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BY: David Patrikarakos, journalist and author of *War in 140 Characters*

THE DIGITAL STATESMAN: ZELENSKY'S MASTERCLASS IN CONFLICT COMMUNICATIONS

LAST month I went along to a military base in the south of England to speak on a panel about the types of dilemmas a commander might face during urban warfare. In broad terms, the scenario saw a hostile army, named... ahem...“red” (to contrast with NATO’s “blue” to be fair, but still) invade and occupy a city in eastern Europe. The job for NATO forces was to win the city back or – as it was more euphemistically described – “restore its sovereignty.” The challenge for NATO was how to do this with the least civilian suffering.

NATO versus the “red” army,

which was busy invading and occupying a neighbouring country in eastern Europe. The conference was organised before Russia’s 24 February invasion of Ukraine but, clearly, it could not have been better timed. Each member of the panel (generally people far more accomplished than me) spoke to their speciality. Mine was focused on the communications side of things, or what is more commonly known as information warfare.

It’s the subject of my book, *War in 140 Characters: How Social Media is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty First Century*, which emerged from my time covering

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the 2014 war in Ukraine and to which I have returned intensely as the war’s latest iteration has unfolded. But care is needed. Often, when interviewed I am asked to explain how these days the “information war” is more important than the war on the ground. I always reply that it absolutely isn’t. What matters most in Ukraine right now are those shells devastating Mariupol; those soldiers killing Ukrainian civilians; and the chemical weapons that the Russians might decide to drop.

But if communications can’t change the direction of a tank, they can change the direction of policy. This matters because it’s

policy that brings the Javelins and stingers and our very own British NLAWs (Next generation Light Anti-tank Weapons) that are blasting the Russian invaders to a well-deserved hell. Western aid and cash are flowing into Ukraine and that is – as people who count have told me – in large part to do with the effectiveness of what we might call the Ukrainian information war.

I recently wrote a piece for *Unherd*, where I'm a Contributing Editor, focusing on Kyiv's – to my mind – incredibly focused and disciplined and indeed effective media output, which is, as I noted, concerned on the central figure of its President Volodymyr Zelensky, who practises what I term "digital statesmanship," which is a fancy way of saying he gets what (again) I term the correct "grammar" necessary for effective communications in the social media age.

Consider Zelensky's now famous "I need ammo not a ride" and then contrast its deliberate colloquialism and informality with the elevated and ornate language of other wartime leaders famous in the west – especially Churchill and De Gaulle. Watch them stand on podiums and at lecterns while their audiences

gaze up at them like the supermen they needed to be. Now, look at Zelensky dashing around the Kyiv cityscape, underslept and undershaved. He's not a superman, he's just like us – and that's the point. Contrast their often long and, occasionally, rambling, speeches with the 33-second and terse video he shot

on a phone in the street. Down, dirty and demotic is the order of the day.

Now Zelensky is obviously a politician not a soldier and his operation is supported by – I would guess – an entire media operation that undoubtedly includes speechwriters. He is

also of course a former TV star, so intuitively gets how to reach audiences and, critically, to entertain them (and if you want to reach this generation you better be prepared to do that). But I think that his lessons can be internalised by institutions – particularly the British armed forces.

When communicating – especially online – the army has several advantages. For all that it gets criticised, and for all that a certain part of the population will almost certainly never like it, the British army has vast soft power. When you break it down, much of what constitutes national pride (we won World War II etc.) comes down to military successes. Plus, we all know who will defend us if we are attacked.

Then there's the output. The army does many things, but chief among them is that it is an outstanding producer of content. If the internet prizes excitement and visuals, and it does, then the army provides that in spades. Jumping out of planes, barreling across forests,



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Picture: Ukraine Presidency/ZUMA Press

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operating dangerous machinery and of course running around brandishing big guns: everything about it is the life less ordinary. And that's what everyone wants; as they sit on their sofa, munching cheeseburgers and watching *Strictly*. Finally, in times of crisis like, say, war, the army is one of the institutions we need to hear from the most. Indeed, if things are really bad we can't not hear from it.

So everything is there. The question then naturally arises: why are army comms still so flawed? The answer, loosely speaking, is I believe: permissions. The public sphere is dominated by tech platforms that have accelerated news cycles as they've shortened attention spans (you can square these trends during times of crisis, above all wars). What is needed to compete in the information environment is what Zelensky possesses: comms that are down and dirty but – above all – fast. They need to be able to react to events as they appear; and they must not be precious.

What then for an institution that is a vast bureaucracy run on the unashamed principle of being a pretty much vertical hierarchy that runs not even on permissions, but actual orders? The army is a top-down chain of command because if it's not people will die. This is probably ideal when you need to advance through a minefield, less so when you need to respond to Twitter trolls.

A few years ago, I spoke to a brigade that shall remain nameless, but is charged with doing a lot of online comms. At every point at which I was not engaged in 'official' business – that is to say, lecturing or taking questions – soldiers and officers would regale me with their frustration over the permissions required to tweet or to post. The ideas, the creativity, the skill they had in spades. They just weren't allowed to do stuff. While drinking coffee on breaks, at

lunch in the mess and walking to the car – at every opportunity I heard the same complaints.

As I was leaving a soldier walked me out of the gate and told me he had recently deployed abroad to help a local government with their communications in a time of intense crisis. Such were the problems with getting sufficient permissions, that in the end he was forced to "accidentally" drop a USB stick on the floor so a local soldier could pick it up, plug it in and use the content on it. "It was nuts," he told me, shaking his head.

This is the army's fault as a very sharp NATO officer pointed



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out to me at my recent talk. Often it's the politicians who are terrified of the army saying the wrong thing or doing something that might, in some form or another, embarrass them. This is a problem. Politicians are by their nature fickle, cowardly and utterly susceptible to public opinion. A set of characteristics that does not lend itself to risk taking – especially when the potential damage is reputational, and, perhaps most importantly, not something they can blame on anyone else.

These issues need to be addressed at the wider policy level – and, in my own tiny way, I'm trying to. But it doesn't change the fact that many of these problems are internal, and the army can fix them, which it must do – especially since it's not difficult. Every year, it takes in thousands of young recruits, all of whom are fresh out of a near lifetime of basic training on digital platforms. The motifs that Zelensky so skilfully employs they have imbibed naturally.

Simply put: they get it. They need to be trusted so they can be deployed most effectively. This means giving them – and anyone else charged with communicating – a degree of freedom that might be disconcerting for senior officers at first, but that is necessary to effectively contest those information spaces. Twitter is not kind to chains of command. I say this over and over again – and my audiences understand. They, too, get it. They got it at the conference last month. I am hopeful.

In the meantime, as the session wound up a three star General made a comment to the room. "Much of our training used to be around taking back territory seized after a Russian blitzkrieg," he said. "Now we've seen their blitzkrieg in Ukraine.

"So, I guess we'll just have to change our training."