

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The field of Strategic Communications Professionals: a new research agenda for International Security

Nicholas Michelsen\* and Thomas Colley

Department of War Studies, King's College London

\*Corresponding author. Email: nicholas.michelsen@kcl.ac.uk

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## Abstract

Communication has long been accepted as integral to the conduct of international affairs. The role that discourses, ideas, norms, and narratives play at the systemic level of world politics has been examined extensively. Scholarly interest has now turned to how international actors use political communication tools to create and counter threats, such as propaganda, hybrid warfare, fake news, and election tampering, and it is often taken for granted that states are inferior to their challengers in these domains. To address this, 'Strategic Communications' has emerged as a mode of thought and practice promising to enhance state communication; encompassing long-established activities including public diplomacy, public relations, nation branding, and information operations. In this developing field, private sector professionals are increasingly being called on to support and advise governments. Particular attention has been paid to the 'Big Data' private companies may have access to, but there has been little IR research examining the experts seeking changes in how strategic communications is practised. Informed by elite interviews with communication professionals across the public-private space, this article sets out a research agenda to fill this gap, enhancing understanding of the expert relationships that shape international strategic communications.

**Keywords:** Strategic Communications; Field; International Security; Experts; Assemblages

## Introduction

The emergence of a digitised, networked media ecology has made communication appear increasingly important to achieving outcomes in international politics. The incorporation of new platforms into the global media ecology is thought to have provided state, non-state, and private actors with an extended capacity to wield strategic influence through communicative means.<sup>1</sup> 'Big Data' analytics promise more accurate readings of popular opinion and more targeted, personalised communication. Widespread citizen access to digital communication networks are thought to make it easier for insurgents to foster violent extremism among disaffected populations throughout the world. Threats arising from shifts in the global media space are encapsulated by contemporary buzzwords like post-truth, fake news, and hybrid warfare.<sup>2</sup> These changes in communications practices have significant implications for international security.

The importance of communications practices for international security is typically articulated through two arguments. The first is that states are often inferior to state challengers in harnessing the contemporary communication environment. This is because they treat communication as

<sup>1</sup>Nicholas Michelsen and Mervyn Frost, 'Strategic communications in international relations: Practical traps and ethical puzzles', *Defence Strategic Communications*, 2 (2017), pp. 9–33.

<sup>2</sup>Damien van Puyelde, 'Hybrid war – does it even exist?', *NATO Review*, available at: {<https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2015/Also-in-2015/hybrid-modern-future-warfare-russia-ukraine/EN/>} accessed 10 December 2017; John Corner, 'Fake news, post-truth and media-political change', *Media, Culture & Society*, 39:7 (2017), pp. 1100–07.

secondary to policies and actions, whereas the messaging of insurgent or terrorist opponents starts with what they intend to communicate and designs actions from there.<sup>3</sup> In counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, this is thought to explain Western failures to secure ongoing public support by not communicating the purpose of their missions coherently enough.<sup>4</sup> The second argument is that liberal democracies are especially at risk of subversion by opponents using democratically enshrined freedoms of expression to propagate disinformation, as shown by concerns about Russian hybrid warfare or the impact of fake news on electoral processes.<sup>5</sup> It is debatable whether states are as disadvantaged in the communicative realm as is commonly assumed,<sup>6</sup> but nonetheless, widespread assumptions about states' vulnerabilities in this arena have driven attempts to improve state communication practices.<sup>7</sup>

In this context, 'Strategic Communications' has emerged as a mode of thought and practice promising to enhance state capabilities; encompassing long-established activities including public diplomacy, public relations, nation branding, and information operations.<sup>8</sup> Most research on improving strategic communications in IR has tended to focus on either communication content and form – such as strategic narratives and counternarratives – or on better understanding of shifting media ecologies, networks, or the use of social media and bulk data.<sup>9</sup> There is research examining the security communication of political elites, particularly within the securitisation literature.<sup>10</sup> There has, however, been little IR communications research specifically examining the experts who now seek to establish and develop strategic communication practices; in particular, the proliferation of private sector communicators contracted on behalf of states to work on international affairs and security issues.<sup>11</sup>

The increasing prominence of private Strategic Communications Professionals (SCPs) might be seen to reflect a broader diffusion of power from states to the private sector, described by Susan Strange as the 'retreat of the state'.<sup>12</sup> How influential these private actors are in international affairs is, however, an unresolved puzzle. The recent controversy surrounding Cambridge Analytica, subsidiary of Strategic Communications Laboratories, has resulted in significant concern about the ability of such groups to influence foreign elections through social media-driven micro-targeting.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>3</sup>David Betz and Vaughan Phillips, 'Putting the strategy back into strategic communications', *Defence Strategic Communications*, 3 (2017), pp. 41–69.

<sup>4</sup>Brett Boudreau, *We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us: An Analysis of NATO Strategic Communications: The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, 2003–2014* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016); David Betz, 'Searching for El Dorado: the legendary golden narrative of the Afghanistan War', in Beatrice De Graaf, George Dimitriu, and Jens Ringsmose (eds), *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War: Winning Domestic Support for the Afghan War* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 37–56.

<sup>5</sup>van Puyelde, 'Hybrid war – does it even exist?'

<sup>6</sup>See Emma Briant, *Propaganda and Counter-Terrorism: Strategies for Global Change* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); Charlie Winter, *Media Jihad: Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2017).

<sup>7</sup>Neville Bolt, 'Strategic communications in crisis', *The RUSI Journal*, 156:4 (2011), pp. 44–53.

<sup>8</sup>Kirk Hallahan, Derina Holtzhausen, Betteke van Ruler, Dejan Verčič, and Krishnamurthy Sriramesh, 'Defining strategic communication', *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1:1 (2007), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup>Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Babak Akhgar et al., *Application of Big Data for National Security: A Practitioner's Guide to Emerging Technologies* (Amsterdam: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2015).

<sup>10</sup>For a recent approach examining how political elites reflect on how they communicate on security issues, see the 'Security Communication in Democracies' Project, available at: {<http://www.normativeorders.net/en/research/projects-2012-2017/66-forschung/forschungsprojekte-2012-2017/1327-security-communication-in-democracies>} accessed 3 May 2018.

<sup>11</sup>Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>12</sup>Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>13</sup>Charles Kriel, 'Fake news, fake wars, fake worlds', *Defence Strategic Communications*, 3 (2017), pp. 171–90; 'Cambridge Analytica: the data firm's global influence', *BBC News*, available at: {<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-43476762>} accessed 4 May 2018.

Widespread claims that such groups have the power to determine electoral outcomes have been met by counter-claims that their psychographic data was actually of limited use.<sup>14</sup>

There is little understanding of the scope of the strategic communications industry or the everyday practices of the experts within it, and thus little understanding of their international roles and influence. The global strategic communications industry is highly diverse, encompassing small, issue-specific consultancies and large, diversified Public Relations and Marketing firms. Its experts fulfil multiple functions for governments, non-state actors, and businesses. However, the inherent secrecy of the industry has meant that few researchers have examined the nature of these actors' roles, cultures, and practices.<sup>15</sup> Several related puzzles remain unaddressed: whether Strategic Communications Professionals are practising communication differently to more established communication fields; whether their cultures, practices, and capabilities make them better placed to counter perceived new communication threats affecting global society; the complex power dynamics that shape their interactions with states, and what normative issues arise within their roles. In this article, we establish conceptual, analytical, and methodological groundwork that would help address these questions through a new research agenda.

