

"We Are Not Getting the Good Stories Out": Québec Media Coverage and NATO's Strategic Narrative for the International Assistance and Security Force (ISAF)

Patricia Aya Dufour*, Royal Military College of Canada

Abstract

The purpose of NATO's strategic communications is to inform and influence key audiences into supporting its decisions and operations. High levels of opposition to NATO-led ISAF mission (2003-2014) supported the view held by some observers that NATO had lost the strategic communication campaign in Afghanistan. Within Canada, one of ISAF's main contributors, the province of Quebec had comparatively higher levels of opposition than the rest of the country. This paper evaluates whether Quebec media effectively relayed NATO's strategic narrative for the mission. The first part of this study uses NATO internal communications products to establish the core messages of the ISAF narrative in different time periods. The second part surveys the main themes in the coverage of ISAF in Quebec's main newspapers and TV shows. The major finding of this paper is that there was an effective dissemination of the NATO narrative in Quebec media, yet exposition to this narrative did not translate into higher levels of public support for the mission.

Keywords: Public Affairs, ISAF, NATO, strategic communications, Quebec media, Afghanistan

Résumé

Le but des communications stratégiques de l'Organisation du traité de l'Atlantique Nord (OTAN) est d'informer et d'influencer leurs publics cibles pour qu'ils soutiennent ses décisions et opérations. Les taux élevés d'opposition à la mission de la FIAS dirigée par l'OTAN (2003-2014) ont corroboré l'opinion de certains observateurs que l'OTAN avait perdu la campagne de communication stratégique en Afghanistan. Au Canada, l'un des principaux contributeurs à la FIAS, la province du Québec, a connu des taux d'opposition plus élevés que dans le reste du pays. Ce travail évalue si les médias du Québec ont efficacement relayé le discours stratégique de l'OTAN relatif à cette mission. La première partie de cette étude utilise les produits de communication interne de l'OTAN pour établir les principaux messages du discours de la FIAS à différents moments. La deuxième partie examine les principaux thèmes de la couverture médiatique de la FIAS dans les principaux journaux et émissions de télévisions du Québec. La principale conclusion de cet article est qu'il y a eu une diffusion efficace du discours de l'OTAN dans les médias québécois, mais que l'exposition à ce discours ne s'est pas traduite par un taux plus élevé de soutien publique pour la mission de la FIAS.

Mots-clés : Affaires publiques, FIAS, OTAN, Communications stratégiques, Médias du Québec, Afghanistan

*Biography :

Patricia Aya Dufour is a graduate student at the Royal Military College's War Studies department. She obtained her bachelor's degree in economics and Islamic studies from McGill University in 2017. Her research interests include the Middle East, Canadian foreign military policy, sovereignty, foreign intervention and public affairs.

Biographie :

Patricia Aya Dufour est étudiante de deuxième cycle au Collège militaire royal du Canada dans le programme d'Études sur la guerre. Elle a obtenu un baccalauréat en économie et en études islamiques à l'Université McGill en 2017. Ses domaines d'études incluent le Moyen-Orient, la politique militaire étrangère du Canada, la souveraineté, l'intervention étrangère et les affaires publiques.

Introduction

At the time of writing, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) strategic narrative for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan is being seriously undermined by the Washington Post's publication of previously classified reports from the US Congress-mandated Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), an American agency tasked to investigate best practices for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Seeking to inform policy improvement, SIGAR has conducted interviews with US and NATO officials in a project called "lessons learned" which aims to research the root causes of the lack of progress in Afghanistan (Whitlock, 2019). The blunt inconsistency between comments made in private and those made in public attests to the divergence between the political, military and diplomatic narrative and the reality on the ground. The US and NATO shared communication products for the duration of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan (2003-2014), and these reports attest to the discrepancy between NATO's narrative and reality. This blow to the strategic narrative is likely to stain ISAF's legacy in contributing nations. For these NATO members, the so-called "Afghanistan papers" will worsen the story of a military intervention that already experienced steadily declining levels of domestic support as the mission evolved. Strategic communications (StratCom) are often identified as one of the culprits for the growing opposition to ISAF. There is a widespread view that NATO and politicians were ultimately unsuccessful at communicating mission objectives to national and international audiences.

