Communicating Complexity

by Kristen Csenkey

July 2021
CONFERENCE REPORT

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Prepared for the Canadian Global Affairs Institute
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• Most Canadians support the military. But, because defence does not have a direct impact on their lives, it is too abstract for them to really see the stakes.

• Defence procurement faces that challenge, to which the fact that it is a long and complex process makes it all the more abstract and appear removed from Canadians’ lives. Timelines and budgets are difficult to grasp, and process stories do not garner the attention of the public.

• Another difficulty is the absence of people in the procurement story, making it less relatable and, hence, attention worthy.

• These issues also apply for how industry communicates its procurement stories: relatability is hard to convey, and can only be done by shining a light on the work of the people involved and the purpose of the procured capabilities.

• In order to communicate complexity effectively, there is a need to break down information, identify and develop the relevant narrative. It requires to listen more than talk. Asking questions to get an idea of different perspectives and using plain and relatable language are central.

• Leveraging empathy, elevating risk profile, shining a light on personal risk, focusing on behavioural change are some of the communication strategies that help leverage attention.

• Building partnerships with media outlets and with stakeholders outside of one’s own team is also critical.

• In procurement, many stakeholders work on shaping the narrative to their own advantage, which makes it difficult to understand the bigger picture. But the story behind procurement is more about the process than just the product itself; is the process fair, transparent, resilient?

• An added layer of complexity is that the government is trying to control the procurement space more by controlling information. This means there are less opportunity for issues to come up—e.g., scandals, lawsuits. Focusing on government information is necessary to hold the government accountable, so when the government takes this information down or leaves it out, it makes it difficult to understand the products and the process.

• When evolving information comes in, the government gathers it and rationales it. So when information is omitted, it disrupts the accountability and decision-making process. Trying to be factual in the information they release and also having spokespeople who deliver messages helps build trust. Relationship building is an important strategy. It is part of building trust.

• In business frameworks within the government and the private sector, communication is focused on procurement, but shipbuilding/ marine is not treated or seen as an industry of itself. Perhaps this is political or too new. It is an emerging field of development and
employment, and we do not talk about the industry involved in procurement as an industry. What is the purpose of the program versus the procurement?

- A real justification that needs to be included in the public messaging is that Canada has the largest coastline – we need to see the defence, economic, etc. of this.

- There is less of a focus on the industrial aspect of procurement because it is hard to measure progress otherwise. It is a harder story to tell.

- Lack of trust between interveners (the defence industry, politicians) is an issue. Communication does not go anywhere because of this lack of trust.

- Trust is necessary to builds credibility. The government, industry, and other stakeholders all play a role in this.

- Industry as a whole can be branded as a political move, government changes shift how the narratives are framed.
Kristen Csenkey is a Fellow with the Canadian Global Affairs Institute (CGAI) and a PhD Candidate in Global Governance at the Balsillie School of International Affairs (BSIA). Her research focuses on the management of emerging technologies, innovation, and cyber governance in Canada. Kristen has published widely on a variety of cyber-related topics reflecting her interests, including on cyber capacity building, innovation governance, technology procurement, continental defence, and cyber considerations for military operations.

Kristen holds a number of fellowships, grants, and research positions. She is a Junior Fellow with the Defence and Security Foresight (DSF) Group led by Dr. Bessma Momani (University of Waterloo) and a network member of the DSF Group’s European NATO Team and the Gender Liaison. She is also a Graduate Fellow with the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN). Kristen was the 2020 Women in Defence and Security (WiDS)-CGAI fellow and is currently a Women in International Security (WIIS) Canada Emerging Thought Leader in Digital Security. Kristen is the Principal Investigator of a Mobilizing Insights in Defence and Security (MINDS) Targeted Engagement Grant (TEG) to examine emerging technologies with military applications.

In 2016, Kristen worked as part of the Political Affairs team at the Embassy to Hungary, Slovenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in Budapest and has held other government positions since then. She holds a HBSc, MA, and a Master of Applied Politics (MAP) degree. Her MAP research examined nationalism and border security policies in Hungary.
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