The lack of attention given to Strategic Communications Professionals contrasts sharply with the international security industry, where extensive attention has been paid to the increasingly intricate 'security assemblages' of public-private actors that provide security today.<sup>16</sup> These security assemblages are recognised as public and private, nationalist and market orientated,<sup>17</sup> and characterised by multiple sites of contestation and ambivalence involving a variety of actors, rationalities, and practices.<sup>18</sup> We see considerable parallels in the international Strategic Communications industry, but there is a marked absence of IR communication research investigating these dynamics and how they influence communication practices. This article aims to break new ground in research on communications in IR by establishing a novel research agenda to investigate these complexities. The groundwork conducted here will make it possible to establish how far SCPs represent a coherent body of practice and expertise and potentially constitute a distinct set of global actors with autonomous impacts on international relations.

We begin by discussing what constitutes a Strategic Communications Professional, and what if anything differentiates strategic communications from other communication practices across the commercial, military, and political spheres. We demonstrate how SCPs have emerged from within a blurred and contested public-private space in which state and private practitioners interact. We then draw on empirical evidence from semi-structured, elite interviews with a range of SCPs based primarily in the UK, concerning their beliefs, practices, and interrelationships.

We find that SCPs see strategic communications as something new and unique, but disagree about how it should be conceptualised and practised. There is also significant divergence between state and private SCPs about where the weaknesses lie in the assemblages through which international strategic communications is undertaken, and whose organisational cultures and practices are best suited to leading international strategic communications efforts. Private sector SCPs criticise state strategic communications efforts as technologically backward, slow and inflexible; state SCPs

<sup>14</sup>Jonathan Allen and Jason Abbruzzese, 'Cambridge Analytica's Effectiveness Called into Question Despite Alleged Facebook Data Harvesting', available at: {<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/cambridge-analytica-s-effectiveness-called-question-despite-alleged-facebook-data-n858256>} accessed 3 May 2018; 'Reality check: Was Facebook data's value "literally nothing"?', *BBC News*, available at: {<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-43502366>} accessed 3 May 2018.

<sup>15</sup>Sue Curry Jansen, *Stealth Communications: The Spectacular Rise of Public Relations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

<sup>16</sup>Rita Abrahamsen, *Security Beyond the State: Private Security in International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>17</sup>Laurent Bonelli and Didier Bigo, 'Mapping the European Union Field of the Professionals of Security: A Methodological Note on the Problematique', Challenge: The Changing Landscape of European (In)security, WP 2 Deliverable (2005), available at: {<http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/iccm/library/63.html>} accessed 11 July 2017.

<sup>18</sup>Joakim Berndtsson and Maria Stern, 'Private security and the public-private divide: Contested lines of distinction and modes of governance in the Stockholm-Arlanda security assemblage', *International Political Sociology*, 5:4 (2011), pp. 422–3.

criticise private sector contractors for repetitive and unoriginal tactical communication products. Their interrelationships are often far more complex than a simple contractor-consultant relationship, and involve considerable contestation and struggle. In some circumstances, for example, private SCPs are employed by states to work for their allies, whose aims can sometimes directly oppose each other. They may even be working for both sides of an international conflict simultaneously, either at the behest of external governments or contracted directly by one of the parties. Due to this contestation, we argue that rather than considering SCPs as a unified epistemic community, they are best conceptualised as a ‘field’,<sup>19</sup> requiring both sociological mapping of its scope and scale and interpretive research into its culture and practices.

We conclude by raising outstanding questions that would advance a new research agenda into the role of this field in international security practices and its potential impact on international relations.

### Strategic Communications and the public-private space

The term ‘Strategic Communications’ is contested. At its broadest, Kirk Hallahan defines strategic communication[s] as ‘the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission’.<sup>20</sup> This definition derives partly from the emergence of strategic communications in the corporate world where it was recognised that hitherto distinct, tactical, and often overlapping communications activities such as public relations (PR), marketing, and advertising could be coordinated to maximise effect.<sup>21</sup> This unification also reflects the idea that *strategic* communications practitioners do not just operate at the tactical level, but have influence on the overall direction and management of organisations.<sup>22</sup>

After the turn of the millennium, this notion translated to the military sphere. Initially it appeared as one of many influencing tools, alongside public diplomacy, psychological operations, or deception operations, generating confusion over how it is best differentiated from them.<sup>23</sup> Over time – and not without resistance – it evolved into an overarching concept under which multiple elements of national influence might be directed.<sup>24</sup> British strategic communications doctrine has emphasised its overarching role in coordinating ‘words, images and actions’ in pursuit of national power, including ‘public information, public affairs, information operations, defence diplomacy, soft power activities and diplomatic campaigning’.<sup>25</sup>

Whether this idea of strategic communication is just propaganda by another name is debatable. Propaganda can be readily associated with ‘coordinating words, images and actions in pursuit of national power’. The two are more easily differentiated in the commercial sphere, since propaganda concerns political persuasion, which excludes most profit-seeking commercial communication.<sup>26</sup> Differentiating the two in politics is harder, not least because their aims are essentially the same: to persuade people to think and act in a desired way.<sup>27</sup> Strategic communication has undoubtedly served as a useful euphemism to avoid the negative connotations

<sup>19</sup>Bonelli and Bigo, ‘Mapping the European Union Field of the Professionals of Security’.

<sup>20</sup>Hallahan et al., ‘Defining strategic communication’, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup>Rosa Brookes, ‘Confessions of a strategic communicator’, *Foreign Policy* (6 December 2012), available at: {<http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/06/confessions-of-a-strategic-communicator>} accessed 30 June 2017.

<sup>22</sup>Danny Moss and Gary Warnaby, ‘Communications strategy? Strategy communication? Integrating different perspectives’, *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 4:3 (1998), pp. 131–40; Hallahan et al., ‘Defining strategic communication’.

<sup>23</sup>Brookes, ‘Confessions of a strategic communicator’.

<sup>24</sup>Dennis Murphy, ‘The Trouble with Strategic Communication(s)’, Center for Strategic Leadership Issue Paper, Vol. 2-08 (2008), US Army War College, available at: {[https://csl.armywarcollege.edu/usacsl/publications/IP2-08TheTroubleWithStrategicCommunication\(s\).pdf](https://csl.armywarcollege.edu/usacsl/publications/IP2-08TheTroubleWithStrategicCommunication(s).pdf)} accessed 12 July 2017.

<sup>25</sup>Ministry of Defence, ‘Strategic Communication: The Defence Contribution’, Joint Doctrine Note 1/12 (2012), pp. 1–2, available at: {[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/33710/20120126jdn112\\_Strategic\\_CommsU.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/33710/20120126jdn112_Strategic_CommsU.pdf)} accessed 7 June 2017.

<sup>26</sup>Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 62.

associated with propaganda, which is why propaganda is the term typically ascribed to opponents' communications.<sup>28</sup> However, what matters here is that a community of professionals have emerged claiming that they are now practising strategic communications and that it is genuinely different from communication activities that have gone before. How coherently these professionals conceptualise the term and how different their everyday practices are comprise the unexplored empirical questions this research seeks to address.

