'Modern' warfare–the battle for public opinion

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In recent decades, the nature of warfare has undergone a dramatic change. From conventional (symmetric) war, between states possessing traditional armed forces we have moved on to 'asymmetric' warfare, pitting armed groups against nation-states, in a 'weak against the strong' relationship. Terrorism is one of the best illustrations of this asymmetry in conflicts. The fight between Israel and Hezbollah on Lebanese soil is typical of the development of these 'asymmetric wars' into 'unlimited wars'. By 'limits' we must understand and include every type of limitation that might exist in a conflict–geographic, spiritual, technical, moral or economic. The theatre of operations is not limited to the 'battlefield', it is polymorphous and omnidirectional. It combines military operations with action in the economic, juridical, political and diplomatic spheres, in areas out of the battle. It reaches out, according to the potential for success, within its own lines, the lines of its allies, or into the enemy rear, to the heart of the population. The only really important element is 'the end', in other words the victory, whatever the means necessary to achieve it. The tactic of unlimited war strikes at the heart of society's fundamental values (humanity, society, culture, hate, love, conscience), whilst stripping them of their meaning, retaining only the strategic potential and its capacity to influence events. The 'choice' of Lebanon as a battlefield lies in the proxy war strategy, which allows third-party states to settle their differences whilst avoiding direct confrontation, with the consequent human and economic losses. One of the aims of unlimited warfare is also to weaken the offensive and defensive capabilities of a country by obliging it to operate on several fronts simultaneously, thereby splitting its forces.

Unconventional warfare

Hezbollah strategy is a prime example of this 'unlimited warfare' (of which the original concept was developed by Chinese strategists during the 1990s to confront the increase in American military might). If you want to draw a comparison between the respective aims of the belligerents, you could say that the Israelis are fighting, essentially, to obtain military success on the battlefield, to secure their borders, and that civilian casualties are the immediate consequences, without in any way being an aim in itself. Hezbollah is fighting primarily to win victories far from the military battlefield, but making use of events occurring there to gain access to Western and Arab media, and to the Internet, where civilian losses are a useful tool for bending public opinion. With this aim in mind the Shia faction has developed a strategy whereby its forces are camouflaged within civilian buildings and populations. Thereafter it can launch attacks from these sites against Tsahal (the Israel Defence Forces-IDF), and fire rockets against civilian targets on Israeli soil, knowing full well that the IDF will locate the source of the attacks and respond by bombarding the sites–from which Hezbollah has already withdrawn to open a new front elsewhere. In this way, Hezbollah makes use of its opponent's power to its own advantage, at the cost of the many civilian victims sacrificed on the battlefield of the public opinion war. It looks as if Israel has already lost that war, thanks to its own military, financial and technological superiority. The strength that guarantees its survival is the basis of its defeat in the media. The mounting numbers of civilian victims, the images of the endless suffering of Lebanese women and children have overcome logic. Of course it is hard to believe that anyone can find legitimacy in the suffering of innocents, whether or not they end up as martyrs. None the less, it is important to realise that the swing of public opinion against Israel, which has developed as the days have gone by, is the result of a cunningly orchestrated strategy, to which Western public opinion has indirectly contributed. It is not because opinions and perceptions change that the doctrines, ideologies and values of the belligerents are also going to change.

Cyber-citizen or cyber-soldier?

We have, without realising it, become the new soldiers of this 'unlimited warfare' that the belligerents have launched on the field of our perceptions. The Lebanese drama has pricked our consciences, and the information flow from the various media sources has forged our convictions. Most people construct their system of beliefs (in the sociological sense) in accordance with the way in which they perceive reality, but you don't have to go back to the ancient philosophers to understand that this reality, when all is said and done, is somewhat subjective; and this subjectivity is food and drink for the belligerents. Manipulated in this information war, we collaborate unwittingly in the dynamics of the conflict whose battlefields invade our screens, just by signing an on-line petition, or by passing on an e-mail or a PowerPoint presentation expressing support. Sometimes you might even find your name on a distribution list, leading the recipients to believe that you have 'chosen' your camp. It is interesting to note that, to communicate, Hezbollah and its sympathisers use cultural methods and symbols to which they are totally opposed, culturally and ideologically.

