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# On Communications War: Public Interest Communications and Classical Military Strategy

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### Abstract

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Strategic communication disciplines routinely use terms such as strategy, tactics, and objectives that originated in strategic military science. I argue here that a better understanding of classical military strategic thinking is relevant to public interest communications (PIC). Case studies of unscrupulous public relations (PR) campaigns on behalf of vested interests that apply deception, misdirection, and fake news in a war fighting mentality are examined. I argue that such practices need to be understood in the military sense to be detected early and effectively countered in legitimate and honorable ways by organizations fighting for the public interest. The article proposes that a key function of a PIC professional in an organization is to become a PIC *Communications Strategos*—strategic communications war leader.

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## Introduction

*“The art of war is of vital importance to the State. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence it is a subject of inquiry, which can on no account be neglected.”* Sun Tzu (1910, p.1)

Public relations (PR) and public interest communications (PIC), as well as other strategic communications fields, routinely use terms such as *strategy, objectives, tactic, target (audience)* that have their root in military science.

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A central maxim of the ancient Chinese military classic Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* states that war is the greatest affair of the state (Wilson, 2012; 2013). This article draws on this military science classic to argue that communication is the greatest affair of social movements or efforts to promote the public interest. Along these lines, this article examines the origins of these key concepts in the historical context of strategy as a way to win battles and wars. It argues that military strategic thinking has fundamentally influenced PR and PIC. A future companion essay, *The Art of Communications War*, will investigate how a deeper understanding of military strategic thinking and insights from the masters of war such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Jomini, von Clausewitz (whose book *On War* inspired the title of this article), and especially Sun Tzu can make PIC more effective.

In its most basic and ancient form, strategy is the ability to win wars. The term strategy is derived from the title of the ancient Greek for an army commander or *Strategos*. In military science, strategy can be defined as “the process by which political purpose is translated into military action” (Wilson, 2012, p. 5). The central notion of the concept of strategy is that a *Strategos* (plural *Stratego*) is a political general (Wilson, 2012), not just officers who followed and implemented orders from civilian oversight. Instead, generals were politicians who advocated specific military actions that they, if adopted, would lead from the front as one of two *Stratego*. The background in politics of the *Strategos* is important since this puts the emphasis of strategy on persuasion and influencing public opinion, not on compulsion—using force to compel people to adopt specific thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. Distilling existing communications' *stratagems* (plans or schemes to outwit an opponent) from various strategic mass communications fields into a cohesive body of work will be a major area of future research needed to establish PIC as a field that helps win communications wars for the public good.

A central text used here is Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. The book was the work of an anonymous 5th century Chinese author who took the literary mantle of 4th century general Sun Wu (Wilson, 2012; 2013). The book argued for a radical break with the ritualized, aristocratic thinking on warfare of the time toward a more successful, research based strategic approach to war by a *wise general* or *clever combatant* (Wilson, 2012; 2013). This ancient classic is seen as a cornerstone of modern strategic thinking, read and taught in war colleges and elite civilian strategic programs across the globe (Wilson, 2012; 2013). Perhaps the most striking (and for PIC most relevant) aspect of Sun Tzu is the premium it places on research. Sun Tzu argues for a deep net assessment of both the organization's and opponent's strengths and weaknesses very similar to a SWOT<sup>1</sup> analysis. Fessmann (2016; 2017) has pointed out that in PIC, research is even more important than in PR. Therefore, Sun Tzu may provide useful insights for PIC. The value of these insights is especially the case when PIC efforts are opposed by well-funded, vested interests trying to defend business practices clearly not in the public interest through often dishonest strategic communications. Sun Tzu offers valuable advice in situations where two parties engaged in a war are trying to win by outsmarting the other. Whoever is better at

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<sup>1</sup> SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.

analyzing the situation correctly and developing the right strategy, wins. Or, as Sun Tzu (1910) put it:

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle. (Tzu, 1910, p. 11)

## The central role of communications to social movements and the non-profit sector

Interviews conducted by the author with key strategic communicators in PIC show a broad agreement that many NGOs and social movements have started to attach a greater importance on strategic communicators in recent years. This trend has led to a growth in the number and scope of communications agencies that specifically serve clients for the public interest with strategic advice (Fessmann, 2018).