Canada was one of the most important contributors to ISAF. Most of the population initially supported involvement in Afghanistan with an approval rate ranging between 65% and 85%, but by 2006 that figure had fallen to 45% and never recovered (Massie, 2015, p.102). Fearing public opposition might threaten the successful passing of parliamentary motions to extend Canadian participation, the Harper government commissioned a Strategic Counsel to conduct in-depth research on public perceptions of Canada's role in Afghanistan to understand how to better influence public opinion on the issue. One of the findings is that the Quebec-based focus groups mostly opposed the mission (Global Affairs Canada, 2006). Defining characteristics of this group included those ideologically opposed to the mission and those poorly informed on the issue. These findings raise important questions about how Quebecers were informed about the stakes of the mission and the role of Quebec media in communicating this information. Consequently, the effectiveness of NATO's strategic communications campaign in the context of Quebec media needs to be examined in more detail.

There is a considerable amount of quality research that has already been produced on the topic of strategic narratives, media and public support/opposition to military involvement in Afghanistan. An authority on the subject is retired Colonel Brett Boudreau, author of NATO's StratCom Center for Excellence report *We Have Met the Enemy and He is Us: An Analysis of NATO Strategic Communications The International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, 2003-2014*. The report explores many themes relevant to this study: the benchmark of success for strategic communication, the link between strategy and communications and the role of strategic communications to foster support in NATO member states. This study aims to add to the existing literature by looking at the effectiveness of strategic communications in a cultural minority context. The main communication products used to understand the key elements of the NATO narrative in the first part of this essay are NATO's StratCom final assessment, Public Affairs Officers (PAO) handbook, StratCom handbooks and StratCom frameworks. The second part of the research consists of a broad survey of Quebec media which requires an examination of subjective variables. A discourse analysis methodology is applied to compare the data in newspaper articles, videos and TV shows to the core messages of NATO's StratCom. Due to scope and time constraints, the media content selected for analysis was

chosen from the media platforms with the largest audiences. This is the preferred methodological choice for this paper as it selects content that is more likely to have been consumed by most Quebecers. In the selection process, measures were taken to ensure a diversity in media owners, political affiliation and region of broadcast (urban as well as non-urban centers). The content used in the second part of this essay comes from the following media: *Le Soleil* and *Progrès Dimanche* (owned by Québecor)¹, *La Presse* (owned by Social Trust), *Le Devoir* (Independent), Radio-Canada (Public Corporation) and Quebec's most popular TV show (Pratka et al., 2020) *Tout le Monde En Parle* (produced by Radio-Canada). When selecting content to be used for analysis, close attention is paid to opinionated wording and for explanations of the purpose of the mission, as it is these elements that strategic communications seeks to influence most. The content has been translated from French to English by the author of this paper.

This study has potential limitations. First, it uses an open-source approach, and as such it does not include classified documents. Second, unlike NATO's internal communication products, the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) communication products were very difficult to find. Another limitation to consider is the context of embedded journalism in Afghanistan. Almost all correspondents who deployed to Afghanistan were embedded with the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), which granted Public Affairs Officers (PAO) more control over the narrative being relayed to the media (Bergen, 2009, p.4).

Part I - The NATO narrative

Miskimmon et al. (2017) broadly define strategic narratives as “a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors” (p.6). At NATO StratCom, the development of the strategic narrative involves actors on the political, operational and tactical levels. The ISAF narrative aims to encourage support for the operation, but it also provides overarching guidance for those involved in the mission. For NATO, the media is both an audience and a medium to communicate with internal audiences (chains of command, families), external audiences (general population, non-NATO entities), third party actors, key influencers (think tanks, NGOs, academics) and stakeholders, such as corporations with vested interests. Media engagement corresponds to political, military and social objectives (NATO PAO Handbook, 2014, p.5). As outlined below, the defining characteristics of the NATO-led ISAF narrative changed considerably over the course of the mission (2003-2014). These changes were caused by multiple factors: changes in command, with each commander adopting a different approach or having a different understanding of the obstacles at hand and the role of communications; geographical expansion of the mission into the East and South of Afghanistan; and evolving attitudes towards local Afghan media and international outlets. In order to paint the full picture of the media strategy, this paper will proceed in chronological order.

