

Weaponized Narrative: The New Battlespace



March 21, 2017



**WEAPONIZED
NARRATIVE
INITIATIVE**

CENTER ON THE
FUTURE OF WAR

**THE SUPREME
ART OF WAR
IS TO SUBDUE
THE ENEMY
WITHOUT FIGHTING.**

Sun Tzu, The Art of War

Weaponized Narrative: The New Battlespace

We are at an inflection point in history. A new battlespace and a new civilization are being born.

This White Paper is a first rough draft of that story.

With our two directorates – Research and Operations – The Weaponized Narrative Initiative is an early attempt to:

- Understand what's going on.
- Do something about it.

Brad Allenby
Joel Garreau

Founding co-directors
The Weaponized Narrative Initiative
www.weaponizednarrative.org

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Opinions expressed in this White Paper are those of the authors alone, and not those of any organizations with which they are or have been affiliated.

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Dear Reader:

This White Paper represents the beginning of an important dialog for the United States, and for all those countries that believe in the value of rationality, responsibility, and some form of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. While each of these pieces has been selected to represent an important element of this dialog, we do not pretend to yet have a coherent integrated perspective on weaponized narrative.

What we can say is what the headlines remind us of every day: weaponized narrative is real, and it is a very effective form of asymmetric warfare when directed against the West. It presents challenges not just to military and security organizations, but to civil society, and to democratic principles and institutions.

It is a long-standing axiom of military strategy that the adversary always gets a vote, and adversaries of the United States, and the modern West, have voted for weaponized narrative. We cannot control that. But we can control how we respond, how we defend and – more important – how we build a future validating that which all those who have gone before us have poured into building this country. Here we stand. We can do no other.

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Weaponized Narrative Is the New Battlespace: And the U.S. is in the unaccustomed position of being seriously behind its adversaries.¹

By Brad Allenby and Joel Garreau

Conventional military dominance is still critical to the superpower status of the United States. But even in a military sense, it is no longer enough: if an American election can be controlled by an adversarial power, then stealth aircraft and special forces are not the answer. With lawmakers poised to authorize \$160 million to counter Russian “fake news” and disinformation, and the CIA and the Congress examining meddling in the U.S. election and democracies around the world, it’s time to see weaponized narrative for what it is: a deep threat to national security.

Weaponized narrative seeks to undermine an opponent’s civilization, identity, and will by generating complexity, confusion, and political and social schisms. It can be used tactically, as part of explicit military or geopolitical conflict; or strategically, as a way to reduce, neutralize, and

defeat a civilization, state, or organization. Done well, it limits or even eliminates the need for armed force to achieve political and military aims.

The efforts to muscle into the affairs of the American presidency, Brexit, the Ukraine, the Baltics, and NATO reflect a shift to a “post-factual” political and cultural environment that is vulnerable to weaponized narrative. This begs three deeper questions:

- How global is this phenomenon?
- Are the underlying drivers temporary or systemic?
- What are the implications for an American military used to technological dominance?

Far from being simply a U.S. or U.K. phenomenon, shifts to “post-factualism” can be seen in Poland, Hungary, Turkey, France, and the Philippines, among other democracies. Russia, whose own political culture is deeply post-factual and indeed post-modern, is now ably constructing ironic, highly cynical, weaponized narratives that were effective in the Ukrainian invasion, and are now destabilizing the Baltic states and the U.S. election process.

Such a large and varied shift to weaponized narrative implies that the enablers are indeed systemic. One fundamental underpinning – often overlooked – is the accelerating volume and velocity of information. Cultures, institutions, and individuals are, among many other things, information-processing mechanisms. As they become overwhelmed with information complexity, the tendency to retreat into simpler narratives becomes stronger.

Under this stress, cultures fragment. Institutions are stretched until they become ineffective or even dysfunctional. Individuals who define their identity primarily through the state – such as Americans, Russians, Chinese, or Europeans – retreat to a mythic Golden Age nationalism, while those who prioritize cultural and religious bonds retreat to fundamentalism.

