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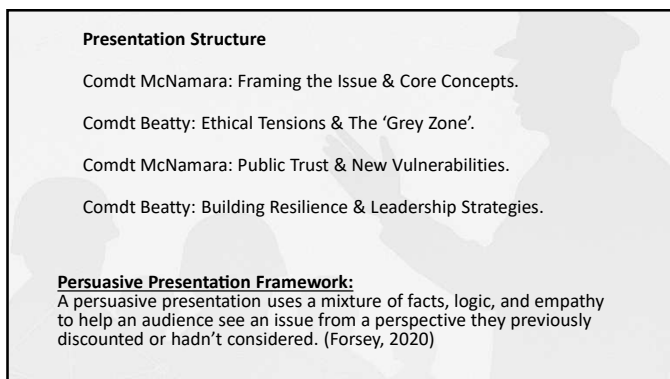
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## Definitions

- **Strategic Communications:** "How Organisations use communications purposefully to fulfil their overall missions" (Heide, et al., 2018).
- **Public Trust:** "a persons belief that another person or institution will act consistently with her or his expectations of positive behaviour" (UNDP, 2021).
- **Disinformation:** "Information that is totally or partially false, crafted by a sender with the aim of misleading, with opportunistic content designed to manipulate reality" (Baptisa & Gradim, 2022).
  - **Misinformation:** "Information that is false, but the person who is disseminating it believes that it is true" (Bachmann, 2023).
  - **Mal-Information:** "Information which is based on reality, but used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country" (Ireton & Posetti, 2018)

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## Ethics & Ethical Boundaries



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## WHY THIS MATTERS

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## Strategic Communications: Credibility & Influence

### • DF Leadership Doctrine (2023):

#### CHAPTER 8: STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

#### Influence - Communication

The ability to effectively articulate and communicate the vision and the organisational strategy enhances the strategic leader's ability to directly and indirectly influence others. Networking is an essential communication tool and hence the strategic leader should identify, seek out and establish key internal and external relationships in order to influence organisational development. Information, media awareness and its utilisation is a key enabler which requires careful but deliberate management at the strategic level.

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## Why Must DF Leaders Manage Strategic Communications

### Not Optional – Essential.

- Communication core of Leadership, provides purpose, direction & motivation.
- Preserves Legitimacy.
- Preserves Credibility.
- Preserves Authenticity.
- Hybrid Warfare: Defensive & offensive capability.
- DF role in national & international security clearly understood.



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## DF Leaders Strategic Messaging.

- *"We have to be able to deliver on national defence operations. That's the fundamental role of the Defence Forces, to defend the State."* (Mulcahy, 2025).
- *"The Defence Forces is like a Swiss Army Knife of the Irish State."* (Mulcahy, 2025).
- *"For more than 100 years the Irish Defence Forces has resolutely remained the servant of the nation, and a bulwark of democracy."* (Clancy, 2023)



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### Strategic Comms: Example

Volodymyr Zelensky Time Magazine Interview (2022)



- **"We are dealing with a difficult threat along many vectors."**
  - **Strategic Messaging:** Expect a hard fight, not just one battle.
  - **Situational Leadership:** Defines threat, ensures understanding of complexity (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969)
- **"We all have to be a unified whole. That is our only chance."**
  - **Strategic Messaging:** Builds cohesion, shared identity.
  - **Transformational Leadership:** Idealised Influence, values of unity & selflessness, strengthens cohesion (Bass & Riggio, 2006)

Clearly operating in wartime environment influenced by hybrid thinking  
 "Vectors": Simple Language?  
 Whole of Government approach evident

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### Strategic Comms: Can go Wrong!

- **"We've got three years to prepare for war"** Gen Sir Roly Walker UK Chief of Gen Staff (Sabbagh, 2024).
- Alarmist, public count down to war, undercutting calmer deterrence messaging. Perhaps at odds with a Whole of Government Approach espoused by UNESCO
- **"It may well be a Taliban that is more reasonable...its less repressive"** Gen Sir Nick Carter UK Chief of Defence. (Reuters, 2021)
- We see this as a naïve legitimisation of an evacuation crisis.