Conceptually, the central role of communications in social movements flows logically from the significance that social movements literature has attributed to effective framing (Benford & Snow, 2000) (and other communication related theories) of social issues by a movement. Framing efforts are fundamentally grounded in effective communications and ideally are done very strategically.

The centrality of strategic communications for social movements and NGOs is further supported by PR theory. The dominant *excellence theory of public relations* paradigm (J. E. Grunig, Dozier, Ehling, L.A. Grunig, Repper, & White, 1992) argues strongly that in order to be most effective, PR practitioners need to have a *seat at the management table* and be *part of the dominant coalition* in any organization. This is true for PIC practitioners as well.

Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* claims an even stronger role for a military general than having a seat at the table. In the realm of war, the general should neither be constrained by the ruler nor interfered with (Wilson, 2013). Social movements and NGOs in the public interest may not necessarily have to go to this extreme, but there is a strong need to strengthen the conceptual role of the key communicators in social movements and NGOs.

Key areas where such catching up to PR by PIC communicators is necessary are areas of contentious issues (such as smoking, climate change, and social justice) with an active opposition using sophisticated communication methods. Research indicates that a majority of PIC professionals do not have to deal with deliberate opposition. However, there is also a minority of PIC communicators who are actively opposed by vested interests fighting to preserve their business model or interests (Fessmann, 2018). These vested interests often engage in efforts and use strategies and tactics that can be described as communications warfare in their PR efforts to deceive and vanquish their opponents—causing significant harm to the public interest.

Such a war fighting mentality is especially prevalent in politics, as can be seen in the activities of political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica: According to a “data war whistleblower” (Cadwalladr, 2018, para. 1) and former chief researcher at Cambridge Analytica Christopher Wylie, he created “Steve Bannon’s<sup>2</sup> psychological warfare mindfuck tool” (Cadwalladr, 2018, para. 5). Furthermore, he stated that “rules don’t matter for them. For them, this is a war, and it’s all fair” (Rosenberg, Confessore, & Cadwalladr, 2018, para 5).

Therefore, I argue that a central mission of the emerging field of PIC is to produce and train strategic thinkers who understand classical strategy and thus are well equipped to counter, for the good of society, the vested interests’ strategies in communications wars. To paraphrase Sun Tzu (1910): The art of communications war is of vital importance to a social movement or efforts to promote the public interest. “It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be neglected” (p. 1).

## War fighting thinking and public interest communications—a contradiction?

*“I regard myself as a soldier, though a soldier of peace.”*  
Mahatma Ghandi (Gandhi-Informationen-Zentrum, 2018, para. 2)

Many activists and public interest communicators feel very uncomfortable with using war fighting mentality and war terminology in social change communications efforts. Some of this is an instinctive reaction based on the notion that the goals of PIC should not be attained through military influenced thinking. Three reasons demonstrate why studying the original military concepts and insights are valuable to examine in PIC.

First, understanding strategy in the military sense has been recognized in nonviolent social movements literature as significantly increasing the odds of nonviolent social movements success. For example, Sharp’s (2012) influential book *From Dictatorship to Democracy - A Conceptual Framework for Liberation* uses military terms such as *grand strategy* and *battles* as critical concepts of nonviolent organizing structures. The analogy of card games may be helpful: Although one cannot guarantee winning in poker, understanding the rules and probabilities involved greatly increases the likelihood to succeed. And, knowing the tricks that are used to cheat in the game enables the honest player to spot and counter them effectively without stooping low by using them.

