

# WHAT IS IO?

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Recently, a colleague of mine was asked by a public affairs officer to not include me on correspondence with reporters because I am an information operations (IO) officer and it “can cause confusion for the reporter.” The implication was that because I am an IO officer my interaction with the media would be perceived as manipulative. This is an example of a common misconception throughout the military that we must correct. IO officers are professional communicators, not psychological manipulators. Information operations is the fancy term that the military has given to what nearly every other organization refers to as communications. The purpose of communications is to inform desired audiences in order to influence those audiences to act, or not act, in a manner that is beneficial to the organization. Ironically, it has been the failure of the IO community to effectively communicate what we do, why we do it, and how we can support that has led to this potentially dangerous misunderstanding of information operations.

The first step in correcting this misperception is to define what IO actually is. The U.S. military defines information operations as the integrated employment of information-related capabilities to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Army has, as recently as 2013, defined IO as the integration of designated information-related capabilities in order to synchronize themes, messages, and actions with operations to inform United States and global audiences.<sup>2</sup> Finally, strategic communication is defined as the focused U.S. government effort to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of U.S. government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power.<sup>3</sup> Taken together this suggests, at least to me, that the role of the IO officer is to develop, refine, and synchronize a communication strategy that makes efficient use of all available assets in order to communicate a message to key stakeholders that will yield a result favorable to the U.S. government, the U.S. military, or the unit. Nowhere in any of that do I read the role of the IO officer as performing psychological manipulation of civilian leadership, the press, or the American public.

If we can accept that the purpose of IO is to inform desired audiences, then we must also accept that the purpose of providing that information is to influence those audiences to take a desired action or inaction. That word — “influence” — seems to cause people a lot of consternation, but it is entirely unnecessary. The very purpose for providing information to any audience is to influence them to take or not take action to the benefit of the organization providing the information. Otherwise, providing the information would simply be a waste of resources. Perhaps if I used the word persuade as opposed to influence it would be less controversial, but the message doesn’t change. The U.S. military regularly informs Congress on its efforts for the purpose of persuading appropriators to provide funding for military programs that will support national strategic goals. We inform the public about our ongoing operations to persuade them to provide support to our personnel while simultaneously informing them of the benefits of military service to persuade them to become members of our honored profession. We inform foreign audiences about the capabilities of our military forces to persuade them to avoid military conflict all together. These are all perfectly legitimate and legal purposes for providing information. Because of the important nature of these efforts to our national security, IO officers — at least those who are good at what they do — will study influence techniques in an effort to improve their capabilities to do their jobs. As would any marketer who were to pick up a book by Dr. Robert Cialdini or Nick Kolenda. However, nowhere in an IO officer’s training or professional military education do they receive instruction on the conduct of what was formerly called psychological operations (now called military information support operations – MISO). IO officers understand MISO and the effects it can have on the information environment. They are also aware of and adhere to the provisions of 10 U.S.C. 2241 which states “no part of any funds authorized to be appropriated in any act shall be used by the Department of Defense for publicity or propaganda purposes within the United States not otherwise specifically authorized by law.” Military information support operations are, however, only one of the many designated information-related capabilities that IO officers assist their commanders in employing, and there is zero prohibition that I can find on the use of any other information capability (excepting methods of electronic interference).

This unfortunate misrepresentation of information operations officers does not lie solely with the IO community. There are a host of factors that contributed to this misunderstanding from the very beginning of the discipline. However, we have certainly failed to effectively communicate the truth about what we do and why. In 2011, *Rolling Stone* Magazine published an article that accused the former commander of NATO Training Mission Afghanistan — then-LTG William Caldwell — of illegally ordering a team of psychological operators to “manipulate visiting American senators.”<sup>4</sup> Their source was a National Guard IO officer, then-LTC Michael Holmes, whom the article quoted as saying “my job in psy-ops is to play with people’s heads.” The article lists Holmes as an IO officer, not a PSYOPs officer, and makes no mention of the fact that Holmes had no military training or education in conducting PSYOPs. Caldwell was known for brilliant execution of strategic communication, and he directed his IO officer to build a strategy for persuading key stakeholders to provide the resources he believed were needed to accomplish the mission he had been assigned. According to the article, Holmes refused to comply with the order citing the “Smith-Mundt act of 1948.” He was later reprimanded for a host of unrelated charges, but none the less asserted that his reprimand was the result of his refusal to comply with Caldwell’s orders. The official title for the law Holmes referenced is the United States Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948 and it is specific to the U.S. Department of State and what would later be called the U.S. Information Agency. Nowhere in the Smith-Mundt act are the words “information operations” used. Nor does the word “propaganda” show up.<sup>5</sup> But in referencing the act, Holmes immediately associated IO with propaganda. On 13 July 1972, the act was amended as part of Public Law 92-352 Sec. 204 to state that “any such information shall not be disseminated with in the U.S...” Still the act makes no reference to the Department of Defense or any of the military departments. Even that portion of the act referenced as establishing the prohibition has since been repealed by H.R. 5736 in 2012. It is my understanding that there was an official inquiry following the accusations made in the article, but that no violations were found. The damage to the IO community, however, was done. In my own career I have already encountered commanders who eschew employment of IO officers for fear of being accused of violating some urban legend of misrepresented law.

IO is the coordination and synchronization of the military’s capabilities to affect the information environment; it is not the psychological manipulation of the minds of the masses. The purpose of those communications is to persuade our audiences to act in a manner that is to our benefit. And given that the mission of the U.S. military is to deter, continuously shape, and ultimately win conflict against our nation’s adversaries there is nothing nefarious about that persuasion. While we in the IO community have yet to effectively communicate what benefits we provide the force and how our commanders can ethically employ the capabilities at our disposal, perhaps it is time we start to lift ourselves out of the shadows of ignorance and do our job — communicate.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning* (August 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (May 2012).

<sup>3</sup> JP 5-0.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Hastings, “Another Runaway General: Army Deploys Psy-Ops on U.S. Senators,” *Rolling Stone*, 23 February 2013.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948, Pub. Law No. 402, Ch. 36.

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