

The Challenge of Social Media in Security Policy Institutions: A Note of Caution

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“New media”, “social media”, “followers” and “likers” are words which in recent years have entered the mainstream of communication parlance. Communicators, researchers and academics enthusiastically underline the power of new and social media, as well as the major opportunity they offer to communicate better and reach a wider audience. Institutions everywhere are involved in the trendy use of these tools, in some cases not so much focusing on the specificities of their field of business as simply spreading information and trying to reach as many people as possible.

While such developments seem to offer a rationale for massive, one-size-fits-all use of the new media by security policy agencies, the comments on the following pages will highlight a number of considerations to take into account before using them. Communication through these new media should be seen to all intents and purposes as a powerful weapon, to be handled with care. The enthusiastic reports about social media as new policy-making tools are legitimate,² but it is necessary to take into account all the consequences of their use as well as the human and financial resources involved in order to ensure critical balance.

This paper is an attempt, from the perspective of a journalist working within the security sector, to analyze how effectively security policy institutions such as NATO use the social media, to underline pro and cons, and to suggest a different approach to them. The analysis will be based on six questions: 1. What can be defined as new/social media? 2. Are the social media an all-purpose tool? 3. What to communicate? 4. Who should communicate? 5. Are we ready to engage? 6. When to use the social media? We will try to answer each of these in turn, explicitly or implicitly, so as to offer a constructive critique aimed at improving the use of social media.

1. What can be defined as new/social media?

According to whether a technological, sociological or journalistic approach is taken, it is possible to find hundreds of different academic definitions for new media.³

Media are etymologically (from the Latin) in the middle, in other words between an event or fact and the people who are to be informed of it. The function of media is to link the event to the people who were not present when it occurred. With regard to the specific definition of new media, it is of interest to examine what are the criteria for use of the contrasting adjectives “new” or “old”. The criterion for defining media as “old” can be a timeline and/or the technology the medium in question is based on. Classifications based on these two criteria will overlap only to a certain extent. Broadly, old or traditional media are all vectors of information that reach people through print, television or radio technology. However, with specific reference to a timeline it is possible to consider radio



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² See Lucy Leiderman, Policy making in 140 characters or less: NATO and social media, *NDC Research Paper n.77*, May 2012.

³ <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/new-media>.



a new medium compared to newspapers, and TV a new medium compared to the radio. Basing the classification on a timeline is thus a relative approach, meaning that what are currently considered new media should in the near future become old or traditional. In the same way, if the criterion is technology Blu-Ray is currently a new medium and DVDs/CD ROMs are traditional.⁴

Since the above examples show that focusing only on the time frame and on technology could make it difficult to distinguish consistently between traditional and new media, it is appropriate to take other distinctive parameters into account.

For the purposes of this study the author suggests identifying the new media as those based on Internet technology, fulfilling three main criteria. The first two are:

1. accessibility of a larger audience;
2. capacity of disseminating information faster.

According to these two criteria, a new medium is any tool/application able to distribute formatted information using Internet technology, reaching a wider audience in a shorter time than the original product which it disseminates. In this perspective YouTube can be considered a new medium even if it reproduces a TV report already seen on the traditional media. The same is true of an on-line journal website, which disseminates the same content as the printed journal but more rapidly and to a larger readership.

These two parameters give a limited perspective, focusing merely on the technology used to circulate information. It is now necessary to introduce the third criterion, which changes the viewpoint and makes it possible to give an exhaustive definition of what can be considered as new media. What is important here is that the information itself has to be conceived and proposed in a new format or a new style. This criterion can be stated as follows:

3. the need for information to be created “ad hoc”.

In other words, the adjective “new” has to be applied to both the containers and the content, both the technology and the information. This third criterion is a prerequisite to the achievement of efficiency and effectiveness – particularly important if one thinks that the use of new media can bring great advantages but also hundreds of competitors and challenges to face.

