independent Strategic Review of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2514 (2020)*, UN Doc. S/2020/1224, December 15, 2020, para. 189.

42 On communication around UNMISS's redesignation of three POC sites in 2020, see: Lauren Spink and Daniel Levine-Spound, "'They Said "It's Your Government to Protect You." We Said It Was the Government That Killed Us': Civilian Perspectives on the Future of UNMISS," Center for Civilians in Conflict, February 19, 2021. On MONUSCO's communication around the closure of five bases in North Kivu in 2017, see: Lauren Spink, "Protection with Less Presence: How the Peacekeeping Operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo Is Attempting to Deliver Protection with Fewer Resources," Center for Civilians in Conflict, January 2018, pp. 24–25.

violence—including against the UN. In South Sudan, for example, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was in a UN staff member, forcing the UN to address damaging news coverage on social media blaming the organization for spreading the virus and to counter threats to its personnel.[43] Timely, fact-based public education by UN peace operations has been essential to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, keep mission personnel and the populations they serve safe, dispel rumors, and maintain the legitimacy of the UN.

External Challenges to Strategic Communications

Taken together, these changes in the communications landscape pose significant risks for UN peace operations. Armed groups and other stakeholders are using more widely available means of communication to recruit supporters, undermine confidence in national and local leaders, and shape perceptions of the political landscape. For example, in North Africa and the Sahel, where the UN has several peace operations, including in Mali (MINUSMA) and Libya (UNSMIL), "multilevel communication capabilities are a core element of the jihadi phenomenon.… Jihadist groups have developed effective and sophisticated communication strategies via the creation of magazines and weekly media outlets… but mainly through the use of social media channels."[44]

Spoilers are using these capabilities to undermine confidence in, and even mobilize violence against, peace operations personnel. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), "fake news" accusing UN peacekeepers of killing a protester while delivering weapons to armed groups circulated on social media. In conjunction with existing public frustration with the inability of the UN

> Spoilers are using new communications capabilities to undermine confidence in, and even mobilize violence against, peace operations personnel.

mission to adequately protect civilians, this resulted in the burning of a UN office. In Mali, rumors that the UN was partnering with jihadists led to protesters blocking access to a UN base in the center of the country. In CAR, targeted information operations against the UN complicated electoral support provided by the mission.[45]

While many of these efforts amount to disinformation, some groups have also been savvy in pointing out legitimate gaps between UN rhetoric and action. Negative perceptions of a mission can arise because the mission has failed to deliver (e.g., by failing to protect civilians) or caused harm (e.g., through sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers). These negative stories tend to dominate local coverage and attention. As Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Jack Barclay point out, "UN credibility suffers from a 'say-do' gap, whereby some audiences feel that UN rhetoric is not supported by action."[46]

These gaps arise because there is almost always a mismatch between what a mission is expected to achieve and what it is able or mandated to achieve, especially when it comes to the protection of civilians (see Box 2). In Mali, for example, there has been "frustration over the 'failure' of MINUSMA to combat the 'terrorist threat'" even though the mission does not have a counterterrorism mandate—though it operates alongside other international operations that do.[47] By contrast, the UN mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) does have a mandate to neutralize armed groups, but it lacks the capacity to implement this mandate effectively, similarly leading to frustration.[48] This expectations gap can lead to resentment or anger, undermining public trust in the mission and jeopardizing its ability to protect civilians, demobilize former combatants, or secure and maintain participation in political processes.

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43   UN DPO, note on missions' responses to misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech (on file with authors), May 2021.

44   Andreea Stoian Karadeli, "Extremist Communication Capabilities in North Africa and the Sahel," NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2020.

45   UN DPO, note on missions' responses to misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech.

46   While Fink and Barclay are commenting on the UN's role in counterterrorism, this point applies equally to peace operations. Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Jack Barclay, "Mastering the Narrative: Counterterrorism Strategic Communication and the United Nations," Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, 2013, p. 40.

47   Jaïr van der Lijn et al., "Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in Mali," Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network, 2019, p. 82.

48   United Nations, "Review of Peacekeeping Responses in Four Critical Missions," p. 42.

Another challenge is identifying who is behind disinformation and what their motive is (see Box 3). Missions cannot always track and pinpoint the exact origin of harmful messaging, especially when social media messages originate on one platform (like WhatsApp) before jumping to another (like Facebook). According to one UN official, "Responding to disinformation requires harnessing political analysis. We can't counter it without analytic tools to understand where it is coming from, where the levers are—who's seeking to influence who for what ends."[49] The UN needs to be realistic about its capabilities and scope; a targeted approach focused on specific instances of disinformation is likely to be more successful than a broad effort to counter all disinformation.