Second, some of the most important social movements and campaigns adopted this military terminology and approach. For example, it is not by accident that Mahatma Ghandi said, “I regard myself as a soldier, though a soldier of peace” (Gandhi-Informationen-Zentrum, 2018,

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<sup>2</sup> Bannon served as chief strategist for U.S. President Donald Trump.

para. 2). Although Ghandi's philosophy of *Ahimsa* was centered on non-violent struggle, he understood it very well as a strategy in the military sense and noted that:

I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence. . . I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honor than that she should, in a cowardly manner, become or remain a helpless witness to her own dishonor. But I believe that nonviolence is infinitely superior to violence (Gandhi Research Foundation, n.d., para. 2-3).

Similarly, Hon (1997) has pointed out that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) applied effective strategic thinking to the U.S. civil rights movement. As King said, "Public relations is a very necessary part of any protest of civil disobedience" (as cited in Garrow, 1986, p. 172). Hon (1997) characterized the SCLC communications efforts as such:

King shrouded the rhetoric of the movement in spiritual rather than strategic terms...[However,] the movement provides magnificent insight into the positive role public relations plays in effecting social progress. The movement can easily be conceptualized as an extended and ultimately effective public relations campaign. All the elements are there: a charismatic CEO who happened to be a gifted orator; an organization designed to direct strategy; and explicit goals having to do with awareness, attitude, and behavior. (p. 164)

Third, in many areas of PIC there are vested interests that actively use a war fighting mentality in their defense of their vested interest such as the tobacco and oil industries. As the documentary *Merchants of Doubt* (Kenner & Robledo, 2014) shows, communications experts for these industries applied strategic communications in a war on science.

### Side note: A possible solution to avoid military terminology

This article argues for PIC scholars and students to acquire in-depth understanding of the original military terms and mindsets both in their historical military context and prevalent uses in strategic communications. However, an interview conducted with Mark Dessauer, Vice President of Learning at the PIC agency Spitfire, showed a possibly innovative solution to the disconnect of using military terminology for nonviolent aims. At Spitfire, Dessauer and others consciously replace military based communications terms such target audience with nonmilitary terms such as *priority populations* (Fessmann, 2018). Dessauer pointed out:

In communications, we need to demilitarize [the terminology] and remove the audience as the other. The clients need to see themselves as not at the end of our program initiatives project campaign, but as a partner with whom we sit down, we listen [to] and we hear from them what's important to the community. The most appropriate representative or messenger is the most important channel. ...This shift to social equity...is very aligned with strategic communications and public interest communications. (M. Dessauer, personal communication, February 29, 2018)

Dessauer also noted that changing the words also changes the thinking. He began to move toward a more active nomenclature, better aligned to the goals of PIC, a decade ago when he started working on childhood obesity. For example, he has been using an active *stairway talk* analogy instead of the typical *elevator pitch*, because one can get more in and it conjures up physical activity (M. Dessauer, personal communication, February 29, 2018).

Such a deliberate change/demilitarization of the nomenclature of strategic communications to become specific to PIC is worthy of future investigations and scholarship. This shift could be a major future contribution to the field (and nomenclatural departure from PR). However, such reframing and explication nevertheless does not detract from the importance of understanding the full richness of the military terms and mindsets—meaning that PIC scholars should still familiarize themselves with the military strategic classics and core strategic concepts.

## Strategic PR as a negative force

*"However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results."*  
Winston Churchill (n.d., para. 1)

Edward Bernays, often called *the father of PR* (Curtis, 2002), claims that he coined the term public relations after his experience of the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference (Curtis, 2002) to establish the specific concept of PR to distinguish good communications practice from the negative propaganda used in WWI. However, it seems unfortunately clear that in the almost 100 years since, PR has not been very successful in changing the image of PR as propaganda among many publics not formally trained in PR.

Besides Bernays, P.T. Barnum and Ivy Lee also are generally credited with significant influence on the emergence of PR. Barnum can be said to have contributed publicity and special events to the field. Ivy Lee, as a former journalist, brought in the media relations expertise. However, of the three, only Bernays mainly focused on strategic communications. In fact, he was well known to look down on public relations practitioners, who did not fulfill his intellectual/strategic standards. As he put it: "Public relations today is horrible. Any dope, any nitwit, any idiot can call him or herself a public relations practitioner" ("Edward Bernays, 'Father of Public Relations,'" 1995, para. 10).