A subgroup of the new media is made up of the social media such as Facebook and Twitter, whose main characteristic is that they establish an interactive dialogue between organizations, communities and individuals. These are just two examples of the new media, in other words a sub-category, but very often they come to symbolize the entire category; it is largely through their popularity and sociological impact that the social media in general have become so central a feature of modern society. This has created a certain lexical confusion, even among media operators, sometimes leading to a distorted use of the social media. Nowadays the audience want to be actively involved in organizations they appreciate, but this does not automatically make social media the perfect tool to use regardless of the situation or the kind of message. It is easy to

find examples of how these resources are used on Internet and for many users what seems to count is simply to be present in the social media, irrespective of their potential advantages and dangers.

2. Are the social media an all-purpose tool?

This question, which at first glance could appear pleonastic, is actually a necessary basis to understanding which media are best suited to our needs. To provide an answer, it is necessary to define our goal: are we setting out to communicate or to inform?

In general, communication means sharing an area of communicative commonality in a two-way process.⁵ It involves a message sender and a receiver who, in accordance with his understanding, sends back another message providing feedback for the original sender. The distinctive feature of communication is the exchange of opinions to share, receive, and perceive.

By contrast, informing is a one-way process which requires just one participant – the sender of the message. Once the information is sent, the process is completed and the task successfully performed. Feedback is neither expected by the sender nor is it the desired result.

The choice between communicating and informing in the web space should be based on the mission and goals involved. Different media and information products can be used accordingly, to ensure efficiency and effectiveness.

To inform a target audience it is preferable to use tools such as websites, YouTube and Flickr, where the emphasis is on spreading messages and images but feedback is not a priority. Generic information about an organization, news items, events, articles, press statements, photographic reports and video interviews are among the products that can be delivered through these “information media”.

When the goal is to interact with the audience in order to collect and analyze feedback, provide answers and clarification, or make the audience feel part of the organization, the social media are recommended.

The current policy of most institutions is that social media presence and a proper strategy are needed to reach the target group. The web arena is nowadays considered too important and extensive to be exploited only by a website providing information on the individual or body concerned. In the “war of hearts and minds” institutions try to communicate actively with their supporters and followers, whether actual or potential. The stated aim is to give readers and/or viewers a voice and make them part of a community, based on shared values and mutual interest. By engaging people in their missions, organizations try to gain not just “followers” but “supporters” – volunteers whose efforts can bring added value and foster the effects of initiatives and missions all over the world.⁶

The approach of an international organization such as NATO to its communication needs is clearly stated in its Strategic Communications Policy: “the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities – Public

⁴ See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York University Press, New York/London, 2006.

⁵ See James Arthur Anderson, *Communication Theory: Epistemological Foundations*, Guilford Press, NY, 1996.

⁶ See <http://we-nato.org/2012/03/23/nato-soft-power-and-social-media/>



Diplomacy, Public Affairs, Military Public Affairs, Information Operations and Psychological Operations, as appropriate – in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO’s aims.”⁷

To accomplish its Public Affairs tasks the Alliance uses a variety of communication tools which include the social media, considered synonymous with the new media as “web-based technologies used for social interaction and to transform and broadcast media monologues into interactive, social dialogues.”⁸ This definition clearly identifies the central role of interaction between the organization and its target audience: social media can transform media monologues into dialogues. The social media are also considered able to “provide a means for far swifter updating of information and near instantaneous responses. [...] Contemporary audiences increasingly demand to be part of the discussion rather than the passive recipients of information. Social media facilitate such engagement and enable us to reach both existing and additional, potentially significant, audience groups.”⁹ NATO encourages discussions, facilitates them and becomes a part of them when possible.

3. What to communicate?

Once it is clear that social media should be used to interact with the public, it must be decided on what topics, news, and events. The NATO Directive referred to above indicates that the messages conveyed by social media should be considered the same as for other new media, with the added value of audience interaction. The sole aim of communication through the social media should be to afford a rapid first glance at information that should then be analyzed in greater detail using other tools. This concept is reinforced by an

analysis of several international organizations’ Facebook and Twitter pages.