NATO became involved in Afghanistan in late 2001, following the beginning of the US' Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). NATO took official command of the mission in 2003. That year marked the first time that NATO communication and intelligence capabilities were integrated in the mission. Considering the scarce resources allocated to strategic communications, both in terms of personnel and in their rankings, it can be said that that this department had yet to become a priority for NATO HQ. Forging a media narrative was a decentralized process, with national variations of the

¹ Despite its large audience, *Journal de Montreal* was not included in the media analysis because it is owned by Quebecor, and source selection took into consideration diversity in media ownership and urban/non urban areas.

mission objectives and strategies (Boudreau, 2016, p.101). What is more, the US invasion of Iraq considerably diverted attention away from military operations in Afghanistan.

2004 brought another change in command, with Canadian Army Major General Andrew Leslie appointed Deputy Commander for ISAF StratCom. In September of that year, Major General Leslie appeared in the fourth issue of Canadian magazine *FrontLine Defence*, where he was asked about the reasons for Canadian participation in Afghanistan. "First and foremost," he replied, "it is in our national security interests to be there. The epicenter of international terrorism is within a thousand kilometers of Kabul" (Cox, 2004). He then added that there were also important geopolitical and humanitarian considerations behind the motivation for Canadian participation in Afghanistan.

2006 marked the beginning of ISAF expansion beyond Kabul. The initial communication strategy was to manage public expectations by admitting that some resistance to ISAF was expected in the volatile southern and eastern regions, as they remained Taliban strongholds. At a press conference for the change in command, NATO Civilian Representative and Minister of State Mr Hikmet Çetin stated "we have made a very thorough security assessment on the area South and what we have to expect, with regards to the opposing forces and we have tailored the force package to what we need to meet those challenges" (NATO Int., 2016). This is representative of two trends in communication objectives during this era: awareness of the challenge and confidence in overcoming it (Boudreau, 2016, p.124).

Elements highlighted to the media included the successful reconstruction work in Kabul, using airport security and economic activity statistics as indicators of performance. The message emphasized was that economic reconstruction and security were possible once a region stabilized. ISAF had both security and reconstruction responsibilities, and expansion into more volatile regions meant that ISAF would carry out a larger share of security activities. In sum, NATO's main message for this period is that there was a need for a security approach if reconstruction and development initiatives were to be implemented effectively. As Boudreau (2016) noted, this period was characterized by occasionally competing UN/OEF/ISAF communication campaigns, which resulted in few commonly agreed-upon lines (p.141). The result was that some may have placed emphasis on reconstruction part of the narrative, but highlighting this sole element without including the operational security would undoubtedly have raised eyebrows for those familiar with military developments in the area, most notably Operation Medusa that unfolded in September of that year (Dobbin, 2009, pp.24-30).

In Kandahar, from 2006-2008, NATO adapted its narrative to the increasing number of casualties from contributing nations, which obscured the much-desired news of progress in stabilizing the region to ensure the success of reconstruction activities. As the analysis of the StratCom performance report pointed out (2016), during this period there was a "long-standing complaint from NATO HQ (reinforced regularly by Ambassadors in the North Atlantic Council), generals (reinforced regularly by the Chiefs of Defense Staff in the Military Committee) and government officials (reinforced regularly to forces in theatre through national channels) that the information effort was not doing enough to get the good news stories out" (p.163). The Canadian death toll was especially high and PAOs set up a response strategy designed to temper negative perceptions concerning the validity of the mission. After respecting guidelines for casualty reporting, explanations typically included: an outline of the purpose of the mission the soldier was carrying out when the casualty occurred, and how it fit into the wider strategy in the region. A concluding remark regarding ISAF's legitimacy is the reminder that the troops were there at the democratically elected Afghan president's request, in partnership with Afghan institutions (PAO Handbook, 2014, p.325).

With feedback from contributing nations that public support for the war was declining alarmingly, there was an attempt to push reconstruction stories amidst the other stories that exposed the harsh reality on the ground. For instance, Bergen (2009) found considerable evidence that “Canadian public affairs officers in Afghanistan began aggressively selling or “pushing” development and reconstruction stories to journalists embedded with the Forces in Afghanistan” (p.32). Another author commented that “during this period, typical media coverage provided little more than a stream of human-interest pieces, as if Afghanistan was some enormous Katrina aftermath” (Newmann, 2009, p.27). A major finding for NATO StratCom assessment in this period was that outreach by returning personnel who shared small-scale stories of success were very effective in fostering domestic support – in other words, the narrative delivered by a veteran was more effective than the narrative delivered by government officials.