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### Ethical Tensions & the Hybrid 'Grey Zone'



(O Cionnaith, F., 2018)

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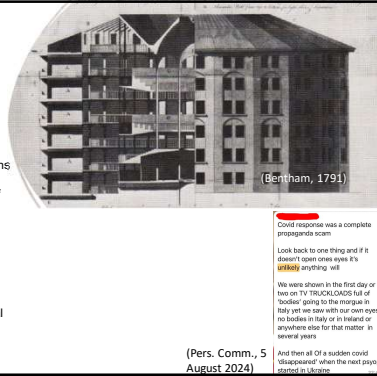
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## Communications Grey Zone

- Knowledge interpreted through a societal lens (Foucault, Derrida)
- Interpretation of facts. Scepticism. Virality of falsehoods (Zannettou et al., Pennycook & Rand)
- Decreased public trust (Wike et al., Dalton, Reuters)
- Grey zone leveraged by actors (Kragh & Asberg, Bachmann et al., 2023)
- Credibility difficult to restore (Lemmon)
- Hybrid warfare overestimated Vs institutional decline (Bennet & Livingston)



(Pers. Comm., 5 August 2024)

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## Ethical Tension: Disclose or Conceal?

- Ethical question: Do leaders protect operations through silence, or protect trust through openness?
- Bachmann (2023): disinformation = destructive as kinetic war.
- Gunneriusson (2019): silence corrodes credibility.
- Bachmann & Paphiti (2021): openness can be weaponised.
- Tension: Both choices carry ethical costs.
- Hardin (1999) and UNDP (2021): "conditions for distrust can be met more readily than the conditions for trust".



Enda Kenny issued an apology during this Dáil debate in 2013 to the House of Representatives.

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## Persuasion vs Propaganda

- **Ethical question:** Where is the line between reassurance and manipulation?
- Lemmon (2024): "propaganda creep" once spin is detected.
- Bradshaw & Howard (2019): computational propaganda by democracies
- **Tension:** Inform to reassure vs risk manipulating your own public
- Jenna Abrams as analysed by Xia (2019)



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**Consider This:**  
UNIFIL Tunnels & IRISHBATT

**•The Crisis:** Claims UNIFIL = Hezbollah proxy → Irish Army complicit since 1978

**•The Dilemma:**  
•Deny and sound defensive, or stay silent and risk guilt by association

**•Hypothetical Response:**  
•Clarify mandate limits, reaffirm Irish neutrality, highlight peacekeeping record.

**•Strategic Risk:**  
•Allegations gain traction, reputational harm spreads

**•Strategic Gain:**  
•Credibility preserved through values and professionalism

**•Possible Lesson:**  
•In external crises, rapid clarification anchored in values and record is more resilient than denial or silence.

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## New Vulnerabilities: Speed & Authenticity

- Ethical question: Can leaders ever "just inform" when algorithms weaponise attention?
- Zanetti (2018): hoaxes spread faster than truth.
- Pennycook & Rand (2021): inattentive sharing drives misinformation.
- UNIFIL tunnels case: part fact, part spin — no easy rebuttal.
- Tension:** Delay = rumours dominate; premature denial = backfires.

(United Nations News, 2024)

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## PUBLIC TRUST & NEW VULNERABILITIES

**GEN Martin Dempsey**  
*"Every day we should ask ourselves if we are doing enough to contribute to a climate of trust."* (Caslen & Finney, 2011)

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## Public Trust in Military Organisations.

- **Professionalism:** Competent, disciplined, ethically sound, *willingness to submit to civilian authority.* (Caslen, 2011).
- **Legitimacy & Non Partisanship:** Acts in public interest, non political alignment, *subordinate to civilian political authority.* (Krebs, et al. 2021)
- **Transparency Ethical Behaviour & Institutional Integrity:** 'How', ethical norms, transparent about failure/ scandal. (Brooks, 2020)
- **Social Connection:** Public connection, familiar. (Margulies & Blankshain, 2022). Public understand core functions, security, combat, crisis response. (Accorsi & Krebs, 2024)

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• "We unequivocally condemn any actions by members of the Defence Forces that our contrary to our values. It will not be tolerated" . (Clancy, 2024).

- Transparency.
- Accountability.
- Values Based.
- Ethical.
- Institutional Integrity.

**Oglaigh** • 21 Jun 24  
We wish to address the conversation that is currently taking place on social media, as we are an organisation committed to honesty and transparency.