A noticeable area strategic communications appears to be different from what has come before is the trend within public and private sector doctrine and practice to promote strategic communications not as a euphemism or a unifying concept, but as a mode of thought about communication; a distinctive *mindset*.<sup>29</sup> The idea is that everything should be seen as a form of communication and therefore that everybody within an organisation should see themselves potentially as a strategic communicator. As Boudreau puts it in the context of NATO strategic communications in Afghanistan, organisations should recognise that 'all actions, whether big or small, kinetic or otherwise, communicate something to somebody, somewhere: as does doing nothing'.<sup>30</sup> This mindset reflects the assumption that rather than focusing on the messaging one is looking to project, strategic communicators in all contexts should begin by considering how all their actions, behaviours, words, and deeds might be interpreted by target audiences.<sup>31</sup> From this position, strategic communications does not just subsume and unify long-established communications subfields; it is a *distinct mode of thought* to which all members and actions of an organisation would ideally subscribe.

These practitioners are of interest since they advocate a cultural shift in how strategic communications is thought about and practised. In other words, alongside a focus on how new sources of data can enhance strategic communications, there is evidence of an expert-driven push for cultural change in how organisations such as governments think about how they might communicate more effectively. Yet to what extent are these views shared among all practitioners who claim expertise in strategic communications? To what extent do SCPs represent a coherent group of experts crossing commercial, military, and political domains, with a culture and practices different from what had existed before? What happens when these ideas about strategic communications come up against existing state communications practices?

Interaction between the state and the private sector in political communication is nothing new. Governments have a long history of calling on private sector communications expertise, going back to the first recognised PR practitioners such as Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays a century ago.<sup>32</sup> However, rarely have these relationships been studied in sociological depth and not in the context of Strategic Communications as a distinct mode of thought and practice. The consultancy literature addresses to some extent the relationship between private communications consultants and public sector clients, but as Ulrike Röttger and Joachim Preusse observe, the 'sociology of consulting is only in its infancy'.<sup>33</sup> Existing research focuses overwhelmingly on the clients that consultants work for while neglecting the agency of the consultants themselves. Communications research has compared the differing challenges public and corporate sector actors face. The public sector is seen to face greater legal, political, and timing constraints, and a

<sup>27</sup>Philip Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Day* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 6.

<sup>28</sup>Haroro Ingram, *A Brief History of Propaganda During Conflict: Lessons for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2016), available at: {<https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ICCT-Haroro-Ingram-Brief-History-Propaganda-June-2016-4.pdf>} accessed 10 May 2018.

<sup>29</sup>Brookes, 'Confessions of a strategic communicator'.

<sup>30</sup>Boudreau, 'We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us', p. 41.

<sup>31</sup>Brookes, 'Confessions of a strategic communicator'; Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011).

<sup>32</sup>Jansen, *Stealth Communications*.

<sup>33</sup>Ulrike Röttger and Joachim Preusse, 'External consulting in Strategic Communication: Functions and roles within systems theory', *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 7:2 (2013), p. 100.

greater sense of budgetary inadequacy compared to corporate communicators.<sup>34</sup> However, the nuanced and potentially complex interactions between state and private SCPs at tactical and strategic levels in the international system has seen little attention. As we will go on to demonstrate, with private practitioners sometimes contracted by states to direct communication strategy for other states, potentially subcontracting other private companies at the tactical level, a simplistic public-private divide is insufficient to characterise the operations of SCPs in international politics.

The lack of attention to the complex public-private relationships in strategic communications is contrasted with the security field, where it has been recognised that security is increasingly provided by a combination of state forces and private security companies in ever more complex 'security assemblages'.<sup>35</sup> The complexity of these assemblages renders the public-private divide an inadequate characterisation as there are public-public and private-private tensions too.<sup>36</sup> There is also overlap between security assemblages and the field of strategic communications. As Anna Leander argues, private security companies do not just provide physical security; they also possess considerable power to shape security discourses.<sup>37</sup> By providing intelligence used to identify risks and threats, and potentially recommendations on how to mitigate these, they play a significant role in securitisation.<sup>38</sup> Securitisation is a communicative process, so all security practitioners are potentially implicated in activities that could be defined as strategic communication. As Tim Burt notes, an increasing number of security companies offer 'strategic communication' services in the form of risk and crisis management advice.<sup>39</sup> Such groups can be considered to be within the field of Strategic Communications Professionals, although for our purposes this depends on whether their expertise claims are communication-specific. Our interest specifically concerns the assemblages of public-private expertise seeking to influence discourses and practices concerning what constitutes effective strategic communications within security more generally.

The other reason for the lack of research into the role of SCPs working for governments is the secrecy through which these operations take place. Success in the field is associated with invisibility, because persuasion is typically effective only when it appears unconstructed, authentic, and the persuader's intent is hidden.<sup>40</sup> Because of this, research has tended to be limited to case studies of scandals, high-profile failures, or when putatively propagandistic activities have been uncovered that are perceived to exceed acceptable state behaviour, or violate global civil society norms. The Cambridge Analytica scandal is the latest of series of political controversies concerning the actions of private communication firms. Others include the role of Hill Knowlton in creating what today might be described as 'fake news' in order to strengthen the case for military action against Iraq in the Gulf War.<sup>41</sup> Another is the Shared Values Initiative; a campaign of television adverts to improve international Muslim opinion regarding the US during the War on

<sup>34</sup>For insightful examples, see Brook Fisher Liu, Suzanne Horsley, and Abbey Blake Levenshush, 'Government and corporate communication practices: Do the differences matter?', *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 38:2 (2010), pp. 189–213; Dave Gelders, Geert Bouckaert, and Betteke van Ruler, 'Communication management in the public sector: Consequences for public communication about policy intentions', *Government Information Quarterly*, 24:2 (2007), pp. 326–37.

<sup>35</sup>Abrahamsen, *Security Beyond the State*.

<sup>36</sup>Berndtsson and Stern, 'Private security and the public-private divide', pp. 422–3.

<sup>37</sup>Anna Leander, 'The power to construct international security: On the significance of private military companies', *Millennium*, 33:3 (2005), pp. 803–25.

<sup>38</sup>Didier Bigo, 'Globalized (in)security: the field and the ban-opticon', in Didier Bigo and Anastasia Tsoukala (eds), *Terror, Insecurity and Liberty: Illiberal Practices of Liberal Regimes after 9/11* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 10–48; Leander, 'The power to construct international security'.

<sup>39</sup>Tim Burt, *Dark Art: The Changing Face of Public Relations* (London: Elliott and Thompson, 2012).

<sup>40</sup>Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Ig Publishing, 1928); Jansen, *Stealth Communications*.

<sup>41</sup>Robert van Es, 'From impartial advocates to political agents: Role switching and trustworthiness in consultancy', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 39:1–2 (2002), pp. 145–51; James E. Grunig, 'Public Relations and international affairs: Effects, ethics and responsibility', *Journal of International Affairs*, 47:1 (1993), pp. 137–62.