A defining feature of the NATO narrative in the first year beyond Kabul was the emphasis on the holistic approach to the Afghan mission. The “comprehensive approach” encompassed all the dimensions of intervention for a successful mission (Kobieracki, 2007, pp.87-94). When military actions seemed to weigh more heavily towards defense compared to other aspects, General McNeil stressed that “those who talk about the comprehensive approach should not forget the combat element” (McNeil, 2006, as cited in Boudreau, 2016, p.170). The Canadian version of this narrative, the defense diplomacy and development (3D) approach as conceptualized in Somalia in the 1990s features heavily in Canadian press when discussing the Canadian approach to Afghanistan (Dawson, 2008, p.28). McNeil’s approach to the mission shifted the narrative from reconstruction to operation, with the reasoning that the former cannot happen without the latter. This resulted in an increase in military operations (mainly carried out by OEF but at times by NATO). These were characterized by night-raids in Afghan residences and an increase in civilian casualties (CIVCAS).

Managing the increase in CIVCAS between 2007 and 2009 was an important challenge to the NATO narrative which was simultaneously attempting to shift the focus on good stories. In the 2009 Public Affairs plan for Afghanistan, instructions were laid out to deploy PA assets with larger Crisis Action Teams (CAT) to the incident site to document evidence and mitigation efforts in order to counter CIVCAS allegations (PAO Handbook, 2014, p.77). In retrospect, NATO StratCom admitted it was a mistake to downplay CIVCAS figures as it undermined the credibility of the organization. What is more, the strategy considerably backfired when classified military documents were leaked to the Guardian, the New York Times, Der Spiegel and Wikileaks in 2010, which revealed the US and NATO were well-aware of the extent of CIVCAS, which in turn fostered skepticism at the NATO narrative. The most important challenge for public affairs in the years prior to 2009 was to explain casualties (both combat and civilian) within the context of the current operation and objectives.

The arrival of US General McChrystal in 2009 marked a turning point for ISAF. His initial assessment of the mission, made public in the Washington Post, advocated for an important change in operational culture. The strategic change here was to adopt a population-centric counterinsurgency tactic, meaning that there had to be greater partnering with Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and ISAF should encourage responsive and accountable Afghan governance by progressively delegating national security responsibilities (McChrystal, 2009). This marked an important shift in the central message of the discourse; from one where ISAF viewed itself as a security and reconstruction force to one where ISAF viewed itself as the mentor of the force who would carry out these functions.

While the professionalization of Afghan forces and institutions was a stated objective from the beginning of the mission, it really became a central theme of the NATO discourse in the years after 2009. This was perhaps best exemplified by Canadian Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of

National Defence Keith Martin's remarks following the approval of the 2009 parliamentary motion to extend the mission to 2011: "[the passing of this motion] paves the way for what the real endpoint should be, which is to enable the Afghan people to secure their own security, by ensuring that the four pillars of Afghan security - the police, the army, the judiciary and the corrections facilities - have trained, paid and equipped staff" (Martin, 2009).

In 2010, NATO HQ established an annual publication of a strategic communications framework, which provided political-military guidance for the implementation of StratCom initiatives throughout the NATO chain of command. The StratCom Framework of 2011 defined key communication themes for the year to come and recommended that ISAF contributing nations draw from these for their national communication campaigns. The guiding core message for the NATO/ISAF campaign in 2011 was "this mission is essential for our shared security. Our strategy is sound, our long-term commitment is solid and with our Afghan partners, we will succeed" (Bornemann, 2011, p.4). Themes to be communicated included resolve (being realistic about the challenges the objectives), maintaining momentum (need to stay committed to strategy for it to pay off), creating/consolidating partnerships with Afghan institutions and encouraging the "Afghan Lead" (the Afghan Government must take increasing responsibility in all areas, including being responsive and accountable to its public).