In most cases these pages duplicate the information from the institutional websites by sharing the link on the profile concerned. This turns the new social media resource into a “secondary tool”, a space where information from the website – the “primary source of information” – is simply shared with the audience. To better illustrate this concept, it is helpful to think of the new media as a sort of Matryoshka doll: information (press releases, articles, essays, reports, etc.) placed in the biggest doll (social media) is already featured in the content of the smaller dolls (websites, YouTube, Flickr). In the end, the largest Matryoshka is nothing more than a receptacle containing all the smaller dolls.

In general, the current trend is simply to make inappropriate use of the social media as an amplifier for messages developed in detail through other tools such as websites. There is thus no policy to develop extensive and independent social media information, or a new format for content to convey using these tools. Following this approach, the third prerequisite for new media – the creation of information on an “ad hoc” basis – is missing and the social media are downsized to a digital tool for sharing and organizing media products developed using other tools. The danger in this is that it can make the social media less effective, as shown by the following table. Here, comparing the interest elicited by five news items published on the NATO Defense College website and the same news posted on its Facebook page, it is possible to appreciate the greater appeal of the website for a certain kind of topic not tailored to a social media format.

Website and Facebook Effectiveness			
NATO Defense College Website		NDC Facebook Page	
News published from 1st to 19th April 2012	Views	News shared from 1st to 19th April 2012	Likes
5	1053	5	10

As of 18 June 2012 – Source: survey by the author

Institutions run the risk of becoming involved in a frantic attempt to amplify their communication without paying sufficient attention to the quality of the information – in other words, putting greater effort into “selling” than into preparing a product of good quality.

Overlooking the importance of a frequently updated and effective “container of information” (websites, YouTube, etc.) can mean jeopardizing the potential of social media.¹⁰ Where this mistake is made it is paradoxically the other new media which become the cornerstone of on-line communication, since they supply and format the information conveyed through the social media. By not developing a social media information format, many institutions

or individual users miss the opportunity for direct interaction with their audience. Their messages are mediated in a mould created beforehand by other tools, and not tailored to the intended audience; the product sold is a second-hand one, not addressed exclusively to those who want to share values and interests.

Academic research, political analysis and strategic assessments could be reformatted to ensure compatibility with social media procedures and timing: not only summarized as abstracts, but also transformed into a more personal and direct format. The appropriate writing technique is that used by press agency correspondents, offering a clear picture of the topic in a few lines and going into greater detail

⁷ NATO Strategic Communication Policy PO (2009) 0141.
⁸ ACO/ACT Public Affairs Handbook, July 2010, page 347.
⁹ ACO Directive (AD) 95-3, December 2009, page 6.
¹⁰ See, NATO Military Policy on Public Affairs, MC 0457/1, point 8.



only to the extent that available space allows. For those interested in gaining more information, alternative sources – like the original paper – would always be available by means of other media. Thus, a readership engaged with a 140-character communication format might feel that the information received is aimed at achieving suggestions, comments and opinions. On the other hand, generic and less incisively presented information is unattractive and interaction with readers/viewers could suffer accordingly.

Presenting information in an inappropriate format and style means that the effort of running social media is not repaid in terms of audience response. The following table of audience response to a number of prominent institutions and individuals using social media shows how generic information does not maximize their impact, in many cases stimulating not interaction/communication (number of comments) but merely routine interest. The limited number of comments elicited dramatically underlines the need to cultivate real interaction through “ad hoc” products.

community/audience wants to play a role, to participate in debates, to speculate, to decide who is guilty and who is innocent. To do so, people increasingly use the social media and all the technological resources that allow them to make their opinions heard. Using them in this spirit sometimes means blurring the borderline between conveying sympathy in the face of dramatic adversity and merely satisfying macabre curiosity. This is the reason why sensitive items such as those dealing with casualties or other unpleasant situations should not be distributed through the social media. Given the spirit of interaction these tools are based on, it would be preferable to avoid this kind of communication so as to prevent speculation, gossip and trivialization of dramatic situations.