Terror, which was criticised for being crudely propagandistic and ineffective as a consequence.<sup>42</sup> A more recent example is Bell Pottinger's work for Oakbay in South Africa raising awareness on 'economic apartheid', resulting in being sanctioned by the UK Public Relations and Communications Association for stoking racial tensions.<sup>43</sup> A further controversy emerged in the UK when the Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU) was found to be contracting private actors to conduct counter-radicalisation strategic communications, but without some of those companies' staff knowing they were working for the government.<sup>44</sup>

Such case studies are useful in highlighting that tensions exist when states contract private communication professionals to work on their behalf. That said, they tend to treat consultants as mouthpieces or proxies for governments, without investigating the tensions and struggles within these internal/external, public/private relationships. Such cases tell us little about campaigns that do not become visible as failures or as being overly propagandistic. They shed no light on the majority of international activities undertaken by SCPs, but they do raise a variety of important issues. These include how much control governments can and should exert over SCPs, who bears primary responsibility for the consequences of their campaigns, where power rests in their relationships, how this varies internationally, and practitioners' perspectives on these issues.

Each of these warrants further examination, in order to understand better the practices of groups of private professionals who work on behalf of governments to achieve communication outcomes. There is a limited body of research on these issues in the PR literature, with a small number of studies deploying elite interviews to investigate the cultures and practices of PR practitioners.<sup>45</sup> However, despite researchers such as Jacqui L'Etang advocating ethnographic and anthropological methods too, to our knowledge such approaches have not been applied to studying SCPs when they work as contractors in international relations.<sup>46</sup>

### Strategic communications: Practitioner perspectives

To develop knowledge of SCPs and their roles in international relations, we conducted 13 preliminary semi-structured elite interviews and a focus group with high-level professionals who practice strategic communications in the public-private space. Interviewees were selected to cover a range of roles and perspectives from within the public-private space of Strategic Communication Professionals. Eleven of the 13 are either government employees who contract private companies (n=3) or private sector contractors themselves (n=8). Five of these are at CEO or Director level. Two are leading figures in UK industry associations, the Association of Professional Political Consultants (APPC), and the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA). These were selected due to their ability to provide an overview of the significance of emerging strategic communications practices in their professions. Most were based in London, which several interviewees claimed is widely recognised as a global leader in strategic communications. The sample also included SCPs from the US, EU, and NATO. Interview questions addressed how practitioners defined strategic communications, how they differentiate it from

<sup>42</sup>Jami A. Fullerton and Alice G. Kendrick, *Advertising's War on Terrorism: The Story of the U.S. State Department's Shared Values Initiative* (Spokane, WA: Marquette Books, 2006).

<sup>43</sup>British PR firm Bell Pottinger apologizes for South Africa campaign', *The Guardian* (10 July 2017), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jul/10/bell-pottinger-pr-firm-apologizes-south-africa-campaign>} accessed 4 September 2017.

<sup>44</sup>Ian Cobain et al., 'Inside RICU, the shadowy propaganda unit inspired by the Cold War', *The Guardian* (2 May 2016), available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/02/inside-ricu-the-shadowy-propaganda-unit-inspired-by-the-cold-war>} accessed 27 February 2018.

<sup>45</sup>See, for example, Dejan Vercic, Larissa A. Grunig, and James E. Grunig, 'Global and specific principles of public relations: Evidence from Slovenia', in Hugh M. Cuthbertson and Ni Chen (eds), *International Public Relations: A Comparative Analysis* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1996), pp. 31–65.

<sup>46</sup>Jacqui L'Etang, 'Public relations, culture and anthropology – towards an ethnographic research agenda', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 24:2 (2012), pp. 165–83.

other communication subfields, the work they undertake for states, their views on how the public-private relationship could be improved, and how best to analyse their significance or impact on international relations.<sup>47</sup> Levels of attribution and anonymity were agreed beforehand, with some interviews anonymised due to the secrecy of many communication campaigns. Interviews were transcribed in full and subjected to qualitative, interpretive analysis to identify shared themes for further analysis.

### Conceptualising strategic communications

Firstly, despite the interviewees identifying as professional strategic communicators, participants defined it and differentiated it from other communication subfields in a variety of ways. ‘Everyone has their own definition’, as one participant put it, while another wondered whether ‘individuals that throw that word in don’t really understand what it means’. There was also scepticism that many companies newly describe longstanding communication practices as ‘strategic’ because ‘it sounds grander’ or ‘because it is the word of the moment’. This immediately indicates contestation not just over what constitutes strategic communication, but also whose claims are legitimate when they are practising this supposedly novel and superior form of communication. Amid this contestation, the most notable point of agreement was a clear belief in the idea that there is such a thing as communication that is genuinely ‘strategic’, and that this makes it superior to communication without this property. ‘Strategic’ in this context is not just a synonym for ‘better’ communication though; participants identified multiple characteristics that differentiate genuinely ‘strategic’ communication.

For private and public actors currently working in or for governments, what made communication ‘strategic’ was aligning it more closely with policy. The Principal Consultant of a bespoke strategic communications firm, engaged regularly on government and military contracts, explained that he established his company out of recognition that ‘policy officials didn’t understand communications and communications people didn’t understand policy’, with his efforts aimed at merging understanding of the two. A communications manager in the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) with a private PR background confirmed a similar understanding. For both, strategic communications is ‘an influencing tool ... to support your policy objectives’, explaining further that ‘it’s impossible to do stratcoms if you don’t have a clear policy objective’.

In addition to alignment with policy, other contributors suggested that it is an explicit focus on target audiences that can make communication ‘strategic’. As the Director of a private strategic communications company contracted to the UK government explained,

Stratcoms to me is going to the audience first, understanding the audience, how do they receive information, how do they share information, how do they trust information, what do they really trust, and then creating a solution based on the audience not based on what we already have.

This response is particularly revealing of multifarious ways strategic communications is used, in differentiating a ‘true’ form of strategic communications, which is target audience driven from companies who just market their traditional work that way because it is currently in vogue. It also reflects a viewpoint held by several participants that strategic communications differs by being based more on honesty, engagement, and dialogue than other methods. This can be debated, because the ultimate aim is still to persuade someone to think and act in the way you want them to; but it seems nonetheless reasonable to consider more democratic an attempt to engage with audiences views rather than just project messaging at them. Again, this strongly reinforces our sense of a community of practitioners offering strategic communications as a different approach compared to modes of international communication such as advertising, PR and propaganda.

<sup>47</sup>Quotations were sometimes abridged due to spatial constraints, with false starts and fillers omitted to improve flow while remaining as faithful as possible to researcher’s interpretation of the original meaning of the text.



As well as the target audience focus, another commonly cited difference was that strategic communications differs by being more long-term, as a current FCO strategic communication practitioner explained:

I think too frequently stratcoms is seen as just another word for media relations, so there's quite a lot of confusion between what a stratcoms team does and what a traditional press officer does. That comes up all the time, for example with journalists contacting us for a statement, and that's not really it. Strategic communications for me is a lot more long term, it's not about what's going to appear tomorrow in *The Guardian* ... it is about what are they going to be saying in six months', nine months' time.