Part II - The Quebec Media narrative

In the initial phases of the mission, *Le Soleil*, *La Presse*, *Le Devoir* and Radio Canada mostly described ISAF as a peacekeeping operation, a continuity of Canadian global military commitments of the 1990s. For instance, *Progrès Dimanche*, a popular newspaper in the Northern regions of Quebec, announced Canadian participation in ISAF by stating that the CAF was to join "an international peacekeeping force" (Nahlah, 2001). The article also mentioned that special anti-terrorism units are to be deployed as well. At this point in time, Afghanistan was not a popular topic for Quebec media. There was little coverage on the details of the mission and the objectives that CAF sought to accomplish there. This confusion was best exemplified in a 2002 Radio Canada segment interviewing children whose parent had been deployed to Afghanistan. Entitled "Dad is going to War" the interview examined whether the children understood why their parent had been deployed. Most children answered that they did not know, with one child saying that his father was going to maintain peace and arrest the men who cut off thieves' arms (Radio Canada Archives, 2002, 6:01). As mentioned previously, NATO did not employ its communication capabilities in ISAF until 2003, which may explain the lack of clarity for the purpose of the mission in Quebec media prior to 2003.

In 2003, Quebec media reported that the mission would not be extended beyond August of the following year, citing documents obtained from the Canadian Department of National Defence (*L'Actualité*, 2003). NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer visited Ottawa in early 2004 and Pascale Nadeau, head of news report at Radio Canada, interviewed him to ask the reasons for his visit. When asked whether he came to Ottawa to pressure the Canadian government into staying in Afghanistan and whether the mission would go beyond Kabul, Scheffer responded "it is a well-established Canadian tradition to participate in peacekeeping operations [...] and it is NATO's objective to stabilize more regions in Afghanistan in order to prepare for elections" (*"Afghanistan: Opération Athéna"*, 2004, 6:38). Scheffer stressed that while there must be synergy between OEF and ISAF, NATO focuses on reconstruction and development programs. To conclude the interview, Scheffer pointed out that Canadians also suffered in 9/11 and that ISAF was crucial to the fight against terrorism.

Afghan elections, reconstruction work and threat of terrorism are the main topics covered in

Quebec media in 2004. In March of that year, *Le Devoir's* article reported "national defense will receive 250 million dollars to extend its participation in the peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan, to contribute to the stabilization and reconstruction [...] that such a security budget is required after the 9/11 attacks" (Buzzetti, 2004). The front page of *Le Soleil's* 12th of August edition discussed the problem of having NATO's presence limited to Kabul, and subsequently exposed NATO's problems in staffing the mission with troops from contributing nations. The article was followed by an opinion piece stating that those who opposed Canada's participation in the mission should remember that it is legitimately sanctioned by the United Nations, and despite the dangers of the mission it would be disastrous to leave Afghanistan in the current state of affairs (Giroux, 2003).

The coverage of the elections in Afghanistan discussed the presence of irregularities in voting registration, but also reported on civilians' general enthusiasm for democratic elections, especially that of women, and highlighted how generally peaceful the voting process had been. The Canadian ambassador in Kabul, Christopher Alexander, told Radio Canada "there is a symbolic importance to these elections, and we can consider it a victory that the overall mood of post-election is confusion as opposed to a bloodbath" ("Première élection présidentielle en Afghanistan", 2004, 3:20). *La Presse* featured an in-depth article examining the allegations of irregularities, followed by an opinion piece that argued the allegations of irregularities should not be considered seriously as the fact that elections were able to occur in the Afghan context was an impressive feat. The piece praised ISAF's efforts to encourage democratic processes in Afghanistan (Roy, 2004). *Le Devoir's* reporting of the event underlined the claims of irregularities, but quoted OECD officials claiming that the vote was valid, and the opposition was contesting on political grounds. The piece also stressed the enthusiasm and delight of Afghans to hold democratic elections (Shah, 2004).

