

Volume 2 | Spring 2017

# DEFENCE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS



The official journal of the  
NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence

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# STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: PRACTICAL TRAPS AND ETHICAL PUZZLES

Mervyn Frost, Nicholas Michelsen

## Abstract

Effective communications are today recognised as central not simply to achieving foreign policy or diplomatic success, but to realising any and all strategic aims. Consequently, strategic communications professionals play a critical role in a wide range of government agencies. In the light of an ever-transforming global media ecology, and the proliferation of state and non-state political actors who are able effectively to intervene in this fluid communications space, this observation has rising salience for international relations as a whole. Faced with rising geopolitical tensions, and public anxiety associated with terrorism, strategic communications has been viewed as an essential component of an effective response to campaigns by hostile state and non-state actors seeking to shape public opinion and attitudes in pursuit of their own strategic objectives. This article asks whether NATO members have given sufficient thought to the ethical puzzles raised by the changing landscape of strategic communications for international relations practitioners, and seeks to shed light on the practical ethical challenges faced by all strategic communicators in international relations today. We argue that effective strategic communication is an action that necessarily takes place within, and draws its efficacy from, ethical architectures that are settled constitutive features of international practices.

**Keywords:** ethics, truth, international relations, practice, lies, strategic communications

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## Introduction

Political scientists are well acquainted with the phenomena of propaganda used by governments, political parties, and all kinds of political actors, both in times of peace and times of war. We are familiar with advertising (a form of propaganda), public awareness campaigns (informing the public of the dangers of HIV, for example), the internal communications of political parties to ensure that their MPs stay 'on message',<sup>1</sup> and the many uses of communication strategies in the deployment of 'soft power',<sup>1</sup> and with organisations, parties, movements, and religious groups propounding their ideologies. There remains, however, considerable confusion as to what the term 'strategic communications' means in the context of international relations. The problem of perception and influence has, of course, been an abiding concern of International Relations (IR) scholars, and has been recognised as playing a central role in all foreign policy and diplomacy.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1980s constructivists in IR have explored at length how identities, social roles, myths, narratives, ideas, norms, and discourses in IR shape political reality.<sup>3</sup> Only in recent years, however, have debates around their instrumentalisation through the communications strategies of different international actors taken shape.<sup>4</sup> Within these debates there is little agreement about the nature and significance of strategic communications for international relations as such.

To a certain extent, this confusion may be explained by the diversity of contexts within which the term 'strategic communications' is deployed, and by the correspondingly diverse spectrum of related, and sometimes interchangeable, concepts used. For example, discussions of the concept of strategic communications bridge marketing

<sup>1</sup> Nye, Joseph S., *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Jervis, Robert, *Perception and misperception in international politics*, (Princeton University Press, 2015 (1976)); Nye, Joseph S., 'Soft power', *Foreign Policy* 80 (1990): 153-171.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Wendt 1999; Epstein, Charlotte, *The power of words in international relations: birth of an anti-whaling discourse*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Finnemore, Martha, and Kathryn Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics and political change', *International Organization* 52.04 (1998): 887-917; Campbell, David, *Writing security: United States foreign policy and the politics of identity*, (U of Minnesota Press, 1992); Holsti, Kalevi J., 'National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy', *International Studies Quarterly* 14.3 (1970): 233-309; Hopf, Ted, *Social construction of international politics: identities & foreign policies*, (Moscow, 1955); Weldes, Jutta, (ed.), *Cultures of insecurity: states, communities, and the production of danger*, Borderlines Vol. 14. (University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Zehfuss, Maja, *Constructivism in international relations: the politics of reality*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations Vol. 83, (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Ringmar, Erik 'Inter-Textual Relations The Quarrel Over the Iraq War as a Conflict between Narrative Types', *Cooperation and Conflict* 41.4 (2006): 403-421; Risse, Thomas, "'Let's argue!': communicative action in world politics', *International organization* 54.01 (2000): 1-39; Lapid, Yosef, and Friedrich V. Kratochwil (eds.), *The return of culture and identity in IR theory*, (Rienner, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Castells, Manuel, *Communication power*, (OUP Oxford, 2013); Owen IV, John M., *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change, 1510-2010*, (Princeton University Press, 2010); Mor, Ben D., 'Credibility talk in public diplomacy', *Review of International Studies* 38.02 (2012): 393-422; Hayden, Craig, *The rhetoric of soft power: Public diplomacy in global contexts*, (Lexington Books, 2012); Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic narratives: Communication power and the new world order*, (Routledge, 2014).

(advertising and branding), diplomacy (public and private), and military practice (psychological operations, information operations, and hybrid warfare).<sup>5</sup> A further explanation for widespread confusion about the term as it relates to international relations, is that an increasingly diverse variety of actors are engaged in the field of strategic communications, a phenomenon that has, in part, led to its rise to prominence in institutional parlance within NATO and beyond. A global network of expertise has taken shape over the last three decades, linking private actors and public relations firms or contractors, with public institutions (in both democratic and nondemocratic states) and military and intelligence organisations (national and international), often in relatively complex manners. This network of actors views itself as engaging in competition with other global strategic communicative actors (both state and non-state). In this sense, we can say that a highly complex, internally segmented, global strategic communications network has emerged, which carries within it a variety of approaches, understandings, and institutional forms including states, private citizens, and innumerable nonviolent and violent pressure groups. This complex network of private companies, governments, and non-state actors has become increasingly engaged in processing, transmitting, structuring, packaging, and presenting information to populations. There is an ever more complex set of vested interests emerging in this field.

This article contends that a stable perspective on this complex set of activities may be achieved by exploring the global practices from within which these diverse activities draw their meaning. In particular, it seeks to highlight the ethical component of these practices and to draw attention to the implications of this ethical dimension for practitioners of strategic communications in international relations. Many of these implications have not yet been articulated. It has been a common misconception that the melange of global strategic communicators described above is simply involved in the deployment of a special kind of power towards a target audience. The wielders of such power may be companies, political parties, social movements, terrorist groups, states, or international organisations. According to this view, strategic communications are understood as acts directed towards an external target. The logic is instrumental—it is directed towards getting others to do what they would not otherwise have done. It is an exercise of power. The primary toolbox is understood as competitive storytelling or counter-narrating. Against this externalist view of strategic communications this article presents an internalist one. We argue that strategic communications can only properly be understood from within the global practices where they are constituted as meaningful. The focus will be on the ethical dimensions of these global practices. The multiplicity and diversity of strategic communications in international affairs need not, therefore, be viewed as presenting a barrier to identifying the generic ethical architecture within which strategic communications takes place.

<sup>5</sup> Hallahan, Kirk, et al., 'Defining strategic communication', *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 1.1 (2007): 3-35; Argenti, Paul A., Robert A. Howell, and Karen A. Beck, 'The strategic communication imperative', *MIT Sloan Management Review* 46.3 (2005): 83-89; Botan, Carl, 'Ethics in strategic communication campaigns: The case for a new approach to public relations', *Journal of Business Communication* 34.2 (1997): 188-202; Andreasen, Alan R., Philip Kotler, and David Parker, *Strategic marketing for nonprofit organizations*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall: 2003); Murphy, Dennis M., 'In search of the art and science of strategic communication', *Parameters* 39.4 (2009): 105; Farwell, James P., *Persuasion and power: The art of strategic communication*, (Georgetown University Press, 2012).