In a few instances, the UN has been able to work with social media companies to address disinformation, including by collaborating with Facebook to remove pages and with Twitter to verify accounts.[50] However, these institutional relationships are still nascent, and social media companies are not always willing to take decisive action, especially against state-backed disinformation campaigns.[51] Even when the perpetrators can be identified, missions may not have the political leverage to act, particularly when disinformation is being pushed by regional or international actors. They may also lack the scope to act, especially if disinformation originates from outside the country or is targeting diaspora communities.

In some contexts, strategic communications can also face obstruction from host-state governments. In South Sudan, for example, the government has jammed UN radio transmissions, intercepted communications equipment, and detained communications staff.[52] The government of Syria has gone as far as criminalizing media activities.[53] Especially in polarized environments, every word that comes out of the mission is being scrutinized, and maintaining impartiality requires a delicate balancing act. In such environments, strategic communications pose risks to the mission and those it engages with.

Internal Challenges to Strategic Communications

While UN peace operations are trying to improve their strategic communications capabilities in response to these external challenges, internal obstacles can also impede effective messaging. One challenge is that mission leaders do not always see strategic communications personnel as an integral part of decision making, programming, and political engagement.[54] As one official noted, strategic communications are "often treated as an afterthought."[55] As a result, missions' communications have often been reactive, responding to negative incidents rather than creating a compelling narrative of incremental progress.

> Strategic communications are "often treated as an afterthought," leading to a reactive approach.

While the buy-in of mission leaders varies widely, some shy away from communications and may even distrust their own communications staff. Many do not see communications as a core part of their job; they leave it to the communications team rather than setting the message for the mission and working with communications personnel to tailor and amplify it. Fragmented, unclear, and inconsistent reporting lines can also create a disconnect between strategic communications personnel and mission leaders or other mission sections or components.[56]

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49 Interview with UN official 1, May 2021.

50 Written communication from UN official 2, July 2021.

51 See, for example: Julia Carrie Wong, "Revealed: The Facebook Loophole That Lets World Leaders Deceive and Harass Their Citizens," *The Guardian*, April 12, 2021.

52 UN peacekeeping official in IPI virtual roundtable, April 15, 2021.

53 Naomi Hunt, "New Syria Media Law Entrenches State Control," International Press Institute, September 1, 2011.

54 This challenge extends to the UN Secretariat at large, where the under-secretary-general for global communications is not included in the secretary-general's Executive Committee. According to a 2019 investigation by OIOS, this challenged "the ability of Department managers to provide strategic direction anchored in deliberations at the highest level" and "their ability to provide proactive guidance to other members of leadership at critical early stages." UN Doc. E/AC.51/2019/2.

55 UN official at IPI roundtable, April 15, 2021.

56 United Nations, "Review of Peacekeeping Responses in Four Critical Missions," pp. 25–26; Birnback, "Under the Blue Flag," p. 7.

Most peacekeeping missions also lack strategic communications personnel with the up-to-date, specialized skills needed in today's technology and media environment. Despite being specialists, civilian communications staff often lack skills in areas such as data analysis and digital technology, and this skill set is not reflected in the generic job postings that missions use to recruit public information officers. Military public information officers, who are nominated by TCCs, are often not even communications specialists—though this is changing following the adoption of new recruitment measures. National communications staff may have communications expertise and an understanding of the national media landscape but often lack knowledge of peacekeeping. For all staff, this lack of expertise is exacerbated by the lack of adequate training. In SPMs, for example, communications staff are trained in public information rather than strategic communications.[57] Across all peace operations, non-communications staff and senior mission leaders are seldom trained in strategic communications.[58]

Missions also lack adequate policy and guidance. The 2016 Strategic Communications and Public Information Policy for peacekeeping missions does not adequately reflect the rapidly evolving media landscape in which peacekeepers operate. According to one UN official, "There isn't enough policy guiding [strategic communications], including a more systemic way of implementing policy and supporting missions to achieve their goals. Especially given how quickly communications practices evolve, we need to invest in more proactive policy and guidance to address evolving challenges."[59] Without modalities, structures, or resources for developing and coordinating strategic communications plans, the way missions approach and integrate strategic communications is inconsistent at best.

Another challenge is that missions often lack systems to monitor their strategic communications activities

or evaluate their effectiveness. This has emerged as a shortcoming in several recent evaluations of strategic communications in peace operations. For example, a 2021 evaluation found that MINUSMA was not adequately monitoring its strategic communications and public information activities and had not commissioned an independent evaluation of these activities since 2015.[60]

Best Practices for Strategic Communications for UN Peace Operations

To address these challenges, UN peace operations need to consider both how they design their strategic communications plans and how they implement them. In doing so, they can draw on best practices that have emerged from the experiences of current UN peace operations, as well as from other fields and other UN and non-UN entities.