Audience Engagement				
Profile	Number of news items published on 18 April 2012	Number of comments as of 18 June 2012	Number of likes as of 18 June 2012	Tweets made on 18 April 2012
NATO HQ	2	27	326	6
ACT	1	1	48	0
IMS	0	0	0	No account
SHAPE	6	11	46	6
Anders Fogh Rasmussen	1	13	289	17
ISAF	0	0	0	2
Admiral James Stavridis	0	0	0	0
Barack Obama	0	0	0	15
White House	1	5617	780	5
Herman Van Rompuy	1	0	1	3
Council of the European Union	0	0	0	1
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	2	3	8	14
The International Institute for Strategic Studies	0	0	0	1

As of 18 June 2012 – Source: survey by the author

These numbers have to be considered as based on a worldwide audience, and they are indeed strikingly low. It is thus legitimate to question whether the commitment fully repaid the investment of money and resources it entailed.

With modern society ruled and influenced by the “big brother” eye, we have to a large extent become unaware of the difference between real and fake or between life and its representation, with the result that we tend to live our lives as a “reality show”. Thus, the global

4. Who should communicate?

Bearing in mind that the main purpose of the use of social media is the affiliation of a large audience, two different approaches could be appropriate: communicating through the organizational profile, or the leader’s profile.

If the choice is to project the profile of a charismatic leader, it is easier to establish common ground with the target audience and



make them feel personally involved. By putting forward its “human face” in this way, an organization makes the public feel part of a virtual community of real people. The leader who symbolizes an institution can help close the gap between citizens and organizations. In addition, this approach appears to be particularly well served by the social media since the messages delivered can be short, direct and clear. The social dimension takes priority over the conveying of information.

The risk of relying entirely on the leader’s profile is that communication will direct affection towards the person rather than the organization. Communication which identifies an organization solely with its leader can create many problems in the event of a change of leadership; the trust and affection of those to whom the message is addressed have to be sought again from scratch. The pros and cons of the two approaches are equally balanced, so that combined use of both could prove a judicious form of strategic communication. Nevertheless, a cursory survey bringing together Facebook profiles of several representative leaders and the institutions they represent provides a useful indication of their respective contributions to the overall communicative effect.

5. Are we ready to engage?

An open door policy in terms of accepting comments and criticism from the public needs not only an appropriate mindset but also a coordinated, sustained effort to follow up and maintain contact with the audience. These goals are not easy to achieve, particularly in worldwide organizations involving different sensitivities and cultures.

One of these, NATO, sees itself as not “just a by-stander to the global online world. [...] We are fully committed to supporting it, and we want to be an active participant in the digital world.”¹¹ In this spirit, NATO recognizes the importance not only of social media, but also of transparency and engagement with people all over the world: “Nowadays nobody can claim that NATO hides behind diplomatic brick walls. What we are doing, what we are thinking and with whom we are doing business – it is all out there. Online. Accessible to whoever has the time and the interest to follow us.”¹²

Once an organization decides to engage its audience actively and declares its will to do so, timing is essential to gain credibility and

Individual and Institutional Profiles					
Individual	Facebook Followers	Twitter Followers	Organization	Facebook Followers	Twitter Followers
Anders Fogh Rasmussen	84,854	99,074	NATO HQ	72,660	270,120
Admiral James Stavridis	8,152	9,355	SHAPE	8,606	3,247 (SHAPE PAO)
Barack Obama	26,039,260	14,414,507	White House	1,337,868	2,829,821
Herman Van Rompuy	4,607	53,782	EU Council	8,240	14,587

As of 18 April 2012 – Source: survey by the author

As shown by the above table, the profiles of some individuals record a greater impact than the institutions they represent. This provides grounds for proposing that security policy institutions should ensure their appeal to a wide audience by “humanizing” their on-line communication.

support.¹³ Answers and information have to be provided promptly, dynamically and appropriately. Social media management requires adequate human resources to ensure that this can be done. To leave followers without an answer, or let them feel that no consideration is given to their position or opinion, is even worse than not engaging them at all. This task has to be entrusted to highly skilled personnel with a thorough knowledge of the organization, providing almost 24/7 cover in response to the never-ending engagement of the web. In the world of instant messaging, where information is just “one tweet away”, timely posting of information and of replies to comments and questions is vital. When using other media a certain delay in the information flow can be tolerated, but the social media demand a prompt reaction. Being late simply means being inefficient and losing credibility.