Having identified the ethical frame, we shall then be able to display a range of ethical puzzles, which those who use SC will have to confront.

Our primary contention is that these ethical puzzles need to be clearly posed and answers to them sought. Given the manner in which state-to-state and state-to-non-state dynamics on the world stage take place—at the level of ideas, through social media, public advertising, iconography, or through other forms of discursive action—some of the important questions which confront strategic communications practitioners include:

- *How and when does strategic communications threaten the fundamental global practice of sovereign states and the values embodied in it?*
- *What strategies of communication threaten the global practice of individual human rights and the values embedded in it?*
- *In what ways do the new communication technologies advance or undermine the key ethical values embedded in democratic states?*
- *What limits, if any, ought to be placed on the use of strategic communications and who is entitled to institute and police such limits?*
- *What might be the ethical limits to the uses of communication techniques available to non-democratic states? For example, is the community of states ethically entitled to hack and unblock the censorship machinery of autocratic states? (Turkey, China, North Korea)*
- *Are private international actors ethically entitled to release the secret files of autocratic and also democratic states? (Snowden)*
- *Are individuals and states entitled to use the communication technologies available to them to participate in the internal politics of foreign states, and what are the ethical limits constraining those who seek to instigate shifts in opinion in foreign populations (including those that are subject to military intervention, and counter-insurgency)?*
- *How should Western governments respond to the ability of activist non-state actors, including violent groups and organisations (such as Islamic State) to foster terrorism, social upheaval, or revolutionary change, or to put pressure on democratic governments to change policies (such that the foreign, environmental, or immigration policies of NATO states might themselves be manipulated through the actions of strategic communicators)?*
- *What are the ethical implications for international organisations (like NATO), as they seek through strategic communications to promote their legitimacy, and influence the perception of their actions by populations world-wide?*
- *What ethical challenges are associated with the rise of nationalist demagoguery, which are tied up with successful strategic communications campaigns that tip into dynamics of unpredictable social change (such as Brexit, or tensions associated with the South China Sea)?*

In this article we contend that there is a need for a comprehensive analytical framework within which such ethical puzzles that arise from strategic communications can be posed and thus attended to by practitioners in their professional conduct.

Whilst we cannot resolve each and every one of these questions in this article, in what follows we shall outline such a framework. What we propose will throw light on longstanding ethical debates around the role of rhetoric in politics as it relates to state propaganda, the value of truth versus ‘white lies’, debates about the end justifying the means used, the ethics of inaction and omission in both private and public diplomacy. Though we will not dwell on IR theoretical or methodological debates in this article, the argument we present is an exercise in practice theory understood in holist terms. A key feature of practice theory is that it is presented from the internal point of view—that of all of us who are participants in the global practices being analysed. Our discussion will seek to elucidate the relationship between acts of strategic communication and the global practices within which they take place, paying attention to what of ethical importance is at stake for: 1) democratic societies, 2) for the international society of states, 3) for global civil society. Our intention is to offer an analytical framework for a practical ethics that will be applicable to the professional conduct of strategic communicators of all kinds in international relations.

Our point of departure then, is that in the contemporary world strategic communication takes place within two overarching international practices: The International Society of Sovereign States (SOSS) and the Global Civil Society of Individual Rights Holders (which we shall call Global Civil Society or GCS). The meaning of all strategic communications presupposes the existence of these practices. A failure fully to comprehend this is responsible, in some measure, for many failures in the formulation and execution of state policies (including the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and the global war on terror). What this means for international relations is that any act of strategic communication needs to be recognised as an action the sense of which is wholly defined within these two global practices and the settled ethical norms embedded in them. To engage the breadth of the ethical puzzles at stake, we argue, requires that the global practices in which strategic communications take place must be better understood. Such understanding will clarify how a diverse field of strategic communications actors, including private corporations, public institutions (states and international organisations) and non-state actors (from ISIS to Amnesty International) are constituted as such within those global practices. The ethical debates that arise for these different actors/participants are internal to the overarching global practices that define world politics today.

### **International Truth-Telling and Practical Ethics**

New technologies have made it possible for new groups (sometimes very small ones) to participate in strategic communications campaigns and to influence outcomes, both nearby and distant, in world politics. Previously this was a potential confined to states, large organisations (corporations), and large social institutions such as churches. The reason small groups (Al Qaeda, ISIS, or Al-Shabab) have been able to join more effectively in the global strategic communications game is that the means for doing so have become both cheap and widely available. Particularly important has been the rise of social media. As has been well documented, the new and rapidly changing

media landscape (in particular, the shift from ‘one-to-many’ to ‘many-to-many’ online platforms) has wreaked significant transformation on diplomatic practice.<sup>6</sup> One consequence of this has been that inter-state diplomacy now necessitates speaking directly to other societies, to their governments, and requires projecting narratives at home in the knowledge that official messages are rapidly disseminated and reprocessed through new media platforms. Diplomats now ordinarily conduct their business through communications with highly responsive domestic and foreign audiences, targeting state-actors and civil society actors simultaneously.<sup>7</sup>

As a consequence, collaborative, competitive or conflictual interactions between state-to-state and state-to-non-state actors on the world stage are increasingly recognised as heavily, and in some cases exclusively, mediated through new communication technologies. This suggests that a good deal has changed since the characteristic ideological struggles of the Cold War era. Furthermore, new technologies have meant that foreign states and non-state actors, large and small, are able much more easily to participate clandestinely in the internal politics of other states (meddling in their electoral and party political processes, for example). The implications of these transformations for international relations are significant, not least because the proliferation of strategic communicators leads to considerable information overload and uncertainty, and renders official messages insecure. In an attempt to gain control of their messages, governments and other actors have increasingly turned to ‘expert’ private consultants.<sup>8</sup> As the scope for private, secret, and un-attributable strategic communicators of various kinds has increased in recent years, the problem of accountability has become acute. In both democratic and authoritarian states, in global civil society within which corporations operate, and in communications between individual members of civil society, it has become difficult to determine who is using various forms of communication to do what, to whom, and for what reason.

As opportunities for (legitimate and illegitimate) intervention in the communicative field have proliferated at the global level, and have become available to a wide range of actors, a sense of confusion has arisen about what strategic communications is, and, in particular, about its place within international normative regimes. The rise of debates around ‘hybrid warfare’ or ‘information war’ has been accompanied by calls for new, integrated responses from Western states and international organisations like NATO.<sup>9</sup> However, what might be involved in such responses has tended to be conceptualised under frames that assume that we are entering a new Cold War-like clash between ideological or communicative formations, deemed to lack a common

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<sup>6</sup> Castells, *Communication power*.