Substantive Design of Strategic Communications

A well-established best practice among strategic communications practitioners is that the first step is to identify the objectives. Only then should missions move on to identifying the audience, the most effective ways of formulating messages, and finally, the means for distributing those messages. This design process should form a loop, with regular recalibration based on monitoring, evaluation, and learning.[61]

Tying Strategic Communications to Political Objectives

For UN peace operations, whose mandates are rooted in the "primacy of politics," the objective of strategic communications is fundamentally polit-

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57 Written communication with former UN official, July 2021.

58 On the lack of strategic communications training for senior mission leaders, see: Kevin S. Kennedy and Laura Powers, "Senior Leadership Training in UN Peace Operations," International Peace Institute, February 2019, p. 18.

59 Interview with UN official 2, April 2021.

60 OIOS, "Audit of the Strategic Communication and Public Information Programme in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali," Report 2021/003, March 25, 2021. Similar findings emerged in the OIOS evaluations of strategic communications activities in UNAMI in 2019, UNAMA in 2018, and MINUSCA in 2017.

61 The UN Department of Global Communications identifies seven steps to strategic communications: (1) Why communicate? (2) Which audience? (3) What story? (4) What action? (5) What medium? (6) What distribution? (7) What impact? United Nations, "Global Communications Strategy 2020," pp. 7–8.

Box 3. Countering misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech

Misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech are not new phenomena, but they have become more virulent due to social media and advances in technology enabling "deep-fake" audio and visual content that is indistinguishable from real content. In fact, studies have shown that rumors and falsehoods spread faster than true information online.[62] Similarly, "digital technology exponentially amplifies hate speech, often aimed at women, minorities and vulnerable populations."[63] As social media use grows in the contexts where peace operations are deployed, the challenge will only increase.[64]

While these terms are often used in combination and are related, they have different meanings. Misinformation is false information that is spread without necessarily intending to mislead, while disinformation is false content that is purposefully crafted or manipulated to mislead. The boundary between mis- and disinformation is fluid, as what begin as intentionally false messages are often spread by those who believe the messages to be true (or at least plausible). Hate speech is "any kind of communication… that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or group on the basis of who they are."[65] Hate speech can be a "precursor to atrocity crimes, including genocide."[66]

The UN has taken several initiatives to address these threats. In 2020, the UN launched the Verified initiative to counter the global "infodemic." This has involved setting up a network of volunteers to receive weekly verified social media content related to the infodemic in nine languages that can be sent to other networks. It has also involved the creation of original content at the mission level (including public service announcements in local languages for the radio) alongside related initiatives such as #TakeCareBeforeYouShare and #PledgeToPause. Also in 2020, the secretary-general released a Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech. Several mission mandates explicitly reference hate speech or incitement to hatred, including the mandates for MINUSCA, MONUSCO, and UNMISS, though MINUSCA's mandate is the only one that mentions misinformation (in the context of elections).

The UN's forthcoming Strategy for the Digital Transformation of UN Peacekeeping identifies the timely and integrated detection, analysis, and addressing of mis- and disinformation as a priority. In the meantime, missions have been adopting ad hoc, bottom-up approaches. UNMISS, for example, established a WhatsApp group with 500 influencers to stay apprised of and respond to what is being said about the mission and help tell compelling stories about why peacekeepers are there. MINUSMA has conducted trainings for journalists, radio producers, and bloggers on the impact of fake news and fact checking and has circulated weekly radio and blog messages, including in local languages, that blend entertainment with hard news to help address targeted disinformation. MINUSCA distributed 50,000 solar-powered radios to communities to facilitate their access to information and help combat misperceptions and disinformation.[67]

62 Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online," *Science* 359, no. 6380 (2018).

63 António Guterres, remarks at the launch of the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, June 18, 2019.

64 For an overview of how these challenges affect humanitarian actors, see: International Committee of the Red Cross, "Harmful Information: Misinformation, Disinformation and Hate Speech in Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence," July 2021.

65 United Nations, "Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech," September 2020, p. 2.

66 António Guterres, remarks at the launch of the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, June 18, 2019.

67 Written communication with UN official 2, July 2021.

ical.[68] Strategic communications are an indispensable tool for peace operations to achieve their mandates, on par with tools like mediation and community engagement. Missions, therefore, do not have separate objectives for strategic communications; strategic communications feed directly into their overarching political objectives and vice versa. For this reason, using strategic communications in the pursuit of political objectives is less a best practice than a foundational precept.