The table below presents the results of an investigation focusing on the promptness of several institutions in interacting with their audience. Not everybody is ready to be actively engaged by the audience, but it must be remembered that the spirit of social media is denied by unanswered questions.

¹¹ http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-3DC9CDC0-63294899/natolive/news_82269.htm

¹² *ibidem*.

¹³ See NATO Military Policy on Public Affairs, MC 0457/1, *ibidem*.



Promptness of Interaction		
Facebook Profile	Question related to news published	Reply
NATO HQ	asked on 18 April 2012 at 15.28	No answer
ACT	asked on 18 April 2012 at 15.33	No answer
IMS	asked on 18 April 2012 at 15.44	No answer
SHAPE	asked on 18 April 2012 at 15.49	Reply on 19 April 2012 at 09.38
Anders Fogh Rasmussen	asked on 18 April 2012 at 15.42	No answer
Council of the European Union	asked on 19 April 2012 at 21.20	Reply on 19 April 2012 at 21.21
Admiral James Stavridis	asked on 19 April 2012 at 21.17	Reply on 20 April 2012 at 15.50
FAO	asked on 20 April 2012 at 09.52	Reply on 20 April 2012 at 12.50
International Committee of the Red Cross	asked on 20 April 2012 at 09.59	Reply on 20 April 2012 at 10.16
OSCE	asked on 20 April 2012 at 10.15	No answer

As of 23 April 2012 – Source: survey by the author

In addition, the level of responsibility of those who provide answers has to be clearly defined. The ability to provide answers with various degrees of knowledge and abstraction cannot be found at all the functional levels of a working organization. At the same time, strategic communication is plainly not related to the communicator's hierarchical rank or position: wrong information or politically incorrect answers could reflect a failure of the communication campaign even if provided by a basic level employee.

Acceptance of criticism and a policy of full transparency entail the need to decide the level of censorship/restriction, if any, to apply to audience comments. By their very nature, social media should be used in an interactive way, creating an exchange of opinions and considerations between “followers”/ “likers” and the organization. To block or filter this two-way interaction means to disregard the spirit of the social media tool. On the other hand, it is hard to think about interaction with absolutely no limitation, and a filter is surely needed to ensure that the slender borderline between criticism and gratuitously offensive comment is not respected. Defining the limit for freedom of expression and deciding who is in charge of censorship is a very sensitive matter.

Correct and accurate control of how social media are used is also necessary to avoid supporting offensive and aggressive individuals,

who can exploit the interaction allowed by these media as a vehicle for attack and for projecting opinions that have nothing to do with the business of the organization concerned. Another potential threat is profile identity theft,¹⁴ or setting up of unofficial pages.¹⁵ In a volatile world where copyright violations are hard to pinpoint and prosecute, the risk of finding oneself represented by a non-official page is very high. The limited provisions for protection and the considerable time it takes to obtain the closure of unauthorized or fraudulent pages could provide good reason to prefer filters such as websites, where direct management and oversight make protection easier.

The above-mentioned potential threats also lead to the need, in large organizations such as NATO, to harmonize directives and procedures originating from the communication (public information) directorate with those pertaining to information technology (computer and information systems).¹⁶

With a view to the proper and tailored communication for social media mentioned in point 3, organizations should rely on the professionalism and experience of those who are trained to use these media in the correct way, people who can bring to bear on the task a new writing style, new marketing techniques, and technical

¹⁴ See the Russian news agency RIANOVOSTI on this topic at <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20111220/170388019.html>

¹⁵ See <http://www.facebook.com/hermanvanrompuy#!/pages/European-Union-EU/12088416071>. This account reproduces the UE symbols and format, attracting about 129,000 “likers”. The account's unofficial nature is not immediately perceived, even if correctly stated: “This page is a non official EU page. It has been launched and is currently run by citizens - for citizens. It is independent from European institutions and holds its editorial freedom dear. The aim is to promote the debate between Europeans on pan-European issues.”