<sup>7</sup> Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*; Fletcher, T., *Naked Diplomacy: Power and statecraft in the Digital Age*, (William Collins, London, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> For example, nation branding consultants provide support to both highly developed and developing states. For a range of examples, see Dinnie, Keith, *Nation branding: concepts, issues, practice*, (Routledge, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Arquilla, John, and David Ronfeldt (Eds.), *Networks and netwars: The future of terror, crime, and militancy*, (Rand Corporation, 2001); Hallahan et al., 2009; Murphy, 2009; Peters, Severin, ‘Strategic Communication for Crisis Management Operations of International Organisations: ISAF Afghanistan and EULEX Kosovo, *EU Diplomacy Paper 1/2010*, January 2010’, *EU Diplomacy Papers* (2010): 34; Betz, David, ‘Communication breakdown: strategic communications and defeat in Afghanistan’, *Orbis* 55.4 (2011): 613-630.

register that might facilitate adjudication between their contrasting claims about the world. The suggestion here is that strategic communications success is simply a matter of mastery over techniques of narrative construction, or mastery over the material networks that govern communication flows.<sup>10</sup>

Given the sense of crisis that surrounds contemporary debates around Russia's hybrid warfare or propaganda, and the inherently covert nature of much strategic communications practice, it is perhaps unsurprising that there have been no efforts to develop global ethical frameworks by which to give sense to the full range of strategic communications actors and their actions.<sup>11</sup> We contend that we should not come to the conclusion that 'anything that works, goes' in the arena of strategic communications in international relations, and that strategic communications is therefore best understood purely as a question of competitive mastery over the techniques of international storytelling. All strategic communications actors and the strategic communications actions they carry out are constitutively embedded in a set of ethical norms that characterise the international meta-practices in which we are all participants. A greater understanding of this constitutive architecture will provide critical insights for strategic communications practitioners and will shed light on the ethical puzzles arising from technological advances in this field.

Our central claim here may be re-stated quite simply: All actors and their actions get their meaning, point, and purpose from the social practices within which they are located. For example, consider the diplomat from state X who presents her credentials in state Y. We can only understand what a diplomat is and what 'presenting credentials' involves (what it means), once we know a substantial amount about the practice of diplomacy as a whole. Analogously, we can only understand a move in a game (chess) once we understand the game as a whole. Included in what we have to know about practices in order to understand actors and their actions, are the ethical values embedded in them. In the practice of diplomacy, for example, one of the core values is the value of open channels of communication. In the practice of chess one of the values involved is that of not cheating. In like vein in the international arena, strategic communications actors and the acts of communication they perform can only be understood as constituents of the global practices within which they operate. The actors, their actions, and the global practices are all internally related to one another.<sup>12</sup> Crucial to understanding these global practices is the requirement that we understand their ethical dimensions. Participants in these practices (and we all are participants) interpret one another's actions, including their strategic communications, in the light of these ethical values.

Let us analyse strategic communications in greater detail. From within our global practices one of the first things we understand is that there is something ethically suspect about them. What distinguishes an act of strategic communications from

<sup>10</sup> Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*.

<sup>11</sup> Kroenig, Matthew, 'Facing reality: getting NATO ready for a new Cold War', *Survival* 57.1 (2015): 49-70; Archetti, Cristina. 'Terrorism, communication and new media: explaining radicalization in the digital age', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9.1 (2015).

<sup>12</sup> Frost, Mervyn, and Silviya Lechner, 'Understanding international practices from the internal point of view', *Journal of International Political Theory* (2015): 1755088215596765.

other kinds of communication, such as an academic paper in a journal, is that we assume the academic paper is in accordance with and seeks to uphold the fundamental values of academic practice, especially those to do with truth-telling and building sound arguments, whereas, the former does not always do these things. An identifying feature of strategic communications is that it seeks a way around at least some of these ethical constraints. In academic papers we do not expect, accept, or tolerate tampering with the evidence, leaving out relevant counter-examples, *ad hominem* arguments, attempts to gild the lily, plagiarism, ‘spinning’ the facts, and so on. Such tools are assumed to be indicators of weak scholarship, which the process of external peer review in academia is supposed to test for, placing the burden of proof on the reviewers and their capacity to test and substantiate the logic of the arguments presented. In contrast, we understand that such tools are the stock in trade of strategic communications—that it involves priming the audience, framing events, and ‘spinning the narrative’ to suit the purposes of the user. Because of the assumption that there is an element of ethical turpitude in strategic communications, those who use it more often than not seek to disguise the fact that what they are doing is an act of strategic communications. Instead they seek to portray it as a *bona fide* act of communication. Modern communication technology makes it increasingly easy to act in such clandestine ways.

Rhetoric is central to all strategic communications, indeed, it is central in all political practices. The arguments used in social practices to support one interpretation of an action, or of many actions that together constitute the ‘state of play’ within a practice, are rhetorical arguments rather than formal proofs. Rhetorical argument makes an appeal to what is accepted and settled within a given practice, including the ethical values intrinsic to it. The planks of such arguments taken together either support (or not) a given conclusion. Strategic communications in international relations is always a special form of rhetorical argument. A feature of this is that the planks of the argument are manipulated in specific ways. For example, they might rely upon appeals to emotions that are relevant to a given narrative, but which may highlight part of a story rather than the whole, or, which may hide the implications of a given narrative, or which may effectively silence other relevant arguments that ought to have been aired. In some cases they rely on photographs or videos that carry an emotional charge. There is a panoply of rhetorical devices used by strategic communicators to support the narrative storyline or framing of events. Clearly, this use of devices might potentially lead to the imputation that all strategic communication is nothing but propaganda, a clash of situated truths, where no final determination is possible. In this view the clash of strategic communications is simply a clash of voices between opposed groups (states or communities) who have no agreed way of determining the truth of an act of communication. The clash of strategic communications should then be understood simply as an aspect of the general struggle for power in the international arena. Strategic communications, here, dissolves international political ‘dialogue’ into a form of discursive coercion.

There is no formal procedure, analogous to an academic peer review, by which to test the logic or substantiate international actors’ claims, so the burden of proof seems to be lifted, allowing the persuasiveness of the argument to rest merely/insecurely

upon rhetorical skill and audience receptiveness. However, we contend that to communicate in international relations, whether strategically or not, is nonetheless to make claims with an ethical dimension arising within an existing global architecture of intelligibility. A global architecture (of norms) determines the conditions under which the rhetorical claims put forward by strategic communicators in international relations are received as persuasive or not. Ethical judgement is thus at the very heart of success and failure in strategic communications. That is to say, to practice strategic communication is always to propose judgements about other actor-communicators, often to claim that they are unethical, in that they are engaged in manipulation, supply disinformation, or are otherwise engaged in ethical wrongdoing. For example, the ‘dodgy dossier’, which Tony Blair relied on as a reason for going to war in Iraq, made allegations of legal and ethical wrongdoing by Saddam Hussein. It, like all strategic communications, was constitutively bound to the ethical norms of the practice in which it was made. A central value in this practice is truth-telling. The audience understood the statements provided in the dossier to be true. After the event, it turned out that they were false. Tony Blair’s standing as an ethical international actor suffered accordingly. His reputation has never recovered. We shall return to this illuminating case of an initially successful, yet ultimately flawed strategic communications campaign below.