Strategic communications may be in service to any number of a mission's political objectives. For example, they can support mediation efforts by promoting understanding of the peace process, allowing the public to express its hopes for peace, and countering disinformation propagated by spoilers.[69] Increasingly, these links between strategic communications and other mandated activities are being established in UN policies and guidance. In early 2021, for example, the UN added a module on strategic communications to its Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards, noting their importance to "secure buy-in to the DDR process by outlining what DDR consists of and encouraging individuals to take part, as well as contribute to changing attitudes and behaviour."[70] The 2019 POC handbook includes a chapter on "communicating about POC," and the mandates of the missions in CAR (MINUSCA), Mali (MINUSMA), and South Sudan (UNMISS) all tie strategic communications to these missions' POC mandates (see Box 2).[71] Likewise, the 2018 Gender Responsive United Nations Peace Operations Policy emphasizes the importance of communications to achieving the women, peace, and security agenda (see Box 4). These guidance documents reinforce the idea that missions' strategic communications plans should be grounded in their mandated objectives.

> Strategic communications are an indispensable tool for peace operations to achieve their mandates, on par with tools like mediation and community engagement.

Understanding the Audience

Missions need to keep in mind all audiences and constituencies—domestic, regional, and international. Local populations are perhaps the most important internal audience. They are also one of the broadest audiences, making differentiation critical. Missions should avoid making assumptions about their local audience based on anecdotal evidence such as the perspectives of local staff or elite-level interlocutors, who are unlikely to be representative of the broader population. Instead, missions can use tools such as perception surveys, focus groups, townhalls, and media and social media monitoring to build a nuanced picture of who they should be aiming to reach—though all of these tools have limitations and may not be appropriate at all times.[72] By disaggregating this data on the basis of gender, age, region, and other factors, missions can tailor messages to women, youth, children, and other groups that are disproportionately impacted by conflict and may be underrepresented in the mainstream media (see Box 4).[73]

Beyond local populations, missions have several other domestic audiences to consider—though these are not explicitly mentioned in existing UN policy.[74] One of these is the host-state government. Keeping open lines of communication, even when the government is skeptical of, or hostile to, the UN's presence, can mitigate tensions and help maintain or build support for the mission's presence.[75] Communication with the host-state government is

68 UN Doc. A/70/95–S/2015/446.

69 Ingrid Lehmann, "Media Strategy in Peace Processes," *Peace Hawks*, May 14, 2015.

70 UN Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Resource Centre, "Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards," Module 4.60 on "Public Information and Strategic Communication in Support of DDR," February 2021.

71 MINUSCA's mandate makes the most direct link, calling on the mission "to make more proactive use of strategic communications to support its protection of civilians' strategy." UN Security Council Resolution 2552 (November 12, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2552, para. 31(b)(vii).

72 On the pros and cons of various tools for gathering local perceptions, see: UN DPKO and DFS, "Guidelines: Understanding and Integrating Local Perceptions in UN Peacekeeping," June 2014.

73 United Nations, "Review of Peacekeeping Responses in Four Critical Missions," p. 14.

74 UN DPI, DPKO, and DFS, "Policy: Strategic Communications and Public Information," January 2017.

75 On communicating with host states in the context of POC, see: Patryk I. Labuda, "With or Against the State? Reconciling the Protection of Civilians and Host-State Support in UN Peacekeeping," International Peace Institute, May 2020, p. 34.

Box 4. Mainstreaming gender in strategic communications for peace operations

There are two ways that missions need to consider gender when planning strategic communications: (1) how to use strategic communications to advance the parts of their mandates specifically related to gender or the women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda; and (2) how to ensure that all strategic communications are gender-sensitive.

The 2018 Gender Responsive United Nations Peace Operations Policy requires all missions to undertake gender-specific communications. It calls on missions to

> disseminat[e] the provisions of the… WPS resolutions and the priorities and standards outlined in this Policy to Member States, partners, national authorities, and communities, including outreach spaces targeted to women audiences, in close consultation with the Gender Units at Headquarters and missions, as part of efforts to promote awareness of women's rights, gender equality and WPS mandates.[76]

Research has shown that gender-specific communications, if well designed and implemented, can contribute to changing gender norms, address certain issues related to gender-based violence, and promote women's participation in political or public life.[77]

Beyond gender-specific communications, all communications should be gender-sensitive. This requires considering gender at every step of the planning process:

- When assessing who they want to reach, missions should differentiate target audiences by gender and consider targeting some communications specifically at women. At the same time, they should not treat women as one monolithic audience, and messages related to WPS or gender should not be targeted solely at women.
- When developing messages, missions should represent women and men equally in audio and visual materials, in quotes in written materials, and as proxy messengers. Language and images should avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes such as by always portraying women as victims or mothers. Messages should also avoid using pronouns or terminology in a way that excludes certain genders.
- In selecting the means for transmitting messages, missions should take into account differences in access for men and women, particularly gender gaps in access to digital technologies. They should also seek to bridge any gaps that do exist, such as by organizing in-person events targeting women or distributing battery-powered radios to women.
- In using tools such as perception surveys to design and evaluate strategic communications, missions should disaggregate data by gender. They could also use such tools to identify communications-related challenges such as online hate speech that may disproportionately impact women.