Taken together, these comments suggest that strategic communications is an activity of a higher order and 'not just on the ground, tactical work' as one SCP put it. That said, such tactical work should not be forgotten. A former FCO Director of Communication now privately contracted to advise other governments on international media relations, suggested that 'you have to have a strategic objective of course' but your communication is not really strategic 'if you fall over at the first interview because all you're looking at is the long term and you haven't thought through the immediate'. This perspective emphasises that it is the overall integration and coordination of the tactical, operational and strategic that differentiates strategic communications as superior to activities undertaken before.<sup>48</sup> In turn this implies a mindset whereby the potential communication effects of all words and actions would ideally be considered.

### The different roles of Strategic Communications Professionals

If one sees strategic communications as coordinating different levels and types of communicative activity in pursuit of a given objective, then the field of strategic communications can logically encompass practitioners undertaking a variety of roles. This was borne out by our participants who, while claiming to practice strategic communications, undertake roles varying from oversight of national communication strategy to production of individual messages and products, the latter of which appears more tactical than strategic. In contributing to an overall objective, however, all of these roles are potentially strategic, but some are more strategic than others.

Among those private actors that might be considered more strategic in terms of their overarching management role appear to be a small range of consultants providing high-level guidance on overall government communication activities, in some cases directly for heads of state. Others operate at a range of levels, producing products, or working instead to improve governments' abilities to undertake such tasks themselves. The CEO of a leading strategic communications consultancy summarises this well:

It differs completely by agency. ... It completely differs with every single client. We've got one client where our sole job is creating production, but for other clients it's actually creating the strategy. Our job is to understand the audience and do the strategy. So there is always a tactical element to it but it depends. ... There is no one fit.

There was also notable national variation in the role private sector SCPs play, suggesting the need for sensitivity to this issue. British government communications managers describe how they would contract from a roster of approved private actors for operational and tactical communication products, but the government would provide precise briefs and overall strategic direction. Similarly, a Swedish government strategic communications analyst explained that his department only used private firms for 'monitoring tools, for advice, for surveys and specific tasks such as production and graphics'. Other countries appear to see themselves as lacking

<sup>48</sup>This aligns with the British government's perspective on strategic communications. See Ministry of Defence, 'Strategic Communication'.

expertise in strategic communications and therefore contract private companies from centres of expertise such as London or Washington, DC to either develop their communication capabilities or direct their communication strategies. In certain cases, private sector consultants contracted by governments may be given the freedom to hire their own specialists to produce tactical products; giving them considerable power to direct the state's communicative impact on international relations. As the Chairman of another leading consultancy explains:

A significant amount of the value I add when I deal with a client is that I'm able to bring in the right people for the right jobs and invariably they're people I've worked with in the past. ... And that's really, really important, it's having the networks, it's knowing the specialisms and capabilities. ... So for example, if my client needs to be on Wikipedia in the right way, my Wikipedia guy is absolutely brilliant at understanding what Wikipedia expects of style, how the information is presented and so on. ... It might be somebody that produces content, whether they're a writer who used to write leaders for the *Financial Times*, or somebody who's just brilliant at making ninety-second square-shaped films that are just great on Facebook.

Public-public relationships between SCPs in different countries are also significant to the spread of strategic communications practices. As an FCO strategic communications manager explains:

I am sometimes surprised about the lack of stratcoms knowledge across the international community. So the US does a lot of this, the UK does a lot of this, but even when you look at partners, you know say EU partners, it is very much something that they look to the UK for guidance and leadership and best practice. And I think that's really interesting that we're at the start of internationalising stratcoms. ... Every week there will be at least one international delegation coming in wanting to hear about stratcoms, not just what we do as a stratcoms team but other stratcoms teams across the UK government. It's absolutely phenomenal.

To complicate matters, one private sector consultant we interviewed was contracted by the British state to conduct strategic communications to enhance capacity in another state. This can create increasingly complex interrelationships where practitioners may be caught between the contracting government and the government they are seconded to. Alternatively they might be caught between different governments within a coalition:

I was always aware in advising the foreign government in question that they can't look at you and think 'he's just a Brit trying to get me to do what Brits want', because that's no use to anybody. Why would they want that? But on the other hand they know I am British and they know where my funding comes from because that would be dishonest if they didn't. ... I just tried to give advice which I really felt was good advice for them on their own terms. But it also was British policy.

And from another case:

We were doing a specific job for a government in a foreign country, which was demonstrably delivering peacekeeping results. The British and American policy was actually in contradiction to that and pretty misinformed. When we went to the [British] government and knocked on the door and said 'we have people on the ground, this is what is actually going on', we just had the door closed in our face saying 'we can't even listen to what you're saying because it isn't the role of the private sector to meddle in these matters'. But we were actually hired by the head of state in that country so it wasn't meddling. So there can be those kind of conflicts which you then have to iron out.

These brief accounts demonstrate the complexity of the relationships that characterise the roles of SCPs. Private sector actors can both act as intermediaries and proxies for and between

governments; alternatively they might be undertaking tactical activities for one government to support the strategic goals of another. The accounts reveal multiple sites of contestation within these assemblages. Not only is there contestation over what constitutes strategic communications, practitioners are caught in struggles between actors who may have different goals. This potentially undermines their credibility with the actor they are contracted by or seconded to. The first account immediately above illustrates this, with an SCP contracted by the British government to an allied government trying to convince the latter that genuinely represent their interests, rather than whatever is British policy. SCP practices are also shaped by conflicting assumptions about appropriate roles and relationships between public and private communication actors and between states and non-state actors in international diplomacy. This is revealed in the second account, which indicates resistance from government to accepting private sector 'meddling' in certain issues even if they may be better resourced in a given context. The ways SCPs attempt to resolve these issues and position themselves within these webs of networks and hierarchies is intriguing and, we argue, strongly justifies the need for deeper sociological research.

### **The unrealised power of strategic communications**

Despite conflicting accounts of the roles Strategic Communications Professionals play and how they define the concept, there were two particularly striking points of agreement across the range of experts interviewed: that strategic communications is an extremely powerful tool if used correctly, but that there is persistent failure to do this across all the other actors involved. This fed into differing perspectives on who is best placed out of the public and private sectors to be at the forefront of strategic communications efforts in international relations.

For one CEO for a company with a broad portfolio of international activities, strategic communications is nothing less than a 'very powerful weapons system' that can determine what government is in power in a given country. Moreover, this power is 'only available in the private sector' because governments are 'constrained by so much red tape, an inability to mobilise fast, to be able to adapt techniques and technologies'. In claiming this, the CEO is positioning private SCPs as the kingmakers of international relations, deciding who rules and who does not. Beyond this contentious claim, they also suggest that the unregulated nature of the strategic communications industry means that this communication power is available to whoever is willing to pay. Moreover, a general lack of regulation and oversight supposedly gives the private sector greater flexibility compared to the extensive scrutiny government communicators face. The CEO reinforces this claim with an account of the commercial availability of hacking as a strategic communications tool:

I was shown sales documents from one of our competitors that they go and show to clients to win business and it includes the provision of hacking. You can buy it as a private sector thing to anyone as long as you are willing to pay for it. There's no legislation, or there may be legislation but it's all done under the table, and that's being offered by the private sector now as a normal function of stratcoms firms. ... Where exactly does that sit? The idea is that there's a big state out there called Russia doing it. It's not the big state in Russia doing it, they will be using proxy companies from London who will do it on their behalf ... You can go and hack anyone you want as long as you're prepared to pay for it.

