

Strategic Communication and Public Trust

A photograph of a lit oil lamp with a glass chimney and a metal cage, positioned in front of a window. The window looks out onto a lush green garden with a path, trees, and a white fence. The lamp's light is warm and yellow, contrasting with the natural light from the window.

18 September 2025

Commandants McNamara and Beatty (President of Ireland, n.d.)



The Question

How should Irish Defence Forces leaders manage public trust and strategic communications within ethical boundaries in the era of social media and disinformation?

Executive Summary

For the Defence Forces strategic communication is leadership in action. Strategic communication is central to sustaining public trust.

In today's digital environment DF leaders protect legitimacy and counter disinformation through ethical, credible, and timely communication.

Presentation Structure

Comdt McNamara: Framing the Issue & Core Concepts.

Comdt Beatty: Ethical Tensions & The 'Grey Zone'.

Comdt McNamara: Public Trust & New Vulnerabilities.

Comdt Beatty: Building Resilience & Leadership Strategies.

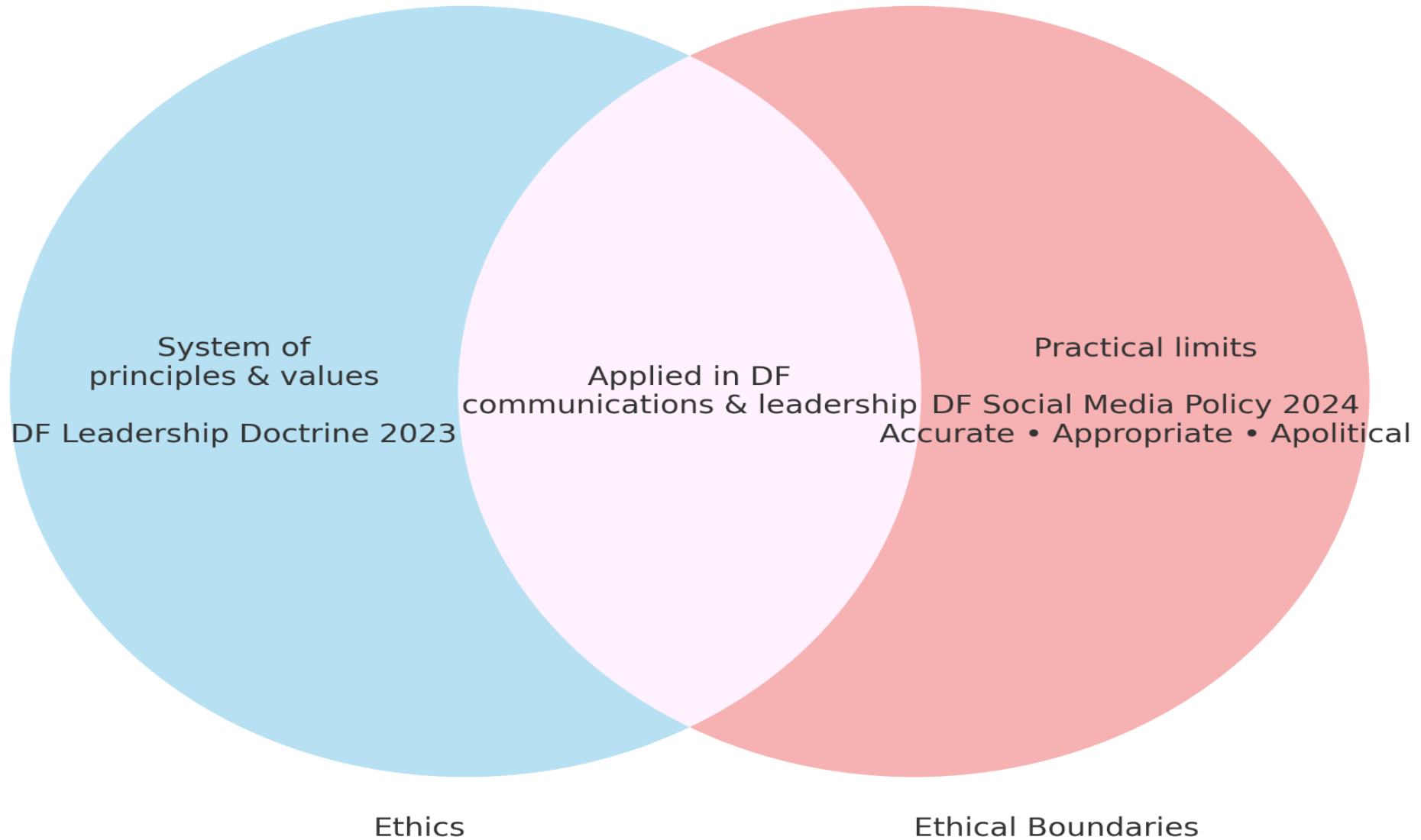
Persuasive Presentation Framework:

A persuasive presentation uses a mixture of facts, logic, and empathy to help an audience see an issue from a perspective they previously discounted or hadn't considered. (Forsey, 2020)

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)

Ethics & Ethical Boundaries



WHY THIS MATTERS



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.

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.





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)



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

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.



A photograph of two men in business suits shaking hands. The man on the left is smiling and wearing glasses, a dark suit, a light blue shirt, and a dark patterned tie. The man on the right is also wearing glasses, a dark suit, a white shirt, and a patterned tie with yellow and blue squares. They are standing in front of a light-colored curtain with vertical wooden slats. The text 'Ethical Tensions & the Hybrid 'Grey Zone'' is overlaid in the center in a large, bold, black font.

Ethical Tensions & the Hybrid 'Grey Zone'

(Ó Cionnaith, F., 2018)

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 & Åsberg, Bachmann et al., 2023)
- Credibility difficult to restore (Lemmon)
- Hybrid warfare overestimated Vs institutional decline (Bennet & Livingston)



(Bentham, 1791)

Covid response was a complete propaganda scam

Look back to one thing and if it doesn't open ones eyes it's unlikely anything will

We were shown in the first day or two on TV TRUCKLOADS full of 'bodies' going to the morgue in Italy yet we saw with our own eyes no bodies in Italy or in Ireland or anywhere else for that matter in several years

And then all Of a sudden covid 'disappeared' when the next psyop started in Ukraine

(Pers. Comm., 5 August 2024)

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 apologises to the Laundries survivors

19 Feb 2013 23:01



(RTÉ, 2013)

Enda Kenny issued an apology during the Dáil debate on the McAleese Report

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)



(IrishCentral, 2024)



AI Letson @AI_Letson · Apr 24

It's much easier to say the Civil War was about money, when your ancestors weren't the currency.



Jenna Abrams @Jenn_Abrams

To those people, who hate the Confederate flag. Did you know that the flag and the war wasn't about slavery, it was all about money