One important step toward all such gender-mainstreaming efforts would be to ensure gender parity among strategic communications personnel.

While the UN does not appear to have provided specific guidance for peace operations on gender-specific or gender-sensitive communications, peace operations could draw on guidance developed by other UN and non-UN entities.[78]

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76 UN DPKO and DFS, "Policy: Gender Responsive United Nations Peacekeeping Operations," February 2018.

77 For an overview of research on gender-specific and gender-sensitive communications, see: Jenny Birchall, "Gender Sensitive Strategic Communications Interventions," Knowledge, Evidence and Learning for Development, December 2018.

78 See, for example: UK Government, "Gender and Strategic Communications in Conflict and Stabilisation Contexts," January 2020; UNICEF, "Gender Responsive Communication for Development: Guidance, Tools and Resources," May 2018; UN Development Programme, "Principles of Gender-Sensitive Communication," 2017; International Organization for Migration, "Gender and Communications Toolkit," 2015; and UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, "Gender-Sensitive Indicators for Media: Framework of Indicators to Gauge Gender Sensitivity in Media Operations and Content," 2012.

especially important when a mission is handing over responsibilities to national or local authorities during a transition or reconfiguration (see Box 5). Non-state armed groups may be another important audience, particularly for communicating the importance of protecting civilians.[79]

In addition to these domestic audiences, missions need to tailor strategic communications to regional and international audiences. These include the host country's diaspora. They also include audiences whose support is needed to sustain the UN peace-keeping partnership: troop- and police-contributing countries (T/PCCs), major financial contributors, and members of the Security Council. For Security Council members, this communication will likely focus on government officials in New York or capitals. For T/PCCs, strategic communication is needed to sustain support not only among elected politicians and government officials but also among the general public.[80]

Developing Effective, Targeted Messages

Strategic communications practitioners have found that the most effective messages tend to be author-itative, compelling, and credible.[81] Authoritative messages are clear, direct, and evidence-based; they are grounded in facts rather than moralizing.[82] Compelling messages tend to center on telling the stories of individual people, which usually resonate more than abstract or impersonal content. The credibility of messages often depends on the messenger; messages delivered by local proxies such as civil society leaders, celebrities, or journal-ists may have more resonance than those coming from UN officials. In Mali, for example, the mission broadcast messages from renowned Malian artists to raise awareness of COVID-19.[83] To be credible,

messages also cannot come across as propagan-distic and need to align with the mission's actions. Messages around conflict-related sexual violence, for example, will ring hollow if the mission does not hold accountable its own personnel who engage in sexual exploitation and abuse.

Messages also need to be tailored to each audience. For example, while messages to the host-state public may focus on explaining the mission's mandate and building its credibility, messages to the public in T/PCCs may focus on how that country's peacekeepers "could help the mission fulfill its mandate and… make a difference on the ground."[84] For the Security Council, messages will focus more on providing a realistic assessment of the political situation on the ground to give the council the information it needs to provide realistic, prioritized mandates and the resources to match.

Using the Right Means for Communication

Identifying the means for communication should be the final step in developing a strategic commu-nications plan. This should be based on an assess-ment of how the target audiences access informa-tion. Radio is usually one of the main means of communication in peacekeeping contexts, and many peacekeeping missions have their own radio stations.[85] In contexts where Internet penetration is high, social media is also an important tool for collecting and analyzing data, setting narratives, consulting with populations, and countering misinformation.[86] In general, missions should not assume that audiences will come to their channels; they can reach more people by collaborating with existing national or local media outlets. For

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79 On communicating with non-state armed groups in the context of POC, see: Ralph Mamiya, "Engaging with Non-state Armed Groups to Protect Civilians: A Pragmatic Approach for UN Peace Operations," International Peace Institute, October 2018.

80 While some T/PCCs have their own strategic communications teams, T/PCC officials have emphasized that "support from the UN for such messaging is helpful." See: Arthur Boutellis and Michael Beary, "Sharing the Burden: Lessons from the European Return to Multidimensional Peacekeeping," International Peace Institute, January 2020, p. 15.

81 Participants in IPI virtual roundtable, April 15, 2021.

82 A UNICEF study testing pro-immunization messages in Nigeria in 2021 found that authoritative messaging was more effective than emotional or informative messaging. See: UNICEF, "UNICEF Nigeria Project with Facebook: Amplifying and Testing Immunization Messages," April 27, 2021.