Ethical terms are transparently central to the justifications, rationales, narratives, and explanations that make up all strategic communications actions. For those terms to make sense to interlocutors, whether states or publics, they must be rooted in common or shared architectures of meaningfulness. Of course, for both foreign and domestic consumers of strategic communications, effective strategic communications seeks to persuade audiences that its account is the most legitimate, vis-à-vis those of its competitors, and it necessarily does so by reference to a set of already existing settled normative formations that give structure to contesting ethical claims and interpretations. As such, the fact that strategic communications seeks to intervene, rhetorically, in the ethical interpretation of an act or event, provides considerable guidance towards making sense of this phenomenon as it relates to world politics. It reveals, put simply, that strategic communications is tightly bound up with the settled norms that are already contained in international meta-practices. We take it to be self-evident that *all* actions are constitutively related to the ethical components of the practices within which actors are participants. This is true of micro-practices like family life and also global practices. To be an actor in international relations, to be a state for example, is to be an entity that makes certain ethical claims for itself and recognises such claims that come from others. Thus to be a state is to claim sovereignty for oneself and one’s citizens, which is an ethical claim for a certain kind of autonomy. To make the claim is to hold that those who infringe one’s sovereignty are guilty of ethical wrongdoing. *A fortiori*, to claim this is to recognise that other states have a right to a similar ethical standing. In the practice of sovereign states, there are many other ethical requirements besides sovereignty that states are required to uphold. These include, amongst others, the upholding of the value of communication between sovereign states by respecting the elaborate rules of diplomacy (key amongst these, of course, is the requirement to be truthful in one’s dealings with other states), upholding the values protected by international

law, upholding the values protected by the International Law of Armed Conflict and also International Humanitarian Law, respecting the value of *pacta sunt servanda* (the assumption that treaties or agreements between states will be honoured), and many others. Respecting and protecting these values is a fundamental requirement of what is involved in being a state in the practice of sovereign states. Wrongdoing erodes a state's standing in this practice, just as being caught cheating in a game undermines a player's standing or, at the limit, results in his or her expulsion from the sport altogether.<sup>13</sup>

It follows from the above that states, in all that they do, which includes their SC actions, must have regard to the ethical constraints operative on them by virtue of their standing as states in the international Society of Sovereign States. Individual citizens in states are similarly constrained by the requirements of citizenship. To make matters more complicated, states and individuals are also actors in Global Civil Society, a key component of which is the global market. As such, they have to pay attention to the constraints operative on them in GCS. These include ethical constraints. The strategic communications of actors in GCS (whether they be states, corporations, or individual men and women) only have traction when they appeal to the ethical norms that are constituted and settled in that practice. In GCS, once again, a key requirement of all actors is that they be truth-tellers. If it becomes known that they are consistently untruthful, then their standing in the practice will be seriously eroded. This is particularly important in GCS because core to all activity in this practice is contract making. For a state, corporation, or individual to flourish in GCS it is important that the other participants are able to 'take their word' that they will honour their contracts. Once this standing is eroded, their future in the practice will be a dim one. Ethical standing is crucial for all participants in this practice.

As indicated, the two social practices in which strategic communication is carried out are the International Society of Sovereign States and Global Civil Society. These practices are identifiable as social arrangements within which agents of a certain kind are constituted. In the former, the key agents are sovereign states and in the latter they are individual rights holders. These practices determine who the actors are, what claims they may make for themselves, what claims from others they have to respect, what actions are available to them (what 'moves' they can make), and what would count as a case of ethical wrongdoing (what would count as a 'foul'). These, taken together, are, one might say, 'the rules of the game'. Without these there would no players or participants—in global affairs there would be no sovereign states or individual rights holders. These rules of the game are constituted historically, so display a degree of flexibility, openness to contestation, and may change, just as the 'off side rule' was introduced in professional football to remove an action allowed under the previous rules that resulted in regular interruptions to the flow of the game. But *the rules must hang together in a more or less coherent way for the game to exist at all, and for there to be identifiable players in it.* This limits the degree to which the rules of any given practice are vulnerable to incremental erosion through repeated infringements by individual participants.

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<sup>13</sup> As those like Lance Armstrong, who was caught cheating in professional cycling, have discovered.

We have already mentioned the core values intrinsic to the practice of states as understood from the point of view of its participants. Values such as sovereignty (understood as the fundamental freedom of a state within the practice of states), free communication between states through the institutions of diplomacy, international law, the laws of armed conflict, and *pacta sunt servanda*. Beyond these, we should also mention the value attached to the diversity that exists between states, the value of order and peace between states, and the prohibition against empire and colonialism. In the contemporary states' practice there is a commitment to democracy within states, although it is clearly not always fully realised and, where it is not, elaborate justifications tend to be offered for the states' failure in this regard. In this practice, states justify their actions in terms of these values and criticise those who do not honour them. Like all actions within this practice, the subcategory of action known as 'strategic communications' can only be read as meaningful in the context of this practice and the ethical values embodied in it.

While the society of sovereign states has existed for several centuries now, Global Civil Society is a practice that has only formed comparatively recently. As outlined earlier, GCS may be defined as that society within which individuals recognise one another as holders of first generation rights. It is a borderless practice. Participant rights holders in it do not regard their rights to be determined by the states in which they find themselves. They claim their rights wherever they happen to be. They also do not regard the rights they claim as having been granted to them by one or another state. Indeed, they often make claims against the states they find themselves in. Rights holders are aware that states can protect or abuse their rights. GCS is an anarchical society in which there is no government in authority over it. The core values constituted and protected within GCS are that of freedom of the individual and the overall accommodation of diversity in GCS as a whole. Amongst the rights protected within the GCS are the rights of the person not to be killed or tortured, the right to free speech, association, freedom of conscience, and the right to own property. The list of rights is not static, but under constant review within the practice itself. The role of non-governmental strategic communicators in this process of review has been well documented.<sup>14</sup>

Strategic communications within GCS always appeals in one way or another to these core values. For example, communications from ISIS often depict the USA and its allies as guilty of military action that kills innocent civilians (thus not respecting their right to life); while strategic communications from the USA and its allies often depicts ISIS as flagrantly abusing the human rights of its victims. Similar allegations about torture are issued from both sides. Non-governmental organisations also mount strategic communications campaigns that hinge on claims about human rights abuses committed by a number of parties involved in conflicts like that taking place in Syria.

The SOSS and GCS are both multi-actor practices and both are what we might call 'super practices' in that they contain within them a host of other social practices. These are highly interdependent. Most people, wherever they happen to be, are

<sup>14</sup> Finnemore and Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics'; Epstein, *The Power of Words*.

participants in the overarching practices as citizens of sovereign states or as rights holders in GCS. In these practices most actors make regular use of SC. One such use relates to attempts to shift the emphasis upon which certain norms are prioritised within international practices. For example, Chinese public diplomacy has, in recent years, sought to emphasise some international norms (free trade and sovereignty) whilst de-emphasising others (human rights, self-determination, citizenship).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, a number of African states have publicly withdrawn from the International Criminal Court, appealing to arguments regarding anti-imperialism, and to the value of sovereignty—both settled international ethical norms. International actors often seek to establish the primacy of one norm or set of norms at the expense of others in their strategic communications. Contestation over the relative significance of international norms is ongoing within the two practices we have outlined, and shows how they have become highly interdependent over time. For example, a state seeking to give priority to ‘free trade’ in its relations with other states implicitly commits itself to endorsing within those states the establishment of conditions that would allow business representatives to conduct themselves as rights holders within an effective legal architecture, that is to say, it assumes their recognition as actors within GCS. Whilst the international practices we have described are clearly not immune to dissolution, and their rules can and do change over time, the architecture of interdependent norms they constitute is highly elastic. This is exploited by strategic communicators in international relations so as to frame their actions as more in line with international norms than the actions of their peers, but such norm contestation does not itself offer evidence for an incremental breakdown in the architecture of international ethical norms.<sup>16</sup> What we see, rather, is analogous to the mechanism by which case law develops in response to disagreements within a legal system. Hard cases are resolved through highly sophisticated debates between jurists who make their cases before learned judges.<sup>17</sup>

