# Speaker Notes: Strategic Communication and Public Trust

## Slide 1 – Strategic Communication and Public Trust

This presentation asks how the Defence Forces should manage public trust in an age of disinformation. Credibility is strategic capital: once lost, it cannot easily be rebuilt (Gill, 2021). The Defence Forces sit between operational secrecy, ethical duty, and public trust.

## Slide 2 – The Question

The question is how leaders balance strategic communication with ethical responsibility. Bachmann argues disinformation can be as destructive as kinetic war (Bachmann et al., 2023). Lemmon highlights how disinformation is weaponised in elections (Lemmon, 2024). Bennett and Livingston argue that while disinformation matters, its impact is often overstated compared to institutional decline (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). For Ireland, as a small state, credibility carries disproportionate weight in diplomacy and legitimacy.

## Slide 3 – Ethical Tensions & the Grey Zone

Bachmann describes the 'grey zone' as ambiguity, deniability, and scarce attribution (Bachmann et al., 2023). Gunneriusson shows that silence corrodes credibility (Bachmann & Gunneriusson, 2017). But Bachmann and Paphiti caution that openness can itself be weaponised (Bachmann & Paphiti, 2016). Wilson highlights bureaucratic inertia: agencies often default to delay (Wilson, 2005; Buck et al., 1992). Critics argue bureaucracies can also adapt efficiently when pressured.

## Slide 4 – Transparency vs Secrecy

The dilemma is whether to disclose or remain silent. Wilson shows managers face structural constraints and weak incentives to act (Wilson, 2005). Nagl highlights how organisational culture can block learning, even when change is necessary (Nagl, 1999). Fitzgerald argues that lessons are sometimes deliberately forgotten when politically inconvenient (Fitzgerald, 2013). These perspectives suggest institutional culture strongly shapes whether transparency or secrecy becomes the default.

## Slide 5 – Consider This: COS’ Dilemma (Women of Honour & IRG Report)

General Clancy faced allegations of systemic abuse. He chose candour, admitting members felt 'ashamed' and 'betrayed' (Irish Times, 2023). This avoided corporate-speak and preserved credibility but created political fallout. Wilson would expect bureaucratic inertia to encourage concealment (Wilson, 2005). Nagl shows that organisations only adapt when leaders push for learning (Nagl, 1999). The lesson: blunt truth, though risky, is more sustainable than delay or vague frameworks.

## Slide 6 – Persuasion vs Propaganda

Democracies have always used persuasion. But Lemmon warns of 'propaganda creep': once spin is detected, future messages are tainted (Lemmon, 2024). Bachmann shows disinformation is integral to hybrid warfare, exploiting vulnerabilities in open societies (Bachmann et al., 2023). Bennett and Livingston argue that panic about disinformation exaggerates its effects, compared to deeper institutional weaknesses (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). For Ireland, corporate language corrodes credibility faster than adversaries.

## Slide 7 – Consider This: UNIFIL Tunnels & IRISHBATT

Allegations linked UNIFIL to Hezbollah, implying Irish complicity since 1978. Options: deny and sound defensive, or remain silent and risk guilt by association. The resilient approach is rapid clarification: highlight Ireland’s neutrality, reaffirm mandate limits, and stress peacekeeping record (Gill, 2021). Kragh and Åsberg show Russian disinformation campaigns succeed where local trust is already weak (Kragh & Åsberg, 2017). The implication: delay risks reputational damage spreading beyond control.

## Slide 8 – Information vs Influence

Zannettou shows false stories spread faster than corrections (Zannettou et al., 2018). Pennycook and Rand find inattentive sharing drives much misinformation (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). Ahmed stresses that misinformation carries large financial and social costs (Ahmed et al., 2022). Critics note that polarisation and mistrust, not disinformation alone, are often decisive. For Ireland, credibility comes from being fast, factual, and plain-spoken.

## Slide 9 – Key Points

The dilemmas show three points:  
- Too much secrecy fosters distrust (Bachmann & Gunneriusson, 2017).  
- Too much openness risks exploitation (Bachmann & Paphiti, 2016).  
- Corporate-speak corrodes trust (Wilson, 2005).  
The balance is difficult, but credibility depends on quick, factual candour.

## Slide 10 – Building Resilience & Leadership Strategies

Resilience is about embedding awareness, frameworks, and leadership behaviours. NATO StratCom COE offers toolkits for rapid response and coordination (Gill, 2021). Critics warn this risks militarising the information space. For Ireland, the challenge is adapting frameworks realistically without undermining democratic credibility.

## Slide 11 – Building Resilience

The USAWC advocates inoculation: pre-emptive training against manipulation (USAWC, 2024). Ahmed highlights the financial and societal costs of false information (Ahmed et al., 2022). Gill shows how NATO StratCom emphasises digital and media literacy (Gill, 2021). Critics caution that resilience programmes risk becoming symbolic. For Ireland, training must be practical and embedded in culture, not just written policy.

## Slide 12 – Consider This: Maintaining Resilience in Crisis

Cases such as Women of Honour, Lariam, and Crotty show delay and corporate language erode trust, while speed and candour contain damage (Irish Times, 2023). Wilson, Nagl, and Fitzgerald warn against 'doctrinal amnesia' (Wilson, 2005; Nagl, 1999; Fitzgerald, 2013). Critics argue adaptation does occur, but selectively. For Ireland, institutionalising lessons is the only way to sustain credibility.

## Slide 13 – Leadership as an Anchor

Wilson highlights bureaucratic inertia (Wilson, 2005). Nagl stresses culture shapes adaptation (Nagl, 1999). Fitzgerald shows forgetting lessons undermines reform (Fitzgerald, 2013). Clancy’s blunt statement that 'the Defence Forces must change' embodied leadership resisting corporate-speak. Leaders anchor resilience through integrity, candour, and institutional learning.

## Slide 14 – Whole of Society Partnerships

NATO and EU examples show the value of military–media–government cooperation (Gill, 2021). But Kragh and Åsberg warn that centralised communication can be seen as propaganda (Kragh & Åsberg, 2017). For Ireland, the lesson is balance: partnerships must preserve independence and transparency to sustain credibility.

## Slide 15 – Sustaining Credibility

Credibility is lost faster than rebuilt. Frameworks only work if leaders are candid; partnerships only hold if publics trust independence. Bachmann shows disinformation thrives where trust is weak (Bachmann et al., 2023). Bennett and Livingston remind us that institutional decline may be more damaging than fake news itself (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). For Ireland, the principle is clear: quick, factual candour is the only sustainable defence.