

UK, and U.S. Deployable Public Affairs Teams met to share ideas and technology recently at RAF Halton.

The global information environment is more active than ever, with a wide array of actors implementing communication strategies underpinned by narratives based on terror and/or perception management or manipulation in order to create a desired end state of their choosing. Recent and evolving technology has provided new levels of access to audiences, bypassing traditional fourth estate channels and decreasing the time for decision and reaction cycles. Technology is the great equalizer and force-multiplier, imputing the same global access and audience reach to the lone individual in a garage or bedroom as that of a corporation or government.

The U.S. and the UK share many common approaches to operating in the information environment, and the potential for synergy led the U.S. Joint Public Affairs Support Element (JPASE) to meet their counterparts at the Joint Information Activity Group (JIAG) from 2 – 5 June 2015, to conduct a technology review/exchange. (See next page for report)

The purpose of the visit was to liaise between the two units, which have similar missions, and for U.S. personnel to assess some key pieces of technology used in the JIAG arsenal. JPASE teams can provide a wide range of capabilities to the joint commander.

Personnel go through continuous and rigorous training to stay combat certificated and work hard to stay on the cutting edge of their professions. JPASE personnel can deploy with full combat gear and weapons, when needed, as well as tools of the trade, including a suite of Visual Information (VI) still and video capabilities, based on mission requirements. JPASE can also deploy with the Defense Video and Imagery Distribution (DVIDs) system, a portable satellite uplink system allowing deployed units to rapidly send images or coordinate live-feed video press conferences through a central distribution node in Atlanta, Ga., for use by media.

According to U.S. Navy Chief Petty Officer Christopher C. Fowler, mass communication specialist and global response force public affairs officer, the visit was an opportunity to see how other commands are doing business and look for opportunities to leverage international best practices.

“My two focal points were aerial videography and rapid file transmission,” Fowler said. “The use of small quad-copters, and other air borne units, is becoming an industry standard. The only question is where, as an organization, do we want to position ourselves relative to that emerging capability.”

JPASE, located in Norfolk, Virginia, is a subordinate command of the Joint Enabling Capabilities Command (JECC), provides the joint force commander (JFC) with a trained, equipped, scalable and expeditionary joint public affairs (JPA) capability supporting worldwide operational requirements. JPASE is an early entry capability that enables the JFC to gain and maintain the initiative in the information domain. JPASE deployable teams provide a ready, rapidly-deployable, turn-key Joint Public Affairs capability to support various operational and contingency requirements, as well as participation in joint training exercises.

JPASE’s British counterpart is the Joint Information Activities Group (JIAG). JIAG provides media and visual information specialist activities, including training and operational delivery capabilities for defence, and other government departments, through the provision of subject matter experts in direct support of contingent and enduring operations and collective training exercises. JIAG stood up on full operating capability, April 1, 2013, by integrating the Defence Media Operations Centre (DMOC) and the Joint Information Operations Training and Advisory Team (JIOTAT) under an OF5 commanding officer. Although under a single organization the two elements remain distinct, whilst concurrently maximizing the synergies in the information environment.

“This visit is huge in that we, at JPASE, are always looking for the next big thing to ensure we maintain the highest possible level of readiness and relevancy,” said U.S. Marine Corps Gunnery Sgt. Matthew O. Holly, a JPASE Public Affairs Planner. “This allows us to offer the most current capabilities to the combatant commanders and any customer as a whole.

The video imagery capability is a new one for JPASE, having only been added to the portfolio within the last year. JPASE is usually the first and often only U.S. public affairs capability in a crisis, with a need to gather initial imagery before the arrival of follow on forces. It was the recognition of this need which brought about the addition of video and still photographers to the deployable teams. The need to build up this capability provided another prism through which to view the work of JIAG, and another opportunity for idea sharing. Since JIAG has held the visual imagery mission for a longer period, UK methods and technology were a keen interest point for the visit.

“Despite individuals in JPASE having experience in imagery acquisition, this is very new to us organizationally,” said Holly. “There’s goodness in seeing what a comparable organization’s best practices are when it comes to visual information capabilities – I’m impressed with JIAG and how they conduct their VI business.”

It is certain that this first visit between UK and U.S. communicators will not be the last, and that opportunities for collaboration, including exchange participation in relevant exercises, is being discussed between the two commands. Communication challenges are ever present and evolving. Technology in the form of hardware and new capabilities and platforms, especially in the social media realm, provide opportunities for successful engagement, but also pose challenges in terms of an ever shrinking decision and response cycle.

Amidst all of this change, the absolute need for public affairs officers to provide advice to commanders, and to implement communication strategies in a timely, coherent, and effective, manner is critical to waging the battle of the narrative with adversaries and providing transparency to critical stakeholder groups. As DoD’s primary joint public affairs enabler, JPASE will remain at the forefront both in understanding the challenges and capabilities of the current and future information environment, and in providing the guidance and transparency joint commanders require. Continuing collaboration with JIAG will be a valuable part of that effort.

John Callahan is a contributor to the UK Defence Forum. He is a public affairs analyst for the U.S. military, a professor of Political Science at New England College, and recently completed his PhD studies at Old Dominion University’s Graduate Programs in International Studies.