This striking claim raises important questions about the cultural and practices of Strategic Communications Professionals if such practices are merely available to those who are 'prepared to pay'. Whether the private sector actually possesses greater flexibility in using such means compared to the state ideally requires investigation. The utility of hacking as a tool of strategic communication also requires further research. However, the publication of hacked emails from the Democratic National Committee during the 2016 US presidential elections raises troubling

questions about how this aspect of communication power is exercised that further justifies our research agenda.<sup>49</sup>

Beyond determining who is in power, one private sector consultant with a government background suggested that effective strategic communications has the power to make policy-making more democratic, using dialogue to ‘break down boundaries that are forming between state, politicians and the public’. The key is recognising that stratcoms is ‘not a separate silo’ but an ‘inherent part of every single decision’ governments make.

If people were empowered to recognise what they could do through stratcoms in government there’d be no stopping us. It would be incredible. But unfortunately at this point in time I do not believe the government could do it themselves and therefore it has to sit within the realm of the private sector.

On the other hand, participants with experience of working in the public sector and evaluating the work of private contractors suggested that it is the work of private contractors that is often underwhelming. They envision a hierarchical relationship where the public sector directs private sector communication activities. According to government participants this reflects the situation in Britain, where the government provides strategic communications objectives and mostly employs private sector SCPs for discrete campaigns or tactical products. The aforementioned FCO communication manager suggested that the private sector are particularly useful in areas such as Target Audience Analysis where they may have stronger access or networks in certain theatres, or through possessing technical expertise the government lacks. Private actors may be better able to communicate with target audiences sceptical of government motives, since their public engagement process would be at least one step removed from government. Improved access to audiences that governments would otherwise find it difficult to credibly reach might make their strategy and policy more informed.

A further reason government participants suggested they should direct strategic communication activities was because they were often unimpressed by the work private contractors produced. They criticised such work as ‘unoriginal’ or of ‘poor quality’, using ‘naïve’ metrics such as ‘numbers of clicks [or] likes’ rather than delivering ‘actual, measurable effect’ in support of policy objectives. Finding credible measures of effect is a challenge throughout communications practice of course. Nevertheless, perceived failures of many private sector companies to demonstrate measurable effect appears to have engendered scepticism of their value to the British government at least, where the more common view participants expressed was that communication is best directed by those with a longstanding grasp of ‘how government works’. In turn, this has engendered questions about the power of strategic communications as a novel approach within the government.

Such comments suggest considerable contestation over strategic communications capabilities, effects, and oversight within the public-private space. One would expect practitioners to present their contribution positively, particularly in a fiercely competitive commercial and political environment. Still, the extent of strategic communications’ actual power, and the actors best placed to optimised this, are contentious empirical and political issues that, we argue, require dedicated research. One key issue at stake is where the deciding power exists in the relationship between SCPs and governments. As our interviews have shown, answers to this conundrum depend partly on who one asks, and may also be context-dependent. Another factor is whether private and public actors share the same political goals, or whether their relationship is merely commercial or technical. Each of these complexities calls for interrogation. The potential to identify and overcome barriers to more open and democratic communication between states and publics adds normative justification for research into these professionals.

<sup>49</sup>Nigel Inkster, ‘Information warfare and the US presidential election’, *Survival*, 58:5 (2016), pp. 23–32.

## Towards mapping Strategic Communications as an international field of practice

Before designing a research agenda to study Strategic Communication Professionals, it is important to define the object being studied. As we have indicated, SCPs exist within layered networks, both horizontal and hierarchical, the structure of which varies depending on the political project in which they are engaged. While this suggests that social network analysis might be a useful approach, we are interested not just in which experts are most influential but also how coherently strategic communications experts within these networks interpret what constitutes strategic communications in theory and practice. In the absence of research on SCPs in International Relations, reviewing the broader literature on expertise in IR highlights three frameworks that may be more useful in conceptualising them: as a community of practice, an epistemic community, or a field of practice. Determining which is most appropriate is an important empirical question because it has implications for which methods will be most appropriate to study the group in question, and for best addressing the puzzles that arose in our interviews. The more cohesive the group is, in terms of its cultures and beliefs, the easier its influences on international communication practices will be for researchers to identify.<sup>50</sup> Given the power attributed to SCPs by some of our interviewees and recent discourses on issues such as electoral interference, providing a conceptual framework through which to analyse SCPs is a key step before any attempt to determine their effects in international politics.

One way to conceptualise SCPs is as a community of practice. According to Emanuel Adler, these are comprised of 'like-minded groups of practitioners who are bound, both informally and contextually, by a shared interest in learning and applying a common practice'.<sup>51</sup> This notion captures usefully the idea of a group of experts who appear to share specific ideas about how communication should be structured and organised, and that this differs from other forms of communication that have gone before. The concept is also sufficiently flexible to account for the emergent nature of strategic communications expertise. Adler explains how communities of practice expand as they develop epistemic authority that leads non-members to adopt their practices and identities.<sup>52</sup> This idea explains the spread of strategic communications in recent years from an unfamiliar concept to one used by a wide variety of communication professionals to describe their activities.<sup>53</sup>

Alternatively, SCPs might be described as an epistemic community. These are classically defined by Peter M. Haas as a 'network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area'.<sup>54</sup> Like communities of practice they may come from a variety of disciplines or backgrounds, but the key theoretical difference is their greater coherence, in that they share principles and causal beliefs as well as a 'set of common practices' to influence policy decisions and resolve problems in their respective fields.<sup>55</sup> In this respect, epistemic communities are thought to be 'a major means by which knowledge translates into power'.<sup>56</sup> This implies a methodology aimed at establishing the group's policy agenda and the effects it has achieved in pursuing it.

<sup>50</sup>Mai'a Davis Cross, 'Rethinking epistemic communities twenty years later', *Review of International Studies*, 39:1 (2013), pp. 137–60.

<sup>51</sup>Emanuel Adler, 'The spread of security communities: Communities of practice, self-restraint, and NATO's post-Cold War transformation', *European Journal of International Relations*, 14:2 (2008), p. 195.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>53</sup>European Communication Monitor Report 2017, available at: {<http://www.communicationmonitor.eu>} accessed 10 December 2017.

<sup>54</sup>Peter M. Haas, 'Introduction: Epistemic communities and international policy coordination', *International Organization*, 46:1 (1992), p. 3.

<sup>55</sup>Jerdén Björn, 'Security expertise and international hierarchy: the case of "The Asia-Pacific Epistemic Community"', *Review of International Studies*, 43:3 (2017), pp. 494–515.

<sup>56</sup>Cross, 'Rethinking epistemic communities'.