Narrative is as old as tribes. Humans are pattern-seeking storytelling animals. We cannot endure an absence of meaning. Rather than look up at the distribution of lights in the night sky and deal with randomness, we will eagerly connect those dots and adorn them with the most elaborate – even poetic – tales of heroes and princesses and bears and dippers. We have a hard-wired need for myth. Narrative is basic to what it means to be human.

What’s new is the extraordinary power of today’s weaponized narrative. It attacks our group

identity – our sense of who we are, our privilege of not being identified as “other.” The rise of the Connected Age allows attacks that tear down old identities that have bound us together. But it also allows the creation of narratives that define the new differences between “us” and “them” that are worth fighting for.

Weaponized narrative comes at a critical juncture. The speed of upheaval in our lives is unprecedented. It will be filled by something. We are desperate for something to hang on to.

By offering cheap passage through a complex world, weaponized narrative furnishes emotional certainty at the cost of rational understanding. The emotionally satisfying decision to accept a weaponized narrative — to believe, to have faith — inoculates cultures, institutions, and individuals against counterarguments and inconvenient facts.

This departure from rationality opens such ring-fenced belief communities to manipulation and their societies to attack. These communities can be strengthened through media tools and messages that reinforce the narrative — crucially, by demonizing outsiders. Trust is extended only to those who believe, leaving other institutional and social structures to erode.

In the hands of professionals, the powerful emotions of anger and fear can be used to control adversaries, limit their options, and disrupt their functional capabilities. This is a unique form of soft power. In such campaigns, facts are not necessary because – contrary to the old memes of the Enlightenment – truth does not necessarily prevail. It can be overwhelmed with constantly repeated and replenished falsehood. Especially powerful are falsehoods or simplifications that the target cohort has been primed to believe by the underlying narratives with which they are also being supplied.

It’s a self-reinforcing loop. This process was clear in Ukraine, in Brexit, in creation of alt-right and other far right and left communities in many countries, and in the American presidential election. All of these campaigns combine indigenous factors with known or suspected Russian deployment of weaponized narrative, achieving significant benefits for Russia with low risk of conventional military responses by the West. Indeed, the response by America, NATO, and European states has been confused, sporadic, and ineffective.

In the short term, then, weaponized narrative challenges existing Western military and security

THE EMOTIONALLY SATISFYING DECISION TO ACCEPT A WEAPONIZED NARRATIVE INOCULATES CULTURES, INSTITUTIONS, AND INDIVIDUALS AGAINST COUNTERARGUMENTS AND INCONVENIENT FACTS.

institutions grown comfortable in their post-Cold War conventional-force dominance. At least one major adversary now has a capability – and indeed a new battlespace – that is not just unfamiliar. It is one where institutional, historical, and cultural factors put the U.S. at a significant disadvantage.

But the longer-term challenges are even more profound: Post-factual politics weaken democratic governance. It enables what might be called post-modern soft authoritarianism. Such authoritarianism is not absolute in the traditional Nazi or Stalinist sense. Rather – much like Putin’s Russia today – it relies on a sophisticated

combination of managed public expectations, a tenuous but real political legitimacy, and the division of state power among otherwise isolated communities. These then become easy to balance against each other, the more readily to be dominated by authoritarian personalities and institutions.

The mechanism, again, depends on weaponized narrative. Old authoritarianism too often required large security forces, violent repression of citizens, and absolute control of information (the Big Lie). How much simpler to engineer human communities so that the expensive and messy process of explicit authoritarianism can be replaced by the far gentler – and more effective – mechanism of narrative.

History is replete with examples. For centuries in Europe, the Church’s narrative of the Great Chain of Being kept the peace. Rebellion simply lay outside the reality within which most people lived.