83 MINUSMA, "Mikado FM: A Peace Radio in the Age of the Coronavirus," April 17, 2020.

84 Boutellis and Beary, "Sharing the Burden," p. 15.

85 For more on peacekeeping radio, see: Michelle Betz and Helene Papper, "UN Peacekeeping Radio: The Way Forward," in *Communications and Peace: Mapping an Emerging Field*, Julia Hoffmann and Virgil Hawkins, eds. (London: Routledge, 2015).

86 On the use of social media in mediation and peacemaking, see: Katrin Wittig and Sausan Ghosheh, "The Role of Social Media in Early Peacemaking: Help or Hindrance?" in *Pioneering Peace Pathways: Making Connections to End Violent Conflict*, Cate Buchanan, ed. (London: Conciliation Resources, 2020); and UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, "Digital Technologies and Mediation in Armed Conflict," March 2019.

example, in addition to using its own radio station, MINUSMA supports and partners with local radio stations—an approach that not only broadens the reach of the mission's messages but also builds the capacity of local media.[87]

Regardless of the medium used, strategic communications should be two-way; missions should not simply inform local communities but also be informed by them. Two-way communication is often most effective in-person. Through community engagement, missions can not only disseminate and receive information but also build trust. However, digital technologies also offer opportunities for broad-based, two-way communications—and during the COVID-19 pandemic, these have often been the only option. For example, in Libya, which has a high level of digital connectivity, UNSMIL conducted a digital dialogue with one thousand youth to gather their views ahead of peace talks.[88]

> Strategic communications should be two-way; missions should not simply inform local communities but also be informed by them.

Monitoring, Evaluating, and Learning

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning are essential parts of the strategic communications cycle. Missions need to constantly monitor their strategic communications and periodically evaluate their impact. To do this, missions will need to continue using tools like perception surveys on a regular basis to see whether their messages are reaching the right audiences, resonating with those audiences, and contributing to their objectives. They should also regularly assess the potential risks of, or actual harm caused by, strategic communications, whether by exposing civilians to retaliation for communicating with the mission, using proxy messengers who are not seen as credible, or disrupting the local media landscape.[89]

While evaluating impact is important, it is only useful if missions learn from their successes and

shortcomings and adapt their communications accordingly. One example of this comes from MINUSCA: after a third-party perception survey revealed that one of the mission's radio shows was reaching fewer people than expected, the mission switched to more local-language content and distributed battery-powered radios, doubling the proportion of people who were listening and who liked what they heard.[90]

Operational Implementation of Strategic Communications

To disseminate effective, targeted messages that align with their political objectives, missions need to shift toward a whole-of-mission approach to strategic communications. They also need more capacity to implement strategic communications plans.

Shifting toward a "Whole-of-Mission" Approach

For strategic communications to feed directly into a mission's objectives, communications personnel need to be at the decision-making table. The goal is not to put out a press release after a crisis; it is to help missions understand and manage risks to prevent crises from breaking out. This means that strategic communications need to be integrated into long-term programmatic planning, especially during a mission's start-up, drawdown, or reconfiguration. Strategic communications play an essential role during a mission's start-up by alleviating uncertainty and setting expectations. Strategic communications are also integral to the transition plans of peace operations in advance of their closure (see Box 5). Likewise, advance planning is needed to communicate changes in a mission's presence. By communicating about such reconfigurations early on, the UN can explain their

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87 MINUSMA, "Community Radios Build Bridge to Peace in Central Mali," January 14, 2019.

88 UNSMIL, "UNSMIL Conducts the First-Ever Large-Scale Digital Dialogue with 1000 Libyan Youth Online," October 17, 2020.

89 On the risks of community engagement specifically, see: Harley Henigson, "Community Engagement in UN Peacekeeping Operations: A People-Centered Approach to Protecting Civilians," International Peace Institute, November 2020, pp. 21–22. On the risks of disrupting the local media landscape, see: Prue Clark and Rodney Sieh, "How the U.N. Silenced Liberia's Press," *Foreign Policy*, August 8, 2016.

90 Lise Morjé Howard et al., "Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic," Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network, 2020, p. 106.

rationale and implications and avoid creating the perception that it is abandoning a community or country. Toward this end, missions can benefit from developing multi-year strategic communications plans with sufficient flexibility to adapt to unforeseen circumstances and changing political configurations and realities.