¹⁶ See Tobias Franke, “Social media: the frontline of cyberdefence?”, at <http://www.nato.int/docu/review>

innovation. Since the rapid spread of news makes the new media a very dangerous environment, there are also deontological reasons for entrusting the task to professionals. Because it is much easier to mislead and give a distorted picture of facts with the new media than with traditional tools of communication, individuals responsible for communication must be able to manage information with care. An additional consideration in this respect is that electronic formatting creates ready scope for improper use of information by those who receive it. Before engaging in the new media arena, every organization should educate and train their personnel for the purpose. Hence the need for professional figures – web managers, marketing experts and on-line communicators – to manage the new media.

All these challenges can be faced only by an institution with a large enough workforce to cover the sensitive aspects of social media communication thoroughly. As a result, many organizations that cannot afford massive use of human resources in the communication field are forced to use the social media to only a limited part of their full potential. This is the case of several Public Affairs Offices, working with a small staff and forced to run their Facebook page within limited perspectives. If they wish to extend their audience so as to reach younger users who are more accustomed to the social media, they can decide to provide information through Facebook rather than to communicate. Even if the results achieved in this way are not completely satisfactory, such an approach has absolutely no impact on budgeting.

6. When to use the social media?

The use of media v whether traditional, new, or social – and the choice of the most appropriate to deliver information are related not only to the message itself but also, or mainly, to the time elapsing from the moment events occur until they are communicated. Each medium has a timespan, which may be shorter or longer, within which its function and effectiveness are at a maximum. Knowing when to use different media to distribute information and activate communication is as important as having knowledge of the media themselves.

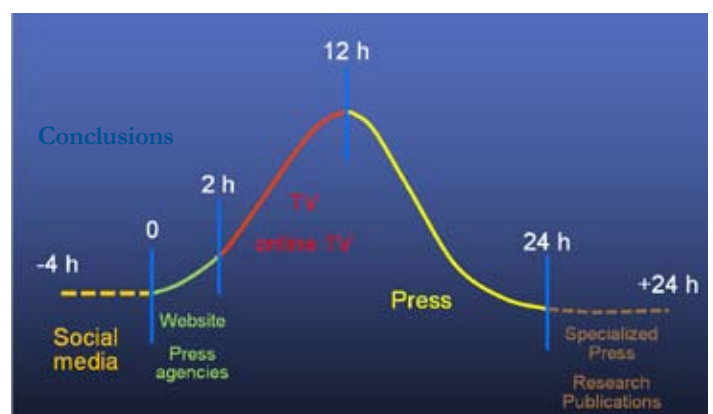
Interest in news can be thought of as a wave: the communicator is a surfer who has to decide when and how to surf it.¹⁷

In the first hour or two after the event the audience's awareness is still low and needs to be solicited. During this time new media offer the

perfect tool – first to stimulate the curiosity of the audience, then to inform them, and finally to receive feedback. An ideal communication cycle comprises three main phases. During the first, the use of social media is highly recommended to advertize an upcoming or freshly occurred event, creating audience suspense. At this time the message should be appropriate to the medium, avoiding formats that do not fulfil the need for rapidity and immediacy of use. The second phase in the cycle is based on the massive use of new media to ensure that the news is quickly spread far and wide, providing a more detailed account. Websites are surely the main actors on the stage for this purpose. For the third phase the social media again come into play. The audience has by now gained the information and can offer its feedback in the form of comments, suggestions and requests. These provide the benchmark for evaluating not only the orientation of public opinion on the topic concerned, but also the effectiveness of the organization's strategic communication. Once the interest of the audience begins to wane, the topic should be covered by other – mainly traditional – media, which now have more time for in-depth analysis of the event or information.

This synergic use of all available media affords full news coverage and optimizes communication actions.