This period marked the prelude of CAF taking the lead in the high-risk Kandahar region. In that time period, officers of the 22nd Regiment were being trained to join ISAF. Several news stories addressed the reality of pre-departure for soldiers and their families. A noticeable difference between independent newspapers and media owned by Quebecor, Quebec's media conglomerate, was the sensationalist language used to depict Afghanistan. For instance, a piece published in Quebec City's *Le Soleil* quoted CAF spokesman Mario Couture's remark that soldiers were very eager to participate in ISAF. The headline of the article written by Giguère (2004) read as follows:

An earth infested with mines. Suicide attacks. Terrorist haven. Taliban headquarters. Ossama Ben Laden's country of residence. A country with values and culture opposite that of Canada. Mountainous terrain with extreme climate conditions. Valcartier soldiers fear nothing: they rushed to sign up to participate in the mother of all missions, Afghanistan.

In summary, between 2001 and 2005, NATO's narrative defined the operation as one of peacekeeping, necessary for national security after the 9/11 attacks. It also highlighted that Afghanistan was a breeding ground for terrorism, that it needed humanitarian assistance and that it was to hold the first democratic elections in decades. In Quebec media, despite initially unclear reporting of mission objectives, Canada's role was associated with peacekeeping as opposed to combat. The mission's purpose was often explained in relation to security concerns, the general threat of terrorism, with 9/11 at the forefront. Media coverage of the Afghan elections was mostly positive.

When Canada took the lead in Kandahar, the mission grew increasingly deadly for the CAF: 150 of the 158 Canadian casualties in Afghanistan occurred after 2006 (Veterans Affairs Canada, 2019). Unsurprisingly, news of soldiers' deaths dominated Quebec media reporting after 2006. The annual report published by Quebecois media analysis institute Influence Communication found that

“with a media prominence score of 7.18% in 2007, Afghanistan was Canada’s top news story [...] 58% of the Afghan war coverage was related to Canadian casualties as opposed to 1.8% for Afghan civilian casualties” (Dumas, 2007, p.8). The report also remarked that over one-third (35%) of all the news coverage related to the Afghan war was about politicians touring war zones. In 2007, over a dozen members of parliament made their way to Afghanistan. Indeed, Prime Minister Harper’s surprise visit in Kandahar was covered extensively in Quebec media. Patrice Roy, the Radio-Canada foreign correspondent based in Kabul, relayed Harpers’ speech to the soldiers and to Canadians that Canada would not “cut and run” from Afghanistan. Roy paraphrased this sentiment with the equivalent Quebec expression of “we will stay at all costs” (“Stephen Harper à Kandahar”, 2006, 3:20). The segment also featured an interview with Kandahar’s governor, asking Canadians to extend their commitment in the region beyond the initially agreed time period.

In 2007, Lieutenant Mailloux of the 22nd Regiment was invited to one of Quebec’s most influential shows, *Tout Le Monde En Parle*. Having suffered the loss of a limb in Afghanistan the previous year, Mailloux’s discussion with hosts, co-hosts and fellow guests exemplified the debate between those opposed and those who support the mission. Following a sly comment by the cohost of the show about the cost of the mission, Mailloux smiled and responded,

Do not worry, your taxpayer money is being well spent [...] I want to take this opportunity to deliver this message: you can be proud of your forces. Over there, we are doing an incredible job. Not only are we able to be diplomatic, we work hard towards reconstruction and development, while being warriors who work in a team and can get stuff done. [...] I believe in our role in Afghanistan, I want to return despite this injury (Mailloux, 2007).

A skeptical guest responded that ISAF’s mission is to secure Western economic interests in the region (a reference Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-Indian, TAPI pipeline project) and that this objective was not worth soldiers losing their limbs. A Canadian PAO, also guest of the show, quickly commented: “Your understanding of the purpose of the mission is limited. We are there at the request of the United Nations, on behalf of the democratically elected president. [...] This is a war for security, not economic, reasons” (5:42). He was aided by another guest, who explained the purpose of Canadian participation in ISAF by explaining that if Quebec had been overrun by criminal bikers and the police could do nothing to stop them, Quebecers would be very grateful for international military assistance. The crowd of the live show applauded this remark (6:28).

The *Progrès-Dimanche* Sunday edition of the 12th June 2007 had an article stating that the CAF recruitment program was currently exceeding all its objectives (Cote, 2007), subsequently followed by another article (Bradette, 2007) whose introduction read as follows:

The Canadian mission in Afghanistan is only discussed when incidents cost the lives of soldiers. We rarely hear about the good work and the living conditions of soldiers in the mission. Yet the challenge they agreed to take on is enormous. Not only is it a peacekeeping mission, as our soldiers are used to. Soldiers deployed must build the peace by playing a more aggressive role. (p.13)

The piece went on to interview a returning CF-18 pilot, Major Martin Hivon who shared his difficult combat experience in Kandahar but stressed that the counter-insurgency tactic was effective in dislodging the Taliban and created the context needed for reconstruction work.