This requires mission leaders to see strategic communications as a mandatory activity and one of their core responsibilities. Some mission leaders have done so, with tangible results. For example, one UNMISS official emphasized that by including communications in strategic and operational decision making, the mission was able to take a proactive approach to risk, including by being transparent and proactive about allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers and raising awareness ahead of major policy shifts (e.g., the redesignation of POC sites).[91]

To encourage such an approach, missions and leaders need to be evaluated based on their performance on strategic communications. While missions' activities and tangible outputs related to strategic communications are regularly captured in their results-based budgeting frameworks, these quantitative measurements paint an incomplete picture and do not capture the outcomes and impact of communications. To this end, strategic communications should be integrated into results frameworks under the Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System (CPAS).[92] Moreover, while several recent independent strategic reviews of missions have thoroughly assessed their communications activities, communications could be more systematically covered in reporting to the Security Council.[93] To hold individual leaders accountable, the secretary-general could also systematically include objectives related to strategic communica-

tions in his compacts with senior officials and related performance assessments.

Missions also need policies and guidance to make it clear that while leadership plays an indispensable role, strategic communications are ultimately a responsibility of all mission personnel. The UN has developed a policy on strategic communications for peacekeeping operations, but this policy could be more regularly updated or supplemented by new policies and commensurate trainings to address emerging issues such as misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech; peacekeeping-intelligence; and parallel forces conducting info ops or psyops campaigns. Additional guidance could also be useful on issues such as the potential risks of strategic communications and gender-sensitive communications.

> The goal is not to put out a press release after a crisis; it is to help missions understand and manage risks to prevent crises from breaking out.

For special political missions, there is no standalone policy on strategic communications, and more detailed guidance could be helpful. While every context and mandate is different, such guidance could ensure that missions have an understanding of the national media infrastructure, including which journalists have access to the media and who controls it (e.g., the relationship between official and seemingly independent media), as well as the media strategies and tools used by conflict stakeholders (e.g., legal and technical methods for suppressing information). Guidance could also help ensure that UN personnel use a consistent style in their communications, such as by knowing what terms can or cannot be used in certain environments.[94]

Finally, a coherent approach to strategic communications requires coordination with other national, regional, and international actors, as well as within the mission and with UN headquarters. Contradictory messaging can undermine the

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91   UN official in IPI virtual roundtable, April 15, 2021.

92   For more detail, see: United Nations, "CPAS," available at https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/cpas . For an assessment of CPAS as a tool for accountability for POC specifically, see: Namie Di Razza, "Accountability System for the Protection of Civilians: Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System," International Peace Institute, available at https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CPAS-Factsheet.pdf .

93   MINUSMA is the only mission explicitly mandated to report quarterly on "measures to improve external communication of the mission," and a dedicated section on "external communication" is included in every report to the Security Council. UN Security Council Resolution 2531 (June 29, 2020), UN Doc. S/RES/2531, para. 62.

94   Interview with UN official 4, July 2021.

mission's credibility and create confusion. Coordination with the host-state government and the UN country team's interagency communications group is especially important. Such coordination becomes all the more important when missions are handing over responsibilities and trying to maintain a sense of continuity during transitions or during humanitarian emergencies or other crises (see Box 5). When missions are operating alongside military forces from other countries or regional organizations, coordination is critical to distinguish between their mandates, especially when a parallel force is engaged in counterterrorism activities.[95] To confront challenges like misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech, missions may also need to build

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Box 5. Strategic communications during UN transitions

Strategic communications take on added importance during UN transitions. As a peace operation prepares to leave a country, lack of effective communication can leave civilians feeling abandoned, erode trust in the UN, and complicate the handover of tasks to the UN country team or other actors. A recent IPI report identified four lessons on the effective management of strategic communications from recent peacekeeping transitions, which are equally relevant for special political missions:

- To facilitate the handover to the UN country team or other actors, "the UN needs to clearly and concisely convey that it will remain in the country even though peacekeepers are leaving."
- Early on in the drawdown process, the mission and the UN country team "need to coordinate clear messages through an integrated communications plan."
- To reach local communities, missions need to develop "a clear strategy to identify the national actors best positioned to complement the UN's own messaging."
- To continue promoting programming on peace and development, the UN should—when appropriate—hand over its communications infrastructure, especially radio stations, to the national government or international partners.[96] In some situations, however, it may be more appropriate to transfer this capacity to national nongovernmental or civil society actors, and official guidance on such transfers is needed.[97]

Recent transitions have also highlighted the symbolic importance of formal ceremonies to hand over responsibilities from the mission to the UN country team and national authorities as a way to communicate the mission's accomplishments and demonstrate continuity with actors remaining in the country.[98]

The UN will need to consider these lessons in planning for upcoming mission transitions—particularly that of MONUSCO. The 2019 independent strategic review of MONUSCO called on the mission to prioritize and mainstream strategic communications in all transition programming "so that key audiences… are informed in a way that dispels misconceptions, counters misinformation and minimizes reputational risk at such a critical political juncture."[99] The review also called on the mission to adjust its communications strategy by shifting "away from highlighting its own success stories to disseminating narratives on national and local achievements" in order to "signal its new transition-oriented mindset."[100]

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95 Alexandra Novosseloff and Lisa Sharland, "Partners and Competitors: Forces Operating in Parallel to UN Peace Operations," International Peace Institute, November 2019, p. 22.