Despite the appeal of these concepts, the evidence we gathered from our interviews suggests that it is questionable whether there is sufficient homogeneity among SCP beliefs, policy orientations, and practices to conceptualise them as an epistemic community or a community of practice; even if these may coalesce in future. Given the contestation in how they define and practice strategic communications, it appears more apt to consider SCPs a *field of practice*. Broader than a community of practice or an epistemic community, a field is potentially heterogeneous, fragmented, and with amorphous, permeable borders, but nevertheless is identifiable as being structured to some extent by structures of ‘common beliefs, practices and meanings’.<sup>57</sup> In Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, a field is a social space in which social actors hold positions of power relative to others, with whom they compete for different kinds of capital, be it economic, political, or symbolic.<sup>58</sup>

This approach bears similarities to a body of research that has sought to map the complex field of security professionals as it has evolved in recent years.<sup>59</sup> The emphasis on practice reflects the importance we perceive in not just mapping the varied perception of what constitutes strategic communications, but also identifying the diversity in what SCPs do, how they do it, and therefore how they influence wider practices in international and global society.<sup>60</sup>

Conceptualising SCPs as a field is appropriate inasmuch as it avoids assuming homogeneity in epistemic assumptions, policy agendas, or practices. It allows scholars to map the actors claiming expertise in strategic communications while also investigating multiple sites of coherence but also the contestation and struggle that our preliminary interviews highlighted. As Bigo *et al.* explain, such an approach facilitates the consideration of horizontal networks and also any hierarchical relationships within them.<sup>61</sup> This focus on relationships within a field aligns with our analysis of strategic communicators as sharing contested but overlapping domains, with some producing tactical communication products, while others exert operational or strategic oversight.

With our data suggesting that SCPs are best conceptualised as a field, but one in which there is considerable variation in how strategic communications is conceptualised and practised, we advocate a multidisciplinary research agenda that addresses these dimensions. This agenda would advance understanding of the role of SCPs in international affairs by combining research mapping the scope and scale of the field with interpretive research into its relationships, cultures, and practices. This would begin with quantitative analysis of the global scale of public-private contracts relating to strategic communications, to identify whether contracting in this area is increasing, who works for which international actors, precisely what tasks they deliver, and how this is correlated with different types of contractor. Such data will identify which companies are leaders in international strategic communications contracting, and where they are based. This macro-level quantitative map of the industry should be accompanied by micro-level qualitative mapping of the professionals themselves. Through interviews and focus groups, scholars can enquire into degrees of common background in, or movement between the private or public sectors, or between different public sectors such as military and civilian affairs. Further interview data will allow for mapping the relationships between the individuals that occupy this public-private field. These are likely to be defined by informal networks of trust.

When considering the roles of SCPs in international affairs, it is not just a question of the quantity or scale of contracts in the space, but how they shape and are shaped by particular understandings of what constitutes effective strategic communications. Ethnographic research

<sup>57</sup>Didier Bigo, Laurent Bonelli, Dario Chi, and Christian Olsson, *The Field of EU Internal Security Agencies* (Paris: Editions L’Harmattan, 2008), p. 8.

<sup>58</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

<sup>59</sup>Bigo *et al.*, *The Field of EU Internal Security Agencies*; Christian Bueger, ‘From expert communities to epistemic arrangements: Situating expertise in international relations’, in Maximilian Mayer, Mariana Carpes, and Ruth Knoblich (eds), *The Global Politics of Science and Technology, Volume I: Global Power Shift* (Berlin: Springer, 2014), pp. 39–54.

<sup>60</sup>Michelsen and Frost, ‘Strategic communications in international relations’.

<sup>61</sup>Bigo *et al.*, *The Field of EU Internal Security Agencies*.

methods would be particularly useful in this regard, providing data on the shared common sense, cultures, and practices of different sectors of the strategic communications industry. As L'Etang observes, there is a conspicuous lack of anthropological research into the communications industry.<sup>62</sup> Our interviews revealed tensions between those seeing strategic communications as a tool to achieve political power and others seeing it as a means to inculcate more democratic practices. Ethnographic research into normative beliefs and cultures of SCPs may prove illuminating in revealing how these underpin strategic communications practices in the field. Nevertheless, secrecy is likely to make participant observation difficult, especially with respect to ongoing government contracts. Elite interviews with practitioners seems likely to provide the most useful insights into participant beliefs and practices, although quantitative methods such as surveys or Q-methods might also be useful in mapping perceptions of strategic communications across the field. As has been shown in the intelligence studies literature, another highly secretive field, triangulation using mixed methods represents a pragmatic way to gain as rich and accurate understanding as possible when practices are intrinsically covert.<sup>63</sup>

Some interviewees suggested that Britain, and specifically London, is one of a few global centres of expertise from which practices are spread internationally. This was suggested to be because UK-based firms' principal industrial competitors, based in the US, are more oriented towards domestic rather than international markets. National case studies would allow scholars to identify how discrete communities of professionals are disseminating specific practices. Identifying national variations is of particular interest given that private practitioners often work for multiple states simultaneously or are contracted by one government to work for another.

## Discussion

Determining how SCPs influence the conduct of international affairs requires imaginative empirical and theoretical research. The contemporary media ecology has become immensely complex, impacting upon the ability of states and non-state actors in international relations to communicate in a measurable or targeted way. Understanding the effect of SCPs in achieving cultural shifts in how international communication is understood and practised is also challenging. Still, this article's preliminary findings suggest a number of potential avenues of influence of SCPs on international communication that warrant further scrutiny.

Communications companies have long worked for states performing a variety of roles because they are believed to bring skills, knowledge, and practical expertise that governments lack in the prevailing communications environment. This could be any government, whatever their objectives; the input of private expertise has the potential to make Russia better at hybrid war, the British government better at counter-extremism, or Luxembourg better at branding itself. Some governments may want to foster a strategic communications mindset across government; others may simply want to stay in power by any communicative means necessary. How effective SCPs are in helping to achieve these objectives is an empirical question. Several of our interviewees noted that measuring the effectiveness of private sector strategic communications activities is extremely difficult, even if this has had little impact on the level of their employment. Nonetheless, in countries such as the UK, experiencing ongoing financial pressures, there is a strong incentive to demonstrate that assemblages of government and private sector SCPs are producing measurable influence and value for money.

Among SCPs themselves our interviews revealed high confidence that their role in improving state or substate actors' communicative capacities can be decisive in international affairs. IR theoretical research has frequently assumed that states are the most powerful communicative actors in

<sup>62</sup>L'Etang, 'Public relations, culture and anthropology'.

<sup>63</sup>Philip H. J. Davies, 'Spies as informants: Triangulation and the interpretation of elite interview data in the study of the intelligence and security services', *Politics*, 21:1 (2001), pp. 73–80.

international relations, even as non-state actors compete to establish and change international normative regimes. Contrary to this assumption, our participants raised decade-long concerns in the strategic studies and foreign policy literatures: that governments lack nimbleness, key skills, resources, and high-tech expertise, and are therefore consistently out-manoeuvred by non-state actors and insurgents.<sup>64</sup> Whether this is true or not, these concerns influence state decision-making around investment in their in-house international communications capacities, particularly if private SCPs can provide clear evidence of their effectiveness. The desire to secure business obviously incentivises the private sector to overstate their power to influence perceptions and deliver international outcomes. They are helped by a tendency to assume that strategic communicators have immense power even in the absence of proof of measures of effect, be they Big Data companies, subversive states or a combination of the two. This evidentiary challenge has been particularly striking in relationship to controversies concerning companies like Cambridge Analytica's involvement in the US and European elections, or alleged Russian usage of bots to influence social media trends. However debatable such claims are, they must be taken seriously, not least because a wide spectrum of states may do so in their decisions to employ private firms, assuming they can best achieve political objectives on their behalf.