Awareness of this cycle is important with a view to freeing social media of outdated information which can have a negative effect on audience interest and make the resulting product less attractive. Presenting too much information at the wrong time is like not presenting it at all: there is a real risk of filling the containers well beyond their capacity and turning what should be a user-friendly system into a disorderly heap where it is hard to find what the audience is interested in.



¹⁷ See Mario Masdea, "Prolegomeni di Comunicazione", Center for High Defense Studies, Rome, 2007.



The new media have brought incalculable added value to the information world. Dozens of examples could be highlighted to underline the major role of the new media in ensuring the spread of truthful information and promoting greater sensitivity of public opinion to the evils of today's world.

The frantic pace of modern life makes it increasingly important to have affordable media systems providing real-time, global information. Simply opting out of the digital information world could be a dramatic mistake.

New media, particularly social media, bring great advantages, but they are not a panacea to make poor strategic communication successful. The user-friendly quality of new media can create the illusion that professional managers are not needed to run web information tools. Qualified specialists, clear and comprehensive directives, pooling of best practices, an innovative style and mindset, and tailored information are other essential elements for fruitful use of new media.

The new information tools – and the social media in particular – are like a two-sided coin. If used properly they offer a major added value, but their misuse could have worse consequences than not using them at all. The key factor is to adapt the infinite potential of the new media to the organization's needs and capacities, as opposed to keeping pace at all costs with the latest vogue. Becoming involved in a never-ending race to use the most up-to-date and trendy web applications is simply a waste of money and resources. Being present on the social media just to gain as many "likers" or "followers" as possible is an activity with an unacceptably disadvantageous cost-benefit ratio.

It is extremely important to analyze the feedback received and adjust policies accordingly, to build a single, consistent image of the institution concerned, and to maintain the highest communication standards.

As Nobel Literature Laureate Mario Vargas Llosa recently underlined, mass communication should not amount to mass banalities and trivialization of culture. Provided that the need for short-term, rapid communication can be balanced with the requirement to maintain substance and values in information, the use of social media can be considered effective and worthwhile. If this balance is lacking, there is the risk that the content of the global message will be sacrificed to reinforce a sterile culture of mere presence as an end in itself.

The approach to identifying a target audience cannot be totally open-ended, because in trying to involve everybody one runs the very real risk of actually involving nobody: any sense of belonging to a community is totally lost when the community has too many members. This is what happens when a member of an institution prefers not to be lumped together with the virtual community at large, or when individuals genuinely interested in a topic do not identify with the superficial treatment it might receive in the social

media.

A wider audience is not always synonymous with an interested audience; in this sense it is wise to refer to the studied conducted by the British anthropologist Robin Dunbar, who first theorized a limit to the number of stable social relationships. Dunbar's number – around 150-200 social interactions – is still relevant as a benchmark to quantify our exchanges of information on the social media. Even if technology has enlarged the potential audience, it does not mean that human interactions are increasing accordingly. Dunbar's number is valid even for the social media, and a proper communication plan should take this into account.

The future could lie in selective use of social media to interact with a smaller number of significant followers; the winning formula could be to inform all and communicate with some. Creation of an inner network to develop a constructive "full spectrum" relationship between organizations and the public is the way ahead – a new form of personal and professional communication.

One-to-one communication can produce a genuine sharing of values and a natural selection of community members. The technologies available to implement this kind of approach – web channels, instant messaging, live chat – are even simpler and faster than those currently used for the social media.

The recent initiative taken by NATO in opening a new web platform dedicated to more personal communication, through a site that "is not a one way communication talk-shop, but a forum where YOU contribute and share ideas with NATO officials, academics, social media activists and bloggers and where just about anyone else can come

³⁷ AKIpress news agency website, Bishkek, quoted by BBC Monitoring, 16 May 2012.

³⁸ Lately the problem has occurred that transit countries tend to place legal agreements in order of preference according to the benefits they receive. Some NATO nations are therefore concerned that NATO agreements could supersede existing bilateral arrangements.

³⁹ Air lift, which can also be provided through national capabilities, is an exception.