Bernays conducted a number of strategic mass communications campaigns in the sense of the definition used in this article: a situational analysis grounded, comprehensive plan-based mass communication to achieve specific long-term goals and objectives. For example, the industry leader in hairnet production, Venida, was faced with an existential threat to its business model when hairnets become unfashionable. The company hired Bernays to conduct a public relations campaign for the product. Bernays devised a strategy where he persuaded labor commissioners across the United States to demand that women working with or near machines wear hairnets for their own protection (Geist, 1985). Furthermore, he got politicians to pass

legislation implementing these safety measures. More importantly, legislation also required anyone with long hair handling food to use a hairnet for hygienic reasons. These policies are still in effect, as can be seen on a daily basis in restaurants across the United States. From a strategic standpoint, this campaign by Bernays was brilliant because it created an indefinite, stable market for the hairnet industry, which otherwise most likely would have vanished completely. However, it should be noted that this campaign also was duplicitous in nature because the campaign emphasized the public interest of the legislation, while the role of his client Venida and its interests were almost never mentioned (“Edward Bernays, 'Father of Public Relations,'" 1995).

Even more famous and consequential was Bernays' *Torches of Freedom* campaign. In 1928 he was hired by American Tobacco Company to work on behalf of its Lucky Strike cigarettes brand. The tobacco executives had a problem: women were not smoking because of social taboos and the perception of smoking as un-lady-like. Thus, the company was not able to reach more than half of its potential customer base within the U.S. population. Therefore, American Tobacco wanted Bernays to break the taboo on women's smoking, especially in public (Curtis, 2002). Very strategically, Bernays hired as a consultant one of the best psychologists of that time, psychoanalyst A. A. Brill, to develop a research based situational analysis. Brill told Bernays that:

the emancipation of women has suppressed many of their feminine desires. More women now do the same work as men do. Many women bear no children; those who do bear have fewer children. Feminine traits are masked. Cigarettes, which are equated with men, become torches of freedom. (as cited in Brandt, 2007, pp. 84-85)

Bernays then paid feminist debutants to defiantly smoke their *torches of freedom* as they walked in the 1929 Easter Sunday Parade in New York City while he arranged for journalists to be present to nationally cover the event (though not revealing his involvement). Bernays thus reframed cigarette smoking, linking it with women's liberation and freedom—indeed managing to break the taboo on women's smoking (Brandt, 2007). For his tobacco clients, results were everything they could have wished for—effectively doubling their customer base and turning about one third of the women in the United States into smokers by 1965.

Although strategically brilliant, from a PIC standpoint, Bernays' *Torches of Freedom* campaign's consequences are horrible. Bernays later claimed that the dangers of tobacco were not known at the time, but this does not change the fact that his strategic communications campaign ended up inadvertently killing millions of women through cancer who otherwise may have never started to smoke.

Furthermore, it is probably not by accident that, after such a compelling display of the power of PR as a strategic communications discipline, a PR agency was hired to defend the industry against an existential threat to its business model in 1953—the time when smoking began to be publicly linked to cancer. In response to the threat, the agency, Hill+Knowlton Strategies, created a strategic communications playbook to deceive the public about the dangers of smoking, discredit the medical science, and deflect blame to other industries, creating additional health issues in the process such as toxic chemicals in flame retardants (Kenner & Robledo, 2014). This



use of strategy is very close to the deceptive aspects of the philosophy of Sun Tzu. In this sense, Hill+Knowlton Strategies treated this issue as a communications war with the goal of preserving its client's business model. Deception and misdirection were very successfully employed here.