Determining the effect of SCPs in achieving cultural shifts in how strategic communications is understood and practised across the international system may be difficult, but it is also important. Arguably SCPs are likely to be most influential if they bring into government a mindset not already there. Our interviews suggest that the private sector is most commonly contracted by governments in tactical functions, in order to produce specific communication products. In state agencies with a core communications role, like the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, which is 'tasked with supporting cooperation and enabling communication coordination', there is scope only for tactical roles. This limitation was also identified in the UK FCO, since it is considered difficult for an external party to come in and grasp the internal dynamics of any government agency. It suggests a potential tension between the desire of many SCPs to shift mindsets on strategic communications or to coordinate communication more closely, and the purely tactical roles they may be contracted to fulfil. SCPs can, however, be given more strategic roles, be it directing crisis communications, acting as intermediaries between governments, or representing the interests of one by substantively developing the communications capacity of another. When acting as delegated representatives of other governments they fulfil roles we might normally associate with state actors. Tracing the nature of these roles in concrete case studies would be useful.

The degree to which SCPs affect significant changes to the communications practices of states remains unclear. Partly this is because the nature and variety of public-private contracts is opaque, even when not officially secret. Interviewees suggested that strategic level advice from the private sector is not always well received, or deemed value for money. There may be important international effects that follow from the degree of mutual suspicion between public and private sector actors identified in some of our interviews, that cannot be straightforwardly equated to 'better' or 'worse' international communications. Both state and private sector SCPs expressed a belief that their collaboration could be made far more efficient, although they tended to see more fault in others within the assemblages by which they interact rather than in themselves.

Variation in access to private SCPs is not evenly distributed at the global level, which may also affect who benefits from their activities. Local regulatory structures, perceptions of commercial risk, and the foreign policies of states in which SCPs work will shape access to private sector communications expertise. Perceived centres of expertise, like London in the UK, seem to exercise outsized influence on global communications practices. The relative lack of regulation of private sector strategic communications may create vulnerabilities for liberal democracies more constrained to act in certain ways than those seeking to undermine them, but who can access

<sup>64</sup>Bolt, 'Strategic communications in crisis'.



similar expertise. Russian ‘information warfare’ is a recurrent concern in this regard.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, a leading UK communications industry figure suggested in interview that fallout from recent scandals is highly likely to increase political risk aversion among UK-based strategic communications companies in selecting foreign clients. Unevenness or changes in states’ access to SCPs may be pivotal to the distribution of ‘communication power’ across international relations.<sup>66</sup> Having said that, the capacity of some non-state actors, such as online extremist groups, to influence and persuade audiences does not necessarily appear to be inhibited by lack of access to commercial expertise.<sup>67</sup>

As international communicative tasks are contracted out to the private sector, to some extent commercial mindsets will inevitably also be imported. Private sector professionals, bringing with them distinctive cultures and norms, may alter which communications practices are deemed most effective and how they are implemented. It may be argued that SCPs are likely to uphold key international norms that foster global security and stability, associated with trust, reliability and credibility, since these are values that underpin all contract-making, whether commercially driven or not.<sup>68</sup> But there are also potentially significant differences between commercial practices and the logics underpinning stability in international affairs. One Ministry of Defence officer in a strategic communication role in the UK, suggested that contractual short-termism when dealing with the private sector made their work ill-suited to the ongoing maintenance of national identity narratives over extended periods of time. As they said, in the realm of international political communications, ‘Commercial does complication, National security is complex.’

Private sector SCPs may bring with them cultures or norms of practice from specific national commercial contexts. If national bodies of SCPs share ‘common senses’ about the ethics of strategic communications, their globalisation may disseminate these values. This might benefit liberal capitalist states in the long term, as commercial opportunities abroad spread ‘Western’ communications practices. Establishing more open and dialogue-based communications practices might have substantive international effects associated with the maintenance that has been termed the liberal international order.<sup>69</sup> Some industry leaders we interviewed emphasised openness, transparency, and truthfulness as core values of what they considered good PR and SC in the UK context, and advocated for these values in global terms, though they also noted this disposition was not universal among their peers.

It is also important to acknowledge that such companies’ commitments to engagement and dialogue may be just gloss, obscuring the fact that they are still ultimately trying to persuade people to think and act as they want them to. There are important, related questions to be raised concerning the role of SCPs in relation to Big Data analytics, relating to the rise in populism worldwide, as well as how SCPs might either benefit or exacerbate the deficit in trust in democratic institutions. The research agenda we have outlined will provide a firm analytical and methodological foundations from which to assess the international significance of the field of Strategic Communication Professionals, which is implicated in some of the most pressing issues in international politics today.

## Conclusion

Communications professionals play significant, yet often invisible roles in international security affairs. Decades of research in international studies on communications concerning norms,

<sup>65</sup>Inkster, ‘Strategic communications in crisis’.

<sup>66</sup>Castells, *Communication Power*.

<sup>67</sup>Chris Galloway, ‘Media jihad: What PR can learn in Islamic State’s public relations masterclass’, *Public Relations Review*, 42:4 (2016), pp. 582–90.

<sup>68</sup>Michelsen and Frost, ‘Strategic communications in international relations’.

<sup>69</sup>John Ikenberry, ‘The plot against American foreign policy: Can the liberal order survive’, *Foreign Affairs*, 96 (2017), p. 2.

discourses, narratives and ideas, have failed to examine this field of expertise.<sup>70</sup> The emergence of Strategic Communications as a term to capture what have in the past been understood as diverse activities provides opportunities for scholars to understand better the influence of communication experts on the conduct of international relations. As we have shown, Strategic Communications Professionals agree strongly on the power of strategic communications to achieve outcomes in world politics, but diverge on what it is, what it isn't and how it should be practised. They operate in a complex space that defies the simplistic public-private divide, and is highly contested, reflecting the diverse nature of the communication and security fields from which it originated.

The epistemic power of Strategic Communications Professionals is emergent, manifested in a series of competing visions, practices, and understandings that shape how states think about and practice strategic communications. IR scholarship ought not to ignore this fluid situation, for how this global field of practice evolves can be expected to have significant impacts upon the norms and conduct of international politics. The global market of Strategic Communications Professionals may reinforce or increase scope to violate international norms, or it may otherwise transform norms around international communication in ways that deserve study. We have therefore set out a multidisciplinary research agenda to identify and map this field, to understand better its, scale, cultures, and practices, and in doing so illuminate its roles in international affairs. At stake, we believe, is the degree to which Strategic Communications Professionals possess 'the power to construct' international communications.<sup>71</sup>

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**Dr Nicholas Michelsen** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of War Studies, King's College London, and Director of Research in the King's Centre for Strategic Communications. His research interests include political and normative debates around international strategic communications, the history of international thought since the First World War, contemporary International Relations theory, transnational movements, suicide-terrorism, hunger-striking, and political self-sacrifice.

**Dr Thomas Colley** is a Teaching Fellow in the Department of War Studies, King's College London, and a Fellow in the King's Centre for Strategic Communications. His research interests include propaganda, strategic communications, and their historical and contemporary use in war. His recent research has examined strategic narratives from the perspectives of ordinary citizens, focusing on the British public's understanding of war.

<sup>70</sup>See Miskimmon et al., O'Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*.

<sup>71</sup>Leander, 'The power to construct international security'.