There is regularly an element of competition involved in international strategic communications. Actor X seeks to communicate a message that is significantly at odds with the message actor Y is advancing, with respect to the significance attached to one or other settled international norm (say, an individual’s accepted right to be free from torture, and a state’s accepted right to self-defence). This is the world of ‘spin’. What we wish to highlight in this article is that the spinners cannot escape the ethical criteria that constrain action in the practice in which they are doing their spinning. In spinning a message, the risk of discovery is always present. There is one particular manoeuvre central to competitive spinning that we wish to highlight. We refer here to the activity of *ethical trapping*.

The meta-practices we have described, like all social practices, include a certain category of action, which we shall call ‘ethical fouls’. Such fouls include a wide range

<sup>15</sup> We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for this example.

<sup>16</sup> The interdependent architecture of norms carries significant, though not unlimited, resilience. Just as pulling on a metal spring and then releasing it will result in a return to its initial form until a certain limit of force is reached, at which point the spring will lose this capacity to return to its original state.

<sup>17</sup> See Dworkin, R, ‘Justice for Hedgehogs’, *Boston University Law Review*, Vol 90 Nr. 2, 2010, p. 473. Indeed, law is thus, for Dworkin, a ‘branch of morality’, or interpretative moral reasoning.

of actions that are not permitted by the 'rules of the game'. In football, players are not permitted to punch the referee or commit a handball infringement. Any player who infringes the rule is penalised, and repeated infringements result in the player being sent to the 'sin bin' or, at the limit, excluded from the game altogether. Similarly, in Olympic sport, to take certain performance-enhancing drugs is to violate settled ethical norms within the practice of Olympic competition. To be caught doping would result in exclusion. Perhaps the defining foul in international relations is to be caught out lying. This is particularly clear in the act of declaring war. Whilst it may be, as Sun Tzu argued, that 'all war is deception', if a state is recognised to have embarked upon a war for reasons other than the declared reason, they are likely to be suffer considerable damage to their standing in world politics.

The UK experience of strategically communicating the rationale for the Second Gulf War, already mentioned above, provides a useful illustration of the commission of a foul and of the consequences that follow from such an action. Whereas Tony Blair was successful in strategically communicating to parliament that Saddam Hussein represented a clear and present danger to the United Kingdom, over time widespread scepticism developed. Indeed, many came to believe that the communicators had deliberately fabricated a story about the severity of the threat. What followed was that British government suffered a loss of credibility. This in turn has constrained subsequent governments seeking to frame British foreign policy as ethical. For example, it has had specific implications for the credibility of UK appeals to humanitarian values as a justification for military interventions abroad. The UK's credibility as an upholder of human rights has been discredited in the eyes of both domestic and international publics. Here we see clearly a successful (short-term) strategic communications campaign resulting in a major (long-term) cost to UK credibility as a strategic communicator in certain contexts. The costs of a perceived foul here have thus been significant for Britain's claim to an ethical role in both the SOSS and GCS. What we see here is that strategic communications actions imply an appeal to the architecture of settled ethical norms, because they hope to convince others of their validity. To engage in a strategic communications action is always to make a case with such an ethical dimension. The case makes a rhetorical appeal to certain shared assumptions about what constitutes ethical and unethical action. To be viewed as having lied or mislead audiences in the past makes future exercises of strategic communications more difficult, or even impossible, as it damages an actor's credibility as a communicator within the confines of the broader practice. In IR, there are severe costs associated with being found out as the author of duplicitous communications. Potentially, such exposure inflicts fatal harm on an actor's capacity *strategically* to communicate in the future.

Strategic communicators recognise the truth of the above. For this reason, no strategic communications actor in IR admits to lying, deception, or indeed to 'spinning' the truth. Indeed, strategic communications actors *of all kinds*, state and non-state, go to elaborate lengths to conceal or deny lying. This is true of weak states and non-state actors, like ISIS or Al Qaeda, and of strong states such as the US or UK. There is a further point worth noting, which is that there are sometimes greater costs to the credibility of liars that are strong, than there are to liars that are relatively weak.

Clearly states as well as non-state actors (like terrorist groups) can and do lie in their strategic communications. Their duplicity often goes undiscovered and they succeed in securing their goals. Here their actions may be seen as analogous to what often happens in football where it is possible to get away with a foul, perhaps even score a goal using a shoulder or hand, or by pretending to have been fouled to get a penalty, and by doing so one may win a particular contest. These, one might say, are tactical fouls. But, in the long run, gaining a reputation as a serial fouler carries a cost to a player's standing in the game. If a pattern of cheating were sustained, it is likely that a player (or team) would no longer be recognised as a player in the game (by suffering a ban from Olympic competition, for example). In international relations, the crucial cost would be a loss of credibility and, at the limit, being pushed into pariah statehood. From such a position, the strategic communications of a state would no longer be given any credence whatsoever—this is a position in which North Korea currently finds itself. Because one's appraisal by others as deceitful carries the high cost of incredulity with respect to all future statements about one's own actions, it is the first principle of competitive strategic communications practice to seek to identify the points of empirical weakness or ethical flaws in the accounts one is seeking to oppose.<sup>18</sup> Actors possessing high levels of credibility have the most to lose, but settled norms against lying tend, over time, to reassert themselves amongst strategic communicators of all kinds. For both weak and strong actors in IR, there are benefits to being recognised as a reliable communicator—that is, as a legitimate and reliable participant in the strategic communications game. There is no mileage in becoming the Lance Armstrong of international politics. Indeed, for weak actors, like Al Qaeda or ISIS, seeking recognition as a credible enunciator of statements of fact about world politics is a foundational aim. These groups seek credibility as strategic communicators. The central role of appeals to justice and attempts to draw attention to Western duplicity in their public diplomacy and propaganda effort, show that appeals to a shared regulatory architecture for ethical dispute are recognised as of great value on the road to achieving such status.

Truth-telling, as an ethical norm, is a fundamental requirement for the mutual constitution of participants in any given social practice. It is only as truth-tellers that they are able to make sense of themselves to relevant audiences, as practitioners within the two most important and interconnected international practices: Global Civil Society and the Society of Sovereign States. Strategic communications, which might be effective in the short-term, but which is not truthful, and thus not ethical, always creates ethical traps for the user. They become permanent hostages to fortune. They become traps, which other actors can spring, and it is here, we argue, that the practical ethical puzzles for strategic communicators reside. Recognition as a truth-teller is a constitutive feature of the architecture of participation in the two international meta-practices. This establishes the basic condition of possibility for successful strategic communications actions. Where this is not recognised, even highly effective strategic communications campaigns (in the short-term) create opportunities that empower even very weak hostile actors and undermine the basic structural conditions on which even the strongest actors' credibility is rooted.