Furthermore, other industries with dangerous products and business practices that were clearly not in the public interest quickly followed suit (Kenner & Robledo, 2014). For example, strategically successful but extremely destructive to civil society was the deliberate attack on the credibility of scientific expertise and the media. As professional climate denial communications strategist Marc Morano put it:

I'm not a scientist, although I do play one on TV occasionally. Ok, hell, more than occasionally. . . .You go up against scientists, most of them are going to be in their own little sort of policy wonk world or area of expertise. Very arcane, very hard to understand, hard to explain, and *very boring*. ...You can't be afraid of the absolute hand-to-hand combat, metaphorically, and you got to name names and go after the individuals. (Kenner & Robledo, 2014, min 1:04, [emphasis in the original])

Gridlock is the greatest friend a global warming skeptic has because that's all you really want. There's no legislation we're championing. *We're the negative force. We're just trying to stop stuff.* (Kenner & Robledo, 2014, min 1:09, [emphasis added])

These attacks have contributed to the modern phenomena of climate change denial and fake news in the United States. In contrast, little evidence of similar trends has occurred in Europe, where business interests and even right-wing media generally have not followed through with such communications strategies of attacking the science and media.

## Public relations and fake news

The 2016 U.S. presidential election has put a spotlight on fake news and greatly increased awareness of the issue among various publics. The election also has sparked renewed academic interest in the subject, if recent publications and conference presentations on fake news are any indication. However, fake news has always been part of strategic communications.

For example, modern scholarship on the role of the Spanish Inquisition suggested that the Inquisition was far less brutal and arbitrary (though sometimes both) than has been the dominant narrative for hundreds of years (Kamen, 1998). Instead, the prevalent narrative of widespread cruelty by the organization can be traced back to a 1567 A.D. protestant propaganda campaign largely based on false information (Rice, 1996)—making it one of the earliest and most successful fake news campaigns in history. However, it should be noted that the exaggerations do not excuse in any way the actual crimes of the Spanish Inquisition, which killed approximately 3,000 to 5,000 people for the supposed crime of being witches (Rice, 1996).

Fake news also has been deeply tied to war strategy. Sun Tzu treated deception as a core principle and dedicated a full chapter on the role of spies and how to deceive the enemy.



Furthermore, *information warfare* is seen as a crucial modern military threat, where potential enemies such as China and Russia have developed disproportionately strong (in relation to their other military capacities) and perhaps superior capacity toward the United States (Wilson, 2013).

Fake news has been at the heart of the justification to go to war in several cases. For example, in 1846 President James K. Polk used the so-called *Thornton Skirmish* incident to falsely claim that Mexico had attacked U.S. troops on U.S. soil in order to justify declaring war on Mexico (Meed, 2003).

Another example is the case of William Randolph Hearst's 1897 much debated New York Journal headline *Remember the Maine, to Hell with Spain!* The headline and the subsequent New York Journal's reporting often has been described as a deliberate and successful attempt to start a war for the sole purpose of selling more of Hearst's newspapers.

In 1964 President Lyndon B. Johnson used the so-called *Gulf of Tonkin Incident*, in which two U.S. naval destroyers stationed off the coast of Vietnam supposedly were attacked by North Vietnam forces, to ask Congress for almost unlimited military power to be used against communist North Vietnam. President Johnson maintained the narrative of an unprovoked attack in spite of having "privately acknowledged that the incident that inspired the resolution probably never happened" (Sanger, 2001, para. 1). Similarly, in 2003 key figures in the administration of President George W. Bush "knew that there was no good intelligence establishing that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)" (Eichenwald, 2015, para. 5). Nevertheless, the Bush Administration proceeded to use this narrative as the key rationale to declare war on Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Thus, fake news is not a new phenomenon. However, it seems as if its impact through social media may be more prevalent and significant than ever before. For example, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency saw fake news as enough of a threat to include a whole page on it in a 20-page emergency management brochure called *If Crisis or War Comes*, which was distributed to all Swedish citizens (AFP/Reuters, 2018). The chapter is named *Be on the lookout for false information*. (Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, 2018).