96 Daniel Forti and Lesley Connolly, "Pivoting from Crisis to Development: Preparing for the Next Wave of UN Peace Operations Transitions," International Peace Institute, July 2019, p. 6.

97 Written communication with UN officials 1 and 2, July 2021.

98 Some stakeholders regretted not holding such a ceremony as part of the withdrawal of the UN mission in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) as "a missed opportunity for communicating the legacy of UNOCI in restoring peace." Alexandra Novosseloff, "Lessons Learned from the UN's Transition in Côte d'Ivoire," International Peace Institute, December 2018, p. 14. In Liberia, by contrast, the handover ceremony had a noteworthy psychological impact, affirming "that the UN would continue supporting the country politically." Daniel Forti and Lesley Connolly, "The Mission Is Gone, but the UN Is Staying: Liberia's Peacekeeping Transition," International Peace Institute, December 2018, p. 28.

99 UN Doc. S/2019/842, para. 171.

100 Ibid., para. 115.

on nascent partnerships with technology companies to detect, analyze, and address this phenomenon and flag or de-platform users when necessary.

Building Capacity for Strategic Communications

In addition to shifting to a whole-of-mission approach, missions need additional and modernized capacities for strategic communications. To ensure that communications staff are qualified, the UN could consider creating a new job category that combines elements of public information, data analysis, and political affairs. When missions require rapid-response, front-line communications capacity, they could also consider using outsourced specialized communications teams like the African Union Mission in Somalia's (AMISOM) Information Support Team, which was composed of private-sector communications specialists.[101] Whatever the approach, most UN personnel working on communications should be local staff, whose "language and professional skills, as well as their knowledge of the people, the culture and the country, can increase the impact of information activities."[102]

There is also a need for more training on a range of strategic communications skills—not just for communications staff but for staff from every mission component and section. Even if communications are not a central part of their job, staff need training in basic skills like speaking to the media, on the radio, or in front of a camera and drafting compelling messages. While senior leaders often already have such skills due to prior professional experience, they still require training in other areas, especially on the effective and responsible use of social media, modern digital campaigning, and crisis communications.

> If missions are to succeed, strategic communications professionals should be part of their decision making, from initial planning through transition and exit.

Conclusion

The UN has increasingly recognized the importance of strategic communications, doctrinally and practically, both at headquarters and in the field. Since 2015, several peacekeeping missions have been explicitly mandated to use communications in support of their mandate, often with a clear link to the protection of civilians. The UN has developed a policy on strategic communications for peacekeeping operations and is producing additional guidance. UN missions have increasingly sought to improve communication with local communities, and several special political missions have shown how digital communications tools can be used in support of peace processes.

But missions' strategic communications efforts are still not commensurate with the scale of the challenges they face and the risks of communicating ineffectively or insufficiently. Peace operations are still figuring out how best to confront the scourge of misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech. Missions with a mandate to protect civilians are still far from closing the gap between communities' perceptions and the reality of what they can offer. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated all of these challenges.

While many of these issues are outside of missions' control, others are within their power to confront by changing their ways of working and configuring themselves to tackle these challenges more effectively. Missions need to shift their approach to anticipate crises and proactively reframe the narrative, to engage in two-way rather than one-way communication, to tailor their messages to specific audiences, and to use a wider variety of communication methods, including digital platforms, to reach and motivate key stakeholders and

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101 On this model—and its many challenges—see: Paul D. Williams, "Strategic Communications for Peace Operations: The African Union's Information War Against al-Shabaab," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 7, no. 1 (2018).

102 UN DPI, DPKO, and DFS, "Strategic Communications and Public Information," paras. 38–39.

constituents. They also need to constantly reevaluate the impact of strategic communications and adapt their approaches based on lessons learned and as the context evolves.

To shift their approach to strategic communications, missions may require additional resources to hire specialized personnel, train staff and leaders, procure and distribute communications equipment, support local journalists or media outlets, and carry out perception surveys. But more importantly, they need a cultural shift. Mission leaders need to see strategic communications as a core mission capacity—on par with capacity in the military, police, civil and political affairs, human rights, and other areas. Strategic communications are not an operational support function, a downstream activity, or an output of a planning cycle; they are an integral part of political strategies and mandate delivery. They are not just a leadership function but a "whole-of-mission" responsibility. Strategic communications must therefore be treated as central to every phase of a UN peace operation. If missions are to succeed, strategic communications professionals should be part of their decision making, from initial planning through transition and exit.

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