<sup>18</sup> Farwell, *Persuasion and power*, pg. 6.

## Strategic Communications and Ethical Traps

Having argued that recognition as a truth-teller is not established solely through one's technical mastery of storytelling methods (such as priming, framing, or narrative mode), within an open global discursive field, but rather may be established only by reference to the ethical architecture of the two international meta-practices, we may now move forward to illuminate some contemporary puzzles arising within the field of contemporary strategic communication. As noted above, the peculiar challenge, which has arisen in recent years, is derived from the proliferation of new strategic communications actors as a direct consequence of new communications technologies. In most cases new actors remain bound by the standard constraints inherent in the global practices in which they operate. However, there is one factor that greatly complicates the overall picture—the non-attributable nature of many communications via the new media. It is often not possible for ordinary members of the public to determine who the authors of a particular communication are. There are huge difficulties in determining who authored an item on social media, or who is responsible for a leak. In such cases, although one can determine in the normal way that a given communication is partial, biased, spun, or even false (and thus unethical), it is not clear whose ethical standing in the practice is damaged by such discoveries. The anonymous authors seem to be immune to the normal consequences of such conduct. Revealing the flaws in a message leaves the author untarnished because the identity of the author is not known. One potential implication of this is communicated in the claim that the very currency of truth-telling is being eroded within contemporary international practices and in national politics.<sup>19</sup> This sense of impunity from loss of standing is only apparent. For the author of such cases of strategic communications, even if only known as 'Anon.', will still be perceived as an actor, as the source of the message, whose ethical standing in the practice can go up and go down following good or bad ethical conduct. Such sources will soon be branded as reliable or not.<sup>20</sup> Anonymity does not shield a voice from judgement; it only hides the identity of the speaker. Huge effort will be directed to uncovering the real identities of states and other actors who seek to hide their real identities with a view to bringing them to the bar of international ethical judgement. A good recent example of such an endeavour has been the tracking down of hackers who hacked the files of the Democratic Party in the US presidential election campaign and published some of the stolen material in order to embarrass Hillary Clinton. Once Russia was revealed as the source, ethical blame for meddling in the sovereign affairs of a foreign state could be allocated.

There are some new actors in international relations whose identities are known, groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS, who, on the face of the matter, do not face the same sanctions as those applied to established international actors, state or non-state, for lying or otherwise committing ethical fouls. Such actors are, from the outset, seen to be illegitimate players in the global practices of sovereign states and GCS.

<sup>19</sup> Tallis, Benjamin, 'Living in Post-truth', *New Perspectives. Interdisciplinary Journal of Central & East European Politics and International Relations* 24.1 (2016): 7-18.

<sup>20</sup> The anonymous source of information to Woodward and Bernstein in the Watergate Scandal soon earned very high standing for the truthful quality of his communications.

In a sense they are widely construed as ‘outlaws’, unconcerned by the judgement of other actors. An implication, which has been drawn from this is that such actors also contribute to a generalised devaluation of truth-telling, in that this status would seem to give them a free hand to flout the ethical requirements of the global practices. It would seem to allow them *carte blanche* to use all of the devices used in strategic communication, including spinning, playing on emotion, giving biased interpretations of action, fabricating ‘facts’, and presenting outright lies as ‘truths’. Such *carte blanche* would surely be infectious and, if perceived as creating an uneven playing field, it might lead to the corruption of other competitors in the strategic communications game. This is analogous to what those caught cheating in cycling argued had occurred in their sport.

This view of some actors as unconstrained by the ethics of the global practices, and thus a source of structural risk, is misconceived. To make the case, we invite the reader to consider the role ethical trapping plays in the search for power by such groups. In the formation of such groups the following trajectory of action is common: Prior to the establishment of groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS, the people involved—citizens of some state and rights holders in civil society—are participants in the global practice in the normal way. By establishing Al Qaeda and ISIS they become wrongdoers and violators of the norms internal to the global practices. Their activities, such as suicide bombings, public executions, and other ‘terrorist’ deeds reinforce their status as unethical actors. Subsequently, though, such groups start making use of a different and more reliable source of power. They find this in the reactions of other global actors to their unethical deeds. This happens when great powers are provoked by Al Qaeda and ISIS to respond in particularly brutal ways, which themselves flout the ethical basis of the global practices. Flout, that is, some of the following norms: human rights, state sovereignty, the laws of armed conflict, and international law more generally. By doing these things the international actors fall into an ethical trap. They have acted in ways that can be criticised by Al Qaeda and ISIS in the conventional way. These maverick groups are then able to use strategic communications to present themselves as substantially less bad than the major international actors. Indeed, this opens the way for them to recruit people widely to their cause on the grounds that they are legitimate actors, far less ethically suspect than the superpower and its allies. Subsequently a pattern of conduct emerges, which starts with the commission and communication of a bad deed by a terrorist group with a view to provoking a worse one by the target state and the international community more generally. Part of the ethically obnoxious response sought, might be to have foreign great powers put boots on the ground in a sovereign state in an act that could be portrayed as aggression, to make widespread use of assassination methods that commonly result in collateral damage, or to have them start using intelligence gathering methods that include the use of torture, and so on. These transgressions can then be advertised through the use of strategic communications to recruit more people to the side of Al Qaeda and ISIS and also to shore up its legitimacy at home. This ethical trapping soon becomes the major source of power for such groups, far outstripping the power directly exercised through terror.

What we wish to stress, though, first, is that such ethical trapping can only be carried out within the global practices within which all participants understand the ethical game being played, and, second, that such ethical trapping also, in the long run, traps the trapper. This comes about in the battle of strategic communications. In order to realise the power available to them from ethical traps, the outlaw group has to use strategic communications to communicate the turpitude of the major actors to the international community. In response, states and international organisations ramp up their strategic communications portraying, and drawing attention to, the evil deeds of the terrorists. What inevitably develops is a fight for the ethical high ground. For ethical trapping to work, the terrorist groups have to appeal to the normal ethical bases of the global practices. In order not to undermine their own strategic communications it then becomes important for such groups themselves to be seen to be upholding the ethical standards to which they appeal when springing the ethical trap. This requires that future actions be more closely aligned with the core values of the global practices. Indeed, this is precisely what has transpired in the conduct of both Al Qaeda and ISIS. After their initial savagery and the strategic communications that made use of it, this aspect of their conduct has been toned down. ISIS, for example, have sought to show how they provide welfare services to those over whom they rule and how they keep order where others fail, and so on. The longer the group has held territory, the greater the emphasis ISIS has sought to give to the ethicality of their actions. This suggests limits to the widespread assumption that ISIS are beyond the pale of any comprehensible ethic. Our point is that when strategically communicating, actors of any kind (even the most violent) will seek in the long run to acquire and hold rhetorically stronger positions within common structures of ethical intelligibility established by global meta-practices. In 2005, Al Qaeda's Ayman Al Zawahiri, amongst others, very publically criticised Abu Musab Al Zarqawi for his attacks on Shia civilians in Iraq, explicitly referencing mounting reputational costs for the group in the judgement of wider Muslim populations. What we see in this competitive strategic communications is the attempt by a participant in international relations to acquire communicative authority by displaying their actions as more in line with the ethical standards of the global practices than those of their opponents. A key implication of the above is that powerful states making use of strategic communications must be careful not to fall into what we have termed 'ethical traps', which are laid by hostile strategic communications actors.