Any conviction in a civilian court may have implications for the retention and service of members of the Defence Forces, as [Show more](#)

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## Public Trust: Corner Stone of DF Legitimacy. DF Public Perception Survey (2024)

### Overall Attitude to The Defence Forces



The strong public trust in the Defence Forces could be leveraged as a solid basis for change.

However: considering Nagl and Fitzgerald's views, is the requisite internal trust there for change to be affected?

Recall Bennett & Livingston (2018): organisational decline trumps disinformation. The public doesn't perceive a decline.

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## Social Media & Disinformation: New Vulnerabilities.

- **Disinformation:** We operate in an age where disinformation can spread faster than facts (Zannettou, 2019).

any status (15sec) · Nov 23, 2023



Misinformation or disinformation?

Óglaigh na hÉireann @defenceforces

PSA

Images circulating of Defence Forces vehicles in Dublin City Centre are not from this evening, but from a separate routine operation and have no connection to this evening's events.

We ask everyone to be sensitive to the spreading disinformation, and to take care.

8:50 PM · Nov 23, 2023 · 1.5M Views

150

1.2K

3.9K

55

Plain-spoken, fact-based clarity for credibility espoused by Irleton & Posetti (2018)

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*'Other parties will willingly fill the message space if it is left empty' (MOD, 2019)*

This mirrors the lessons from the Jenna Abrams case

**Caution:** Spin will destroy public trust and undermine attempts to fill the space (Lemmon, 2024)

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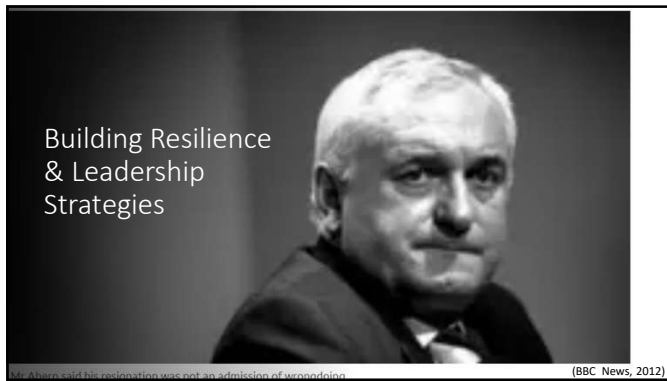
## Defence Forces & Social Media (Ethical Boundary)



- **Opportunities!** Can be a powerful tool.
- **DF Social Media Policy:** "invigorate the internal audience, create advocates both internally and externally, and enhance public perception"
- **Strategic Approach:** Social Media essential: Target Younger Audience.
- **Risks & Ethical Boundaries:** Disinformation.
- DF Stay within the Ethical Boundary.
- **Countering Disinformation:**
  - Active Monitoring.
  - Timely Clarification.

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## Building Resilience

- Resilience = institutional learning + credibility
- Organisational & Communicator (Recall the COS during crisis)
- Avoid "doctrinal amnesia" → embed lessons in culture
- Organisational culture shapes adaptation or failure (Wilson, 2005; Nagl, 1999; Fitzgerald, 2013)

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## Consider This: Maintaining Resilience in Crisis

- 'Defence Forces' credibility was tested. Did the COS demonstrate situational leadership?
- **Tension:** External legitimacy & ethical response Vs internal morale
- **Authenticity, Candour, Empathy**

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## Whole of Society Partnerships

- How can Ireland foster whole-of-society resilience without risking censorship?
- Hybrid threats exploit societal vulnerabilities, not just militaries
- Defence Forces + government + media + civil society must align
- Independence and transparency prevent perception of censorship (Gill, 2021; Kragh & Asberg, 2017; Bachmann, 2023)



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## Sustaining Credibility

- Resilience in the Grey Zone
- Trust is strategic capital → lost faster than rebuilt.
- Delay and “process-heavy” language undermine credibility
- Candour & speed to contain reputational damage Vs Verification
- Avoid the “say-do gap”



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## Conclusion: 3 Key Takeaways

- **Credibility as Centre of Gravity:** Trust is protected through ethical, consistent, plain-spoken communication
- **Deny Disinformation the Initiative:** Fill the information space with clarity, candour, and speed. Engage with government and journalists
- **Action over Rhetoric:** In crisis, words without change damage reputation more than hybrid threats



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