Most relevant for PIC however is that some PR agency and communications professionals working for certain vested interests have embraced using fake news as part of strategic communications campaigns. For example, in 1990 testimony before the U.S. Congressional Human Rights Caucus on the conduct of Iraqi of soldiers in conquered Kuwait, a 15-year-old Kuwaiti girl calling herself just Nayirah described to Congress:

I volunteered at the al-Addan hospital with 12 other women who wanted to help as well. I was the youngest volunteer. The other women were from 20 to 30 years old. While I was there, I saw the Iraqi soldiers come into the hospital with guns. They took the babies out of the incubators, took the incubators and left the children to die on the cold floor. [crying] It was horrifying. ([Guyjohn59], min 0:20)

Visibly moved, the co-chair of the caucus, Rep. John Porter (R-Illinois), noted that in all his years on the caucus, he had never heard such "brutality and inhumanity and sadism" ([Guyjohn59], min 4:07). The event was transmitted live on C-Span and "journalists accepted

Nayirah's and other stories of atrocities without question, never seeking corroboration" (Andersen, 2006, p. 170). This testimony ended up having a very strong impact on public opinion—it was quoted at least six times by U.S. President George H. W. Bush as a reason for his decision to go to war with Iraq in the first Gulf War (Andersen, 2006).

Reporting by the New York Times after the war revealed that Nayirah was the daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the United States and that there was no indication that she had been in Kuwait, let alone the hospital, at the time in question (Arthur, 1992). Furthermore, it was learned that this episode had been part of a deceptive strategic public relations campaign by Hill+Knowlton Strategies with the goal of influencing public opinion on behalf of the Kuwaiti Government in exile (Roschwalb, 1994). Hill+Knowlton Strategies' campaign had been based on more than one million USD spent on focus group research, which had revealed this type of story would be the most effective messaging strategy on behalf of the Kuwaiti Government (Andersen, 2006).

## A strategic attack on the scientific method

Besides such attempts to directly influence key publics through specific media coverage, the deliberate assaults on academic integrity are perhaps even more worrying. Leading cancer and climate scientists have faced death threats and attacks on their credibility and personal lives by industry agents (Kenner & Robledo, 2014). Furthermore, freedom of information requests were used as weapons to get academic email correspondence in order to twist sections out of context to create conspiracy theories (Kenner & Robledo, 2014).

A trend also exists to finance and directly influence academic researchers to create peer-reviewed research articles positive to the company's goals based on false or misleading information. This strategy can include deliberate manipulation of the data collection. For example, the New York Times has reported on an unusual experiment that was conducted in 2014 at the Lovelace Respiratory Research Institute in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and involved "ten monkeys squatted in airtight chambers, watching cartoons for entertainment as they inhaled fumes from a diesel Volkswagen Beetle" (Ewing, 2018, para. 1). The intent was to show that the latest VW diesel technology was much less of a health threat than the traditional diesel technology. This research was part of a larger effort to influence political debate and preserve tax privileges for diesel fuel and was funded by the European Research Group on Environment and Health in the Transport Sector (EUGT). What the scientist may not have been aware of is that this group was funded entirely by Volkswagen, Daimler, and BMW. This practice was defended by Daimler as legitimate scientific work in a statement that noted "all of the research work commissioned with the E.U.G.T. was accompanied and reviewed by a research advisory committee consisting of scientists from renowned universities and research institutes" (Ewing, 2018, para. 11). Although this statement is true, it also shows how the academic peer-review process is under assault. At least in this case, it turned out that the vehicle provided by

Volkswagen to the scientist had been deliberately manipulated “to produce pollution levels that were far less harmful in the lab than they were on the road” (Ewing, 2018, para. 2).

In the end, the research paper on the monkey experiment was never submitted for publication because the breaking news of the VW emissions scandal prevented it. However, given the sophistication of the VW defeat device, the software designed to detect testing and to deliberately mislead the researchers, and the current *replication crisis in science* where as little as 1.07% of studies are replicated (Makel, Plucker, & Hegarty, 2012), VW could reasonably expect the study to pass academic checks and be published. If it had been, VW could have cited and used it in support of its communication purposes (claiming that diesel vehicles are environmental friendly).