Ethical traps appear for powerful international strategic communications actors even without their deliberately making statements known to be untrue. In the complex practices of world politics, telling 'the whole truth', as any actor understands it, is always difficult, for any given state of play is always complex; there are ambiguities in any interpretation and there are things that might accidentally have been overlooked. Strategic communications is driven by the urge to persuade others of one's ethical status. It is, as such, a form of political rhetoric. The essential nature of strategic communications requires events to be packaged in narrative or other forms so as to be convincing—simplifying the matters of fact as they are perceived by the strategic communicator. In this article we hope we have demonstrated that there are significant costs to being recognised as 'spinning' or 'fudging the truth' for political ends, since the aim of strategic communications is to present oneself as a participant

in the global practices who is in good ethical standing, and to present the opponent in a dark ethical light. There is always a risk associated with using the methods of strategic communications, ‘spinning’ for example, for if they are discovered they may undermine this very standing.

For this reason, parsimony is a core feature of successful strategic communications campaigns, in the attempt to anchor the sense of a strategic communications action as unambiguously as possible in relationship to the settled norms of international meta-practices. Successful strategic communications campaigns in international relations often seek to tap into the settled norms of international meta-practices through symbolic images or actions, as much as through narrative. Russia’s hosting of a classical music concert in the ruins of Palmyra in Syria after its recapture from ISIS forces provides an example of such a strategic communications action. In that case, an attempt was made to establish the validity of an ethical interpretation of the Russian intervention in Syria. This account represented the intervention as an action in defence of global cultural resources. Combined with the Russian highlighting of their intervention as authorised by the sovereign government of Syria (and so legitimate under International Law), a powerful strategic communication of Russia legitimacy as an actor in this conflict was effected, which appeals to the ethical structures of both the International Society of States and Global Civil Society. In appealing to the settled norms of the two international meta-practices, the action constructed an ethical trap for Western strategic communicators in the Syrian conflict, as any attempt to re-frame the concert as an example of Russian propaganda would likely incur the inverse perception. Likewise, groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS, seek to articulate ethical diagnoses of the contemporary world that are credible and plausible by publicising evocative images of ‘collateral damage’ from Western drone strikes. They do so by appealing in the process to the settled architecture of international ethics, which Western states claim to uphold. A core claim propounded by Al Qaeda has been that many Muslim individuals live with significant injustice, that Western states have simultaneously failed to respect the sovereignty of Islamic majority states in conducting such strikes, and have failed to realise a cosmopolitan global order able to protect the rights of individual victims.<sup>21</sup> These actors thus appeal directly, in their strategic communications, to ethical claims that are constitutive of International meta-practices, and seek to justify their actions as legitimate by reference to these same shared norms, in the light of an accusation of Western hypocrisy.

This is not, of course, to suggest that such strategic communications campaigns are necessarily persuasive (though they clearly have purchase with some audiences). Nor is it to imply that what is called for here is simply a better or more efficacious narrative contestation, as if the better or more technically accomplished storyteller will carry the day by producing more effective ‘counter-narratives’. Rather, the role of existing settled norms, in governing the legibility of certain ethical claims, shows that even those actors who are widely deemed illegitimate or non-players in the game are in fact *operating within it*. The appeal to the common structures of intelligibility embedded in international meta-practices shows that strategic communications is best understood as a global forum for international ethical argument.

<sup>21</sup> Devji, Faisal, *The terrorist in search of humanity: militant Islam and global politics*, (Columbia University Press, 2008).

Strategic communications actors are participants in a practice defined by putting the truth claims of others to test. Strategic communications interlocutors hope to present the other as hypocrite, liar, or disseminator of half-truths. Strategic communications is thus a global dialogue between or contest between truth claims, which may (though also may not) take narrative form, but in which both sides are constitutively appealing to mutually acknowledged rhetorical grounds for legitimacy. The evaluation of claims made by international strategic communications actors is thus a question of claiming alignment with core values of SOSS and GCS, when there is no agreement on facts. Strategic communications actors seek to provide an ethical gloss, which will be appraised by relation to the settled rules of the game of international practices, indeed, by reference to the coherence of these actors' actions with those practices. All international strategic communications actors attempt to persuade other international actors, by reference to parameters of core practices in IR within which they are constituted. This applies no less to those trying to change the rules of the game like Al Qaeda or ISIS.<sup>22</sup>

A further concern, emerging from new technologies and the consequent proliferation of effective strategic communications actors, is that the scope for international ethical discourse and appraisal might be increasingly constrained by the complexity of the new media ecology. In this environment, surely what an actor argues is less important than their ability to establish their authority in the cacophony of voices that proliferate online. This is supported by the manner in which a self-selective 'electronic autism' characterises online media consumption patterns.<sup>23</sup> We have argued that authority can only spring from a track record of telling the truth. This has traditionally been the strength of established media organisations like the BBC, but such established platforms are increasingly vulnerable to the imputation of partiality or bias. In the case of the BBC, such arguments are often attached to state funding, but a trend toward decline of faith in established platforms is also directly consequent to the rapid proliferation of alternative outlets.<sup>24</sup>

A newly available option to strategic communications actors is that of drenching the diverse online media space with conflicting accounts, narratives, and interpretations, rendering it highly difficult to identify sources, or adjudicate the matters of fact. This is facilitated by the manner in which user-content driven news sites borrow content from each other, and thus appear to provide multi-source corroboration for claims. An argument has been promoted by new media outlets, including RT (a Russian state-funded body), that there are multiple truths, and that giving air to this multiplicity, regardless of content,<sup>25</sup> is an act establishing conditions for open dialogue. There is clearly potential, within this democratising process, for strategic communications

<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that, just as precedent can be overruled through legal challenge, changes to settled international norms can occur, as they did regarding the acceptability of colonial rule. Our claim is not that international norms are essentially stable, only that they change in a procedural manner through deliberation within international practices. See Waldron, Jeremy, 'The rule of law as a theatre of debate', in Dworkin and his critics: with replies from Dworkin (ed. Burnley, Justine), (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, UK, 2004), p. 326.

<sup>23</sup> Castells, *Communication power*, pg. 154.

<sup>24</sup> Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*, pg. 164.

<sup>25</sup> Yablokov, Ilya, 'Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT)', *Politics* 35.3-4 (2015): 301-315

actions that do not ‘make a rhetorical argument’ that can be ethically disputed, or proven credible or not, but which operate by relation to the communicative field in general, aiming to create an atmosphere of distrust of specific official messaging, or introduce sufficient grounds for withholding credence with respect to them (by disseminating multiple, contradictory, stories).