According to Influence Communication, in 2008 ISAF competed for media traction with other topics such as the fear of recession, the federal election, cultural funding cuts and environmental issues (Dumas, 2008). On the 12th of January 2008, *Le Devoir's* front page read "Kandahar: Canada Screams for Help!" The article reviewed recommendations from the Manley report, formally named the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan, whose main recommendation was that Canadian troops withdraw from Kandahar if the international coalition failed to provide additional troops (Castonguay, 2008, p.1). The article also described how different political parties reacted to the Manley report. Bloc Québécois' opposition to the Manley report is clearly stated: the arrival of additional troops in the South will give Harper a blank cheque to extend the mission, making it unlikely that troops will withdraw by 2009 (p.8).

In sum, between 2006 and 2008, NATO's strategic messaging included an awareness of the challenge, but confidence in overcoming it. It mentioned that security was a necessary condition for successful reconstruction work, and that the mission had to apply a holistic approach. The PAO handbook stressed the importance of reminding the media of the legitimacy of ISAF – that it was sanctioned by the UN, at the request of a democratically elected president. There was also a growing understanding of the effectiveness of veterans in communicating the mission's importance. By contrast, Canadian and NATO casualties dominated headlines in Quebec media, but there was a consistent reminder of the legitimacy and necessity of ISAF. The blend of security and development operations was put at the forefront. The main message from the Manley report communicated in Quebec newspapers was the need for additional troops. Shortly after, Harper's pessimism about the likelihood of defeating the Taliban was broadcasted in the media. In line with NATO's Strat Com remarks, a Canadian veteran appeared in a high-profile TV show to take part in a debate over the legitimacy and importance of the mission.

In 2009, the quantitative media prominence score of Afghanistan ranked 3rd behind the financial crisis and the H1N1 virus. It was the third year in a row that Afghanistan lost a rank in media coverage, despite ongoing Canadian casualties. The key issues that made up the media coverage were the death of NATO soldiers (18.63%) the threat of the Taliban (11.31%) NATO mission objectives (10.98%) and the training of Afghan soldiers and police (8.27%) (Dumas, 2009). *Le Devoir's* 4th of April 2009 edition featured an article discussing the shift of NATO's strategy in Afghanistan. It highlighted four major changes: encouraging the involvement of neighboring Iran and Pakistan, beginning negotiations with moderate Taliban groups, investing in economic development and increasing efforts to professionalize the Afghan army and police force (Castonguay, 2009).

Another noteworthy event in Afghanistan-related news in 2009 was the broadcast of Prime Minister Harper's comments to American CNN that ISAF would never be able to defeat the insurgency. *La Presse* reported how this position marked a radically different stance from the one Harper had been promoting since 2006. The article quoted Bloc Québécois leader's question to Harper: "when we questioned the orientation of the mission in 2008 you accused us of being allies of terrorists. Why are you now changing position so radically?" to which Harper responded, "Canada is in Afghanistan to train Afghan forces in the safety of their country" and that he was "very proud of the Canadian military's efforts" (Beauchemin, 2009). In the summer of that year, *La Presse* published an in-depth exposé of the controversial elements of NATO's military documents published on Wikileaks. The article quoted Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon's assertion that despite the indicting elements of these documents, "the Canadian public had not been lied to" (Hétu, 2010).

In 2011, Radio Canada's information center published an article stating that an important page of Canadian military history was being turned as CAF troops end their mission in Afghanistan. The

article stated: "Soldiers say they are satisfied in the work they have accomplished in order to help Afghanistan. They are relieved to witness the end of the mission which cost 157 Canadian soldiers' lives." The article quoted a nameless Valcartier soldier's remark that "we made a difference there, that's for sure. Otherwise, it would be stupid, fellow soldiers would have died in vain" (Radio-Canada, 2011). In a similar vein, *La Presse* Saturday 12 November 2011 edition featured in-depth interviews with six returning veterans. The subtitle of the edition cover read "they have tracked bombs, built roads, trained Afghan soldiers. And yes, they killed other men. Six veterans of the Afghan War share their memories of this war of blood and sand" (Nicoud, 2011). The returning soldiers had a positive overarching narrative of the impact of Canadian forces on the living standards of the Afghan population.