The case was clearly part of a very strategic, highly deceptive communications strategy. Margaret Douglas, chairwoman of a panel that advises the Scottish public health system on pollution issues, specifically noted that these actions strongly resemble behaviors of the tobacco industry: “There are a lot of parallels between the industries in the way they try to downplay the harm and encourage people to become addicted” (as cited in Ewing, 2018, para. 10).

VW here used strategic communications very much in the deceptive sense of Sun Tzu. The fact that Volkswagen was well versed in strategic mass communications is indicated by the fact that in 2011 Volkswagen’s CEO Martin Winterkorn and its Head of Group Communications, Investor Relations and External Relations Stephan Grühsem received the Deutsche Image Award, the highest award given by the German public relations society Deutsche Public Relations Gesellschaft e.V. (DPRG, n.d.).

These examples show how powerful PR can be as a strategic mass communications discipline when used by unscrupulous PR professionals who embrace being the *negative force* (Kenner & Robledo, 2014). Conscious or not, such individuals and the organizations for which they work treat these issues as war and follow the old sentiment that *all is fair in love and in war* (Lyly, 1580).

## The role (or not) of deception in PIC

Deliberate deception is a key concept in Sun Tzu (1910). The book strongly advocates the use of deliberate misinformation, regardless of morality, aimed at the opponent and the general’s own subordinates—so that they cannot give away the general’s intentions. Instead, the subordinates and many other channels should be used as a tool to deliberately misguide friend and foe.

In the military domain such efforts may be morally permissible if the tenants of *just war theory* are fulfilled. For example, Operation Torch in WWII involved deceiving most of the Allied military and British general public in order to trick the Nazis into believing that the D-Day Normandy landings were a diversion (Wilson, 2012). The success of this stratagem played a key role in Allied success in WWII.

However, from a PIC standpoint, this aspect of Sun Tzu should be rejected. PIC communicators operating in open societies and the public sphere are almost never justified in using deception, and the need for transparency and legitimacy nearly always overrides any justification for strategic short-term gains, even if they are in the public interest.

A borderline case is advertising agency Leo Burnett's (Detroit) Troy, MI, campaign. The Troy library was at the brink of being forced to shut its doors because of opposition by Tea Party activists to a bond issue to continue financing the library. Leo Burnett developed a guerrilla social marketing campaign with the goal of changing the conversation from an issue of taxes to preserving the books. To do this, the agency deceptively created a campaign ostensibly around *Vote to Close Troy Library Aug 2, Book Burning Party Aug. 5th* ([Leo Burnett Detroit], 2012). This campaign riled up voters and made them aware of how important books were. From a strategic communications standpoint, the campaign was highly successful and ended up bringing out more than three times the originally predicted number of voters out to show up at the polls. The bond issue easily passed, saving the library. Crucially, Leo Burnett openly revealed the deception long before voting and told people in Troy why the agency had done this. If Leo Burnett had not done so, the campaign should be regarded as unethical regardless of the actual results. Even with public disclosure it is highly questionable whether the results justify the means. Although empirical data are not available, it seems likely that the campaign contributed to a growing mistrust in the media. The campaign thus may have had a long-term detrimental effect on the public interest by reducing the credibility of future PIC campaigns. Furthermore, there seems to be little indication that other, more conventional strategic communications options were considered by the agency and that these could not have worked as well as this guerilla marketing approach.

Even if deception should never be employed for PIC campaigns, it is nevertheless important for PIC scholars and professionals to study strategic deception in military classics. The understanding gained by such labors helps PIC professionals to better recognize such strategies, when used by unscrupulous communicators for vested interests and to develop effective counter-strategies that do not depend on deception.