Strategic communications actions of this variety put enormous pressure on targeted governments, and construct their own ethical traps for their victims. The ethical traps that arise here relate to how states respond to conditions of pervasive distrust with regards to their official messaging, which often serves to accord credibility to, sometimes bizarre, alternative messages. It is a constitutive feature of all strategic communications that one seeks to have influence without the influenced knowing they are being influenced. It is, in other words, central to the efficacy of strategic communications actions that they are not interpreted as explicit propaganda, yet nonetheless inform the conditions of possibility for audience interpretations (engage in covert world-forming). As a wide range of new actors (including private companies) engage in strategic communications, this world-forming power largely operates outside traditional structures of democratic accountability and attribution. The difficulty of attributing accountability with regards to the complex weaves of narrative, facts, or interpretations that circulate online, plays into this condition and fosters public distrust in official messaging in most national contexts. The complexity apparent in the mediation of architectures of interpretation online has thus resulted in classical mechanisms for the assessment of public enunciations or strategic communications (reputation or political status/role) losing their purchase, precisely where and when they are most needed. One important consequence of the proliferation of new media platforms is that a process requiring the filtering of messages through a limited number of reputable hosts or platforms has shifted to a process whereby political communicators can directly access their target audiences.<sup>26</sup> Diplomats leverage this development by speaking directly to foreign publics. This same opportunity space also, however, clearly carries with it the potential for covert manipulation of interpretations on a global scale through acts of communicative disruption (such as the anonymous dissemination of multiple, contradictory, and deliberately false stories, or comment board stuffing).

It should be clear that democratic states, which are strategic communications actors with a particular stake in the sustainability of the meta-practices of international order, must ensure their strategic communications actions do not contribute to eroding their own conditions of possibility. In this area, new technologies, combined with a new set of market dynamics associated with the field of professional strategic communications contractors, might impart a corrosive seduction to leverage communicative disorder for strategic ends. This danger should not be overstated. Actors who engage in this kind of ethical foul will continue to incur long-term costs. For example, Russia’s communications around the Syrian conflict are seen to have been very effective in supporting its strategic aims. These successes have precisely centred on diversion, disruption, and confusion, rendering it difficult to attribute responsibility for particular acts, such as air strikes, before news cycles have moved on.

<sup>26</sup> Castells, *Communication power*; Fletcher, *Naked Diplomacy*.

While these actions have led to short-term successes in winning tactical contests around the Syrian negotiations, such successes have clearly resulted in real costs to Russian credibility. Its standing in international practices has been damaged. For much the same reasons as the Iraq War damaged Western states' capacity strategically to communicate, Russia's credibility as a player in negotiations has been degraded.

Whilst strategic communication is a necessary feature of all political and diplomatic practice, repackaging events, in narrative and other forms, by caveating, obfuscating, and simplifying the matters of fact, it cannot function effectively without a strategic sensitivity to the ethical rules that determine one's standing in international meta-practices. Obfuscatory narratives, or other rhetorical ploys, which may have tactical value within a particular contest, are subject to the criteria pertaining to truth that we have set out. State and non-state actors' leveraging of new technologies for the purpose of disruption (within particular operational contexts) presents little threat to the maintenance and sustainability of international meta-practices, since such ethical fouls will result in longer-term costs for the actors' standing. But consideration is called for how failure to distinguish the task of 'strategic communications' from the various methods or tactics of rhetorical contestation by the agents of democratic states can erode public trust in those democratic institutions and their representatives, with potentially serious consequences.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

Strategic communications are actions that are fundamentally linked to claims and counter-claims about ethical conduct in international relations. By using strategic communications, states clearly can hide things from the citizens from whom they draw their legitimacy. This potentially allows them to cover up their own (short-term) failures, or to put a positive 'spin' on these failures. Private strategic communications companies contracted by states are happy to provide such services because it is lucrative. For example, members of the Assad family in Syria have hired a number of professional contractors to manage its international public image. To offer further examples, the British government hired leading Public Relations contractors to provide 'on the ground' management of press coverage of its withdrawal from Mosul and President Zuma in South Africa has hired another well-known British firm to counteract media that portray him as corrupt. But none of the above diminishes the central role of ethical claim-making in all strategic communications actions. States have always engaged in, and indeed often had a monopoly on the means of SC in the past. What has changed is simply that now there are more voices or actors in the game. This is a democratic moment, but it is also one filled with the perception of danger.

A central concern that we have dealt with in this article is that an emerging condition might be marked by a generalised debasement of public international discourse. One of the puzzles that has been posed in this context has been how should states respond to the strategic communications of a state or non-state actor who suffers

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<sup>27</sup> For example, the proliferation of demagoguery.

lower costs for lying or disseminating half-truths, either because they are anonymous or are already assumed to be ‘outlaws’. Here, we noted, the challenge would appear to be that in avoiding the ethical traps that follow from responding in kind, states risk continual misrepresentation by plural hostile communicators. We have argued that such concerns are overstated. Even rogue strategic communicators like ISIS suffer costs from lying or other kinds of ethical wrongdoing. This is because all strategic communicators must seek to establish ethical validity for their claims by reference to existing shared rhetorical architectures of intelligibility. As an actor within international practices, they can only establish their credibility, and engage in competitive rhetorical contestation, by aligning words and deeds to the ethical norms that are internal to the two international meta-practices, the International Society of Sovereign States and Global Society of Individuals.

This does not, of course, remove the potentially corrosive effects of *the perception* of an uneven playing field amongst strategic communications actors in international relations. The solution to this issue resides in clearly articulating the difference between ‘communicative tactics’ (including rhetorical tools like narratives) and ‘strategic communications’. The only communication which may be properly termed strategic is one which establishes its rhetorical validity by reference to the identifiable rules of the game constituted within international practices, and seeks to align an actor’s actions and words so as to support its preferential standing as a player within those international practices. Communications that do not align with a strategic sensitivity to an actor’s long-term standing, and seek only tactically to ‘counter’ hostile communications or narratives in the short term, will invariably carry long term costs to that actor’s standing within international practices. An implication here is that widespread anxieties regarding the potential for an incremental unravelling of the international normative regime constructed during the last century, in the face of recurrent ‘tactical’ ethical fouling by state and non-state actors (such as lying or hacking), are not warranted.

This connects to a final concern, which arises from the proliferation of strategic communications actors in recent years, upon which we shall close our argument. A challenge for states today is to ensure that the strategic communications actions of private actors, particularly strategic communications contractors hired by those states, do not undermine or contradict the settled norms that underpin International Order. Because they are contracted by individual actors (such as states) for specific operational tasks, they may not be aware of, or may be uninterested in, the difference we have outlined between proper strategic communications in international relations (that is to say, communications that appeal to the settled ethical architecture of international meta-practices), and tactical narrative contestation within the complex media environment. Such concerns may no doubt be overstated, but any confusion between tactical and strategic communications carries particular risks for democratic states. This has bearing upon the question: When, if ever, might it be ethically acceptable for a government to use strategic communications to manipulate its own citizens? Governments are supposed to be accountable to the citizens they govern. If they manipulate the understanding of their citizens about what is going on, and about the conduct of the government itself, then the government is undermining

the accountability structure, which is at the heart of democratic politics. Here, it is setting a trap for itself. Where this happens the citizens cannot properly hold the government to account because they have been manipulated—for they do not know what has been done to them. The allocation of praise and blame is part of what is required of citizens, particularly when considering war and peace. Where governments, or government contracted communicators, thwart citizens' ability properly to do this, we shall see the corrosion of the basic conditions of political life and accountability in democratic societies. Where this happens it will undermine the communicators' capacity strategically to communicate in international relations.

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