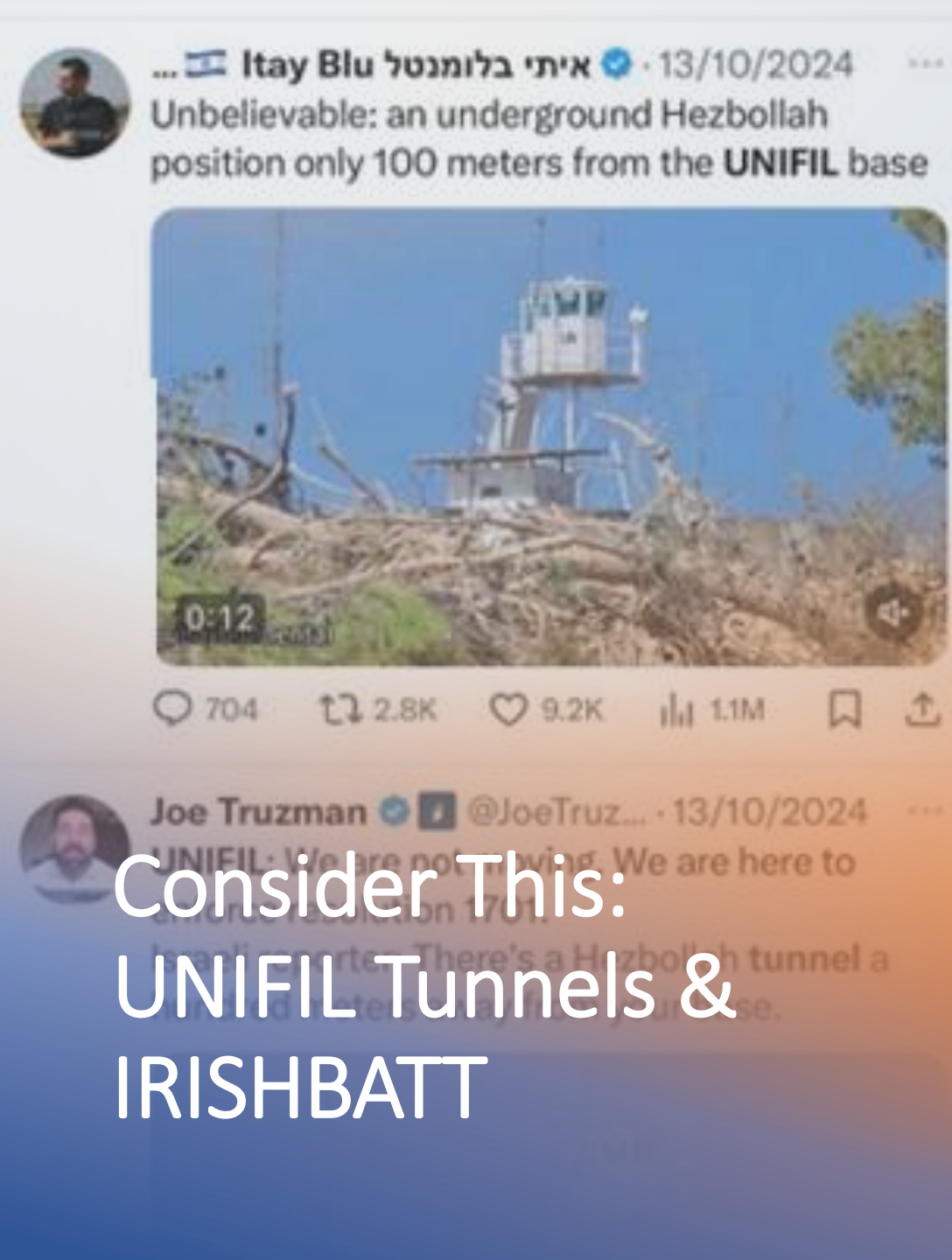
1.1K



59K



139K



- 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..

New Vulnerabilities: Speed & Authenticity

- Ethical question: Can leaders ever “just inform” when algorithms weaponise attention?
- Zannettou (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.



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)



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)

Courts

Serving soldier who beat woman unconscious and boasted about it on social media gets suspended sentence

'I felt completely helpless, feeling like I was being used as a punching bag, I didn't feel human', woman attacked on street by Cathal Crotty (22) told court

Expand



LATEST STORIES >

Many Irish emigrants feel drawn to home. We need to give them more reasons to return

Inside the Fianna Fáil presidential vote: standing ovations, 'thunderous' applause and tears

Netanyahu was told of unique window of opportunity to target Hamas leaders in Doha

'A little lost for words': Heimur Hallgrímsson will consider position after Armenia defeat

- *"We unequivocally condemn any actions by members of the Defence Forces that are contrary to our values. It will not be tolerated"* . (Clancy, 2024).
- Transparency.
- Accountability.
- Values Based.
- Ethical.
- Institutional Integrity.



Óglaigh... · 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](#)

3 256 587 189K



Public Trust: Corner Stone of DF Legitimacy.

DF Public Perception Survey (2024)

Dec 2020 May 2021 Mar 2022 Aug 2023 Sep 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.

Social Media & Disinformation: New Vulnerabilities.

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



Misinformation or disinformation?