The age of the 'war of the senses'

The battle rages on the Net, the number of petitions calling for a ceasefire or against the Israeli intervention, of video clips denouncing or accusing are beyond counting. The number of blog messages and follow-up comments has exploded in the last ten days. Internet is saturated with images, even Google Earth has been overwhelmed, downloadable maps are available to surfers on the Web, showing the areas bombed by Tsahal, or the locations of Israeli civil and military airfields. The Web has become not just the conflict's mouthpiece, but also the storage site for the dissemination of massive disinformation (from whichever side). We are looking at a war of the senses, where the weapons are words and images. It is hard to cope with it all: search engines show only a part of the information available, with the consequence that the results they return to their 'visitors' do not really represent reality. Everyone is churning out information, with the filter of his personal opinions as the only form of quality control. Similarly, it is virtually impossible to identify with any precision the date of a document or graphic, pictures of injured or dead children have become the

central theme for those who oppose the Israeli intervention (e-mail campaigns, PowerPoint presentations, blogs or sites for sharing photos and video clips). So how can you be sure that the selected image isn't derived from a different war, an accident or a clever montage (which is not to cast doubt on the authenticity of a certain number of images currently circulating on the Net)?

Military strategy and civil society

This 'cyber-army', without command structure or charismatic leader, united around a message and impromptu organisation, is more like another strategy attractive to military minds of the organisation and methods of ants and bees; 'swarming', a concept which can be defined as a force attacking an adversary from different directions and then regrouping. The important features of swarming are mobility, communications, autonomous sub-units and coordination/synchronisation. Looked at in this light, the information society and its networking methods offer favourable grounds for integrating individuals and knowledge. No need to prepare or organise, it is chaos theory in action–it is enough to set an action in motion, and the action becomes an autonomous element, with potentially global reach.

Although Israel has maintained its ability to intervene in the traditional media, it is astonishing to note that it is lagging behind in the digital arena of the information war. There was, of course, a deluge of SMS messages directed at Lebanese mobile phone owners, urging them to leave the bombing zones or trying to denigrate Hezbollah (as well as the usual air-dropping of information and propaganda leaflets for the benefit of the Lebanese population). But as of now, a great majority of the most active sites are negative. This psychological warfare is not just on the surface of the Web, but occurs also within its recesses: at the end of June, after the IDF intervention in the southern part of the Gaza Strip, during Operation *Autumn Rain*, a Moroccan group of cyber-activists (Team Evil) corrupted more than 750 Israeli websites (which brings to mind the affair of the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad when several thousand Danish websites were defaced).

An opportunity for journalism to retrieve its honour

In a conflict like this one, and in the context of the situation, the danger and the strategic value of information make it even more difficult to grasp the truth, not that that means that it takes up less space in the media. What is disturbing is that, while the volume is increasing, credible sources seem to be getting scarcer. Information is processed in frantic haste, where media competition seems to take priority over the search for truth. It is quite a rare occurrence to see images and texts on our screens with the accompanying authentication (date, time, context, author). Without this, the image can give an impression of credibility to any input. The takeover of the media by the free market, and the latter's profit motivation, makes a journalist's job that much more difficult—subject as he is to organisational constraints and deadlines.

The weight of images, and the force of eyewitness accounts

On the evening of Tuesday 18 July, during CNN's 'Anderson Cooper 360', the channel's international correspondent Nick Robertson revealed to the world the horror of Israeli air-strikes on buildings in a Lebanese working-class district under Hezbollah control. The reporter, giving it all he had, raced panting through the ruins, giving the TV audience the impression of another imminent rain of bombs. The impression was reinforced by his interlocutor, Hussein Nabulsi, the Hezbollah press spokesman. Robertson: 'You are expecting another strike at any moment?' Nabulsi: 'Of course, of course!' Robertson: 'Is it dangerous here?' Nabulsi, gasping: 'It's very dangerous. It is the most dangerous place and the most dangerous time.' And Robertson, piling it on tremulously: 'And these are civilian houses.' Another CNN reporter, Anderson Cooper, highlighted this sort of media manipulation a few days later. He explained how Hezbollah dictated certain camera shots while forbidding others, with the reporter's work under constant supervision by members of a religious group. Following Anderson Cooper's revelations, Robertson admitted that Hezbollah had manipulated his report.

The production and processing of information has changed dramatically in the last ten years. We have gone from being readers to become producers and actors. There has not been enough time for so-

ciological absorption of this trend. Our collective subconscious is still tied to a certain perception of information and the role that it is supposed to play. Gradually, the new reference points, filters and patterns of behaviour connected to the production and dissemination of information are beginning to take root in our society, reducing somewhat the gap between those who command the technology of information and the consumers. In the light of this article, you could say that people are naive about the pressures exerted to influence them; but perhaps that is also a positive factor in terms of what society should be: as long as the extreme Machiavellianism which inspires these tactics remains beyond the comprehension of most citizens, their motivation to resist and to defend fundamental values is likely to remain intact. In the final analysis, is it not the case that the very weaknesses of democracy are the basis of its strength?

About the author : Stéphane Koch is specialised in strategic management of information, he delivers a course on « offensive » and « diverted » uses of information via the Internet within the Ecole de Guerre Economique (School of Economic Warfare) of Paris. He trains Public Relations professionals, such as PR officers and PR specialists in the fields of information technology issues management and information perception management.