### Side note: Strategic gaming to advance strategic PIC learning

In discussion on strategic thought and training, the role of games should not be ignored. Archeological evidence points to strategy games—such as the in ancient Egypt *Senet* (found in Tutankhamun's tomb) or *Mancala* type board games played using small stones or beans in rows of holes in stone or wood—to be at least 5000 years old. Strategy games rely on the players' uncoerced, autonomous decision-making skills in the form of internal decision tree style thinking to determine the chances of winning. Thus, these games foster situational awareness and strategic thinking. Other historical games that have such learning effects are, for example, *Go*, *Backgammon*, and *Chess*.

Wargaming takes this notion of strategic thinking further. These games use miniature models of soldiers or cardboard counters to simulate military battles, campaigns, or entire wars. These types include *Risk*, *Axis and Allies*, *Advanced Squad Leader*, and *Stratego*. There are also many strategic computer games.

Besides training strategic thinking through play activities, games also may be used as an effective strategy to raise awareness of social issues and prepare activists. Recently, a number of games specifically for social change have emerged: e.g., *The Resistance*; *Rise Up: The Game of People & Power*; *Co-opoly: The Game of Cooperatives*, and *Loud & Proud*. The latest such game is *Space Cats Fight Fascism*, which has been described by the game designer as:

Space Cats Fight Fascism is kind like Star Wars. . .but with cats. :) We first came up with the idea for Space Cats Fight Fascism last year. We'd been examining how to continue to engage people on important subjects through games, while also recognizing the paradigm shift in our society and in many people's emotional reservoirs. So, we began to explore the idea of "games for tired people that want to change the world" - board games that could be used to simultaneously inspire, laugh, motivate, and bring smiles to people's face. And so, Space Cats Fight Fascism was born. It's meant to be a game about resisting the re-emergence and strength of the extreme right. (B. Van Slyke, personal communication, May 16, 2018)

Games, thus, may offer quite a range of options for public interest communicators and may have a social impact.

## Conclusion

As seen in the case studies presented in this article, PR as strategic mass communications has been very effectively used by various organizations and industries whose goals are clearly against the public interest. The tobacco industry has attacked medical science about the risk of cigarettes and the oil industry spent more than half a billion dollars in publicly traceable money on creating and funding U.S. climate change counter-movement organizations that cast doubt on man-made climate change (Brulle, 2013). Also, the sugar industry has for over 50 years made very successful strategic communications efforts to downplay the link to heart disease and other health risks posed by sugar and instead to refocus the blame on saturated fats (O'Connor, 2016).

For PIC, this means that for many key issues in the public interest that need to be addressed, vested interests oppose such efforts through warlike strategic mass communications.

Furthermore, these organizations and their strategists draw on the expertise of more than half a century of battle experience. Given the amount of money such vested interests have available, they are able to hire top graduates from the best academic PR programs. Most non-profit organizations do not pay well in comparison. NGOs and social movements also have a very different type of organizational culture than corporations, attracting people of very different values and beliefs to work for them. PR education at the university level in the United States generally is geared toward PR agency or in-house work at corporations and their organizational

cultures. Thus, many potential PIC students do not (yet) consider studying PR in college. To address this imbalance, PIC needs to teach students that activism in the public interest may mean engaging in framing wars. Thus, PIC needs to provide a strategic background and mindset to develop counter strategies that are effective but do not stoop to the same low tactics as their opponents in such a war.

Drawing on the already existing strategic communications tool sets, trained PIC *Strategos*, or strategic thinkers, will be able to outsmart and out-strategize their opponents from vested interests that are acting against the public good. Thus, the strategies and *stratagems* (plans or schemes to outwit an opponent or achieve an end) developed will add to the *repertoire of contention* (Tarrow, 1993)—the process whereby one group finds a certain tool or action so successful that is adopted over and over again until adoption of counter-strategies makes them ineffective. These stratagems will prepare and equip PIC practitioners to win communications wars for the public good.

In conclusion, this article argues that PIC professionals need to become *Communications Strategos*—strategic generals that lay long-term communications plans, based on careful analysis of the situation, to win for social movements and/or organizations the framing war on key issues in the public interest. These *Communications Strategos* should understand strategic communications both in the classical military science sense as well as strategy within the communications discipline.

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