

# **Abstract 1<sup>st</sup> European Symposium on Non-Lethal Weapons**

## **Psychological Operations**

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Psychological operations (PsyOps) are defined as the distribution of information in order to influence attitudes, decision-making processes, and behaviors of a target population. PsyOps foster the attainment of military goals, and are considered non-lethal weapons in that they can be used either as an alternative or support for more conventional, lethal methods. To evaluate the effectiveness of PsyOps, we conducted three laboratory studies based on a theoretical model of persuasion which is best summed up as “Who says what in what channel to whom and with what effect?” In the first two studies we manipulated message source (one’s own group or another group), argument strength, and involvement (high, medium and low). Results show that when involvement is medium to high, attitude change increases with argument strength. When involvement is low, argument strength does not differentially affect attitude change. In the third study, participants’ attitude strength was assessed after which emotional or rational messages were presented either via a printed pamphlet or via an audio-visual medium. We found that emotional messages are most persuasive when attitude strength is low. When attitude strength is high, emotional messages are not at all persuasive. In contrast, rational messages are moderately but equally persuasive for people with strong or weak attitudes. Communication medium (pamphlet vs. computer) did not differentially affect persuasion. To conclude, while message source (in terms of group membership) and communication medium may not be ignored when designing a PsyOps campaign, their persuasive power may be overrated. The characteristics of the message receiver, however, are central to the amount of persuasion that occurs. In terms of military applications, our research aids in the implementation of PsyOps on a strategic level by helping determine when and when not to use PsyOps, and on an operational level by providing guidelines for the development of PsyOps operations (message content, distribution medium etc.).