Overall, the NATO narrative and Quebec media coverage diverged slightly in the final years of Canada's lead in Kandahar (2009-2011). NATO wanted to communicate that there had been a change in operational nature (shift to a population centric counterinsurgency tactic) and that governing responsibilities were to be progressively delegated to Afghan institutions. While Quebec media did pick up on those lines, significant attention was given to Canadian casualties and the Wikileaks scandal. There was a continuity of the communication tactics developed in the 2006-2008 period, as big media outlets such as *La Presse* and Radio Canada gave veteran soldiers the opportunity to describe their experiences and their level of satisfaction with the result of their work in Afghanistan.

In the period between 2011-2014, CAF handed the lead in Kandahar to the US and kept a small contingent in Kabul to work on the professionalization of Afghan forces. According to one political commentator, while the Anglophone media was concerned about the future of Canadian participation in Afghanistan beyond 2011, Francophone media seemed rather disinterested by the topic (Pratte, 2010). The considerable decrease in CAF personnel deployed to Afghanistan, and perhaps some media fatigue, may explain why the topic was covered so little in Quebec media during this period.

There was a high level of dissemination of the NATO narrative in Quebec media. Quebec's main newspapers readily picked up on nuanced changes in communication objectives, and made room for veteran, journalist and politician responses to objections presented by those who opposed CAF participation in the mission. One point where the NATO narrative and the Quebec media diverged significantly is on the issue of soldier casualties. The NATO narrative, especially in the period between 2006 and 2008, was constructed with awareness that it would provide guidelines of responses to increased casualties. However, these main lines - confidence in overcoming the challenge, the necessity of security operations to ensure successful reconstruction - were relatively absent from casualty reporting, as seen in the Influence Communication reports. There were multiple instances of reiteration of NATO's core message of the "legitimacy of the mission" in Quebec media for the same time period. The PAO handbook recommended using the line "ISAF is sanctioned by the United Nations at the request of a democratically elected president" to mitigate the sensitive issue of soldier casualties (PAO Handbook, 2014, Annex 9-C). Interestingly, there were several instances of this line being used in response to casualties in Quebec media after 2006.

This study found that NATO headquarters' complaint about the information effort is unfounded in the case of Quebec between 2001 and 2011. However, the fact remains that despite high levels of similarity between NATO's lines and the Quebec media lines, NATO's core messages did not resonate with Quebec audiences. This has important repercussions for the improvement of strategic communications: in certain contexts, it is NATO's narrative that needs to be adapted, not the media

diffusion strategy. How the strategic narrative for ISAF could be adapted to Quebec culture is a matter for another study, where relations between the media, public and culture could be further unpacked.

Quebec's coldness towards military institutions has been documented in both culture and academia. In his 2016 memoir, Quebec CAF intelligence officer Sony Chris Marshall commented that when in Quebec, he feels scorned for being associated with the military (p.139). According to Srdjan (2011), since the 1940s public opinion polls have shown that Quebec has skewed Canada's national average to the left on many issues, including military engagements and military spending. He argued that "every time Ottawa moved to support the wars waged by Canada's great and powerful friends in the Anglosphere, significant numbers of francophone Quebecers would show their displeasure, thus causing the question of national unity to spring to the top of Canadian foreign policy concerns" (p.87).

Another author concerned with potential domestic political distortion caused by ethno-cultural fragmentation over foreign policy issues is Massie (2015) who argued that it was the solidity of Canadian political elite consensus, not the narrative, that enabled Canadian participation in Afghanistan (p.98). This signals that there is a potential threshold where public opposition to a foreign policy decision has the potential to be used as a decisive electoral issue. Politicians could potentially secure support from the segment of the population most opposed to the mission by proposing policy that corresponds to their preferences regarding foreign military intervention. There is thus a need for future communication narratives to adapt to historical and cultural specificities of audiences while maintaining high levels of dissemination in main media outlets.

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