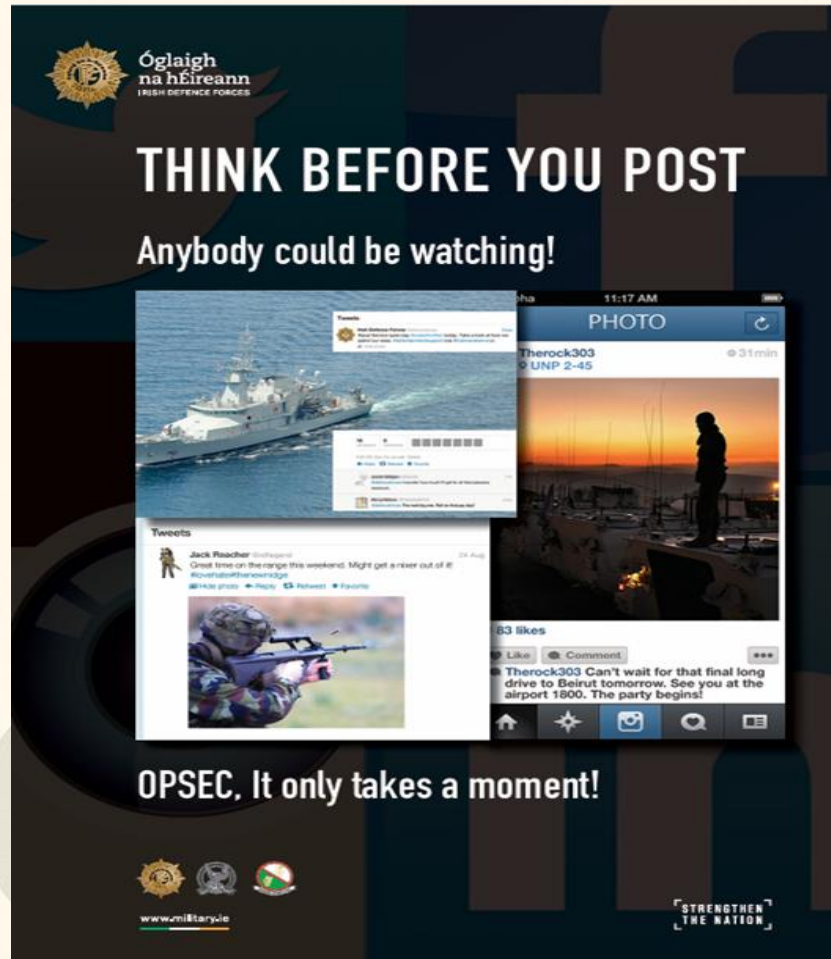
Plain-spoken, fact-based clarity for credibility espoused by Ireton & Posetti (2018)

'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)

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.

Building Resilience & Leadership Strategies



Mr Ahern said his resignation was not an admission of wrongdoing

(BBC News, 2012)

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)



(Manchester Evening News, 2013)

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
- A**uthenticity, **C**andour, **E**mpathy

ered choice of malaria drug
r.roversy



Minister Paul Kehoe. Photo: Colin Keegan, Collins Dublin

y
1 2020 at 07:00

(Brady, 2020)

ARMY SHAME I'm ashamed by horror details of Defences Forces report, bullies and abusers will be punished, says Chief Staff

Adam Higgins

Published: 21:02, 29 Mar 2023 | Updated: 21:28, 29 Mar 2023



(Higgins, 2023)

Harris 'not satisfied' at Defence Forces' handling of fallout of assault case

Cathal Crotty, a serving member of the Irish Defence Forces, walked free from court after he was given a three-year suspended sentence.

Rebecca Black • Tuesday 25 June 2024 14:04 BST



Protesters gather in Dublin in solidarity with Natasha O'Brien who was attacked by Cathal Crotty from court after he was given a three-year suspended sentence for attacking Ms O'Brien (Cate M

(Black, 2024)

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 & Åsberg, 2017; Bachmann, 2023)



Contrast with General Clancy's response to WoH

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”



Lt Col Edward McDonagh in the Glen of Imaal - he will lead the soldiers of the 126th Infantry Battalion to Lebanon in the coming weeks.

Disinfo campaign

- i. the **disinformation campaign** that is now posing an extra threat to Irish troops and the 10,000 troops deployed as part of the UNIFIL peacekeeping

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



Ireland's most effective strategic communicator?
(Cork Film Archive, n.d., in Sigerson, 2015)

Questions



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