It is certainly not clear that weaponized narrative necessarily leads to soft authoritarianism. But it is at least plausible that the advance of inclusive democracy and universalist Western values has been reversed. Authoritarian organizations and states are more adaptive in this new post-factual political environment. Weaponized narratives can only increase the possibility of soft authoritarian outcomes if they are not understood and engaged.

At any rate, it is certainly a reasonable hypothesis that the Enlightenment age of the individual – the core to any democratic system – is clearly ending. Unprecedented complexity, and information volumes and velocities, simply mean that individual cognitive capabilities – no matter how brilliant – are overwhelmed. Power shifts towards those who understand and deploy narrative, be they large states, large corporations, or religious and cultural communities. Power leaks away from the naïve faith in individual rationality that has characterized the last three centuries in the West.

What this may mean for military and security organizations committed to democratic states – or, indeed, for the United States as a whole – is not entirely clear. But much of what has previously been assumed to be fixed and unchanging is turning out to be, in fact, unpredictable, unforeseeable, and random. And the rate of change is accelerating.

It is futile to wish this change away. Instead, we must recognize weaponized narrative, to defend against it, and to put it to our own uses. Our societies and institutions must adapt, or pass into history alongside others that did not.



Brad Allenby and Joel Garreau are the founding co-directors of The Weaponized Narrative Initiative, a part of the Center on the Future of War, a partnership between Arizona State University and the independent think tank New America.

¹ This article first appeared on 3 January 2017 in The Atlantic’s *Defense One* – the web magazine for “national security professionals, stakeholders, citizens, senior leaders in Washington, commanders abroad and next-generation thinkers far from the political scrum.” <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2017/01/weaponized-narrative-new-battlespace/134284/?oref=d-river> . Accessed 4 March 2017.



Attacking Who We Are as Humans

By Joel Garreau

The best storytellers have been getting the choicest pieces of meat around the camp fire for a very long time.

There are reasons for that. And these explain why weaponized narrative is such a devastating weapon.

Humans are pattern-seeking storytelling animals. That's how we make sense of chaos. We cannot endure an absence of meaning. Rather than look up at the distribution of lights in the night sky and deal with randomness, we will eagerly connect those dots and adorn them with the most elaborate – even poetic – tales of heroes and princesses and bears and dippers. We have a hard-wired need for story. Narrative is basic to what it means to be human.

This is the extraordinary power of today's weaponized narrative. It attacks our sense of how the

world works. It also attacks our group identity – our sense of who we are, our privilege of not being identified as “other.” Weaponized narrative specifically attacks our identities that define the differences between “us” and “them” worth fighting for.

Language is not what sets humans apart. Long before the rise of modern Homo sapiens, “Many animals and human species could previously say, ‘Careful! A lion!’” notes Yuval Noah Harari in his *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*.²

What makes us human is story. “As far as we know, only Sapiens can talk about entire kinds of entities that they have never seen, touched or smelled,” says Harari.

Legends, myths, gods and religions appeared for the first time 70,000 years ago when the “Cognitive Revolution” marked the start of upright apes spreading out of Africa. “Thanks to the Cognitive Revolution, Homo sapiens acquired the ability to say, ‘The lion is the guardian spirit of our tribe.’ This ability to speak about fiction is the most unique feature of Sapiens language,” says Harari. “You could never convince a monkey to give you a banana by promising him limitless bananas after death in monkey heaven.”

Story has enabled us to imagine things collectively. We can weave common myths from the Bible’s Genesis story to America’s “Shining City on a Hill” story. Such myths give us the unprecedented ability to cooperate flexibly in large numbers. “That’s why Sapiens rule the world, whereas ants eat our leftovers and chimps are locked up in zoos and research laboratories,” notes Harari.

Historically, groups competing for territory and food were of necessity small. For everyone to know all the others well enough to cohere, the unit couldn’t be much bigger than 150 individuals, research shows. (A U.S. Army “company” is about that size to this day.)

Yet humans figured out how to create cities and empires and armies because strangers can cooperate successfully if they believe in common myths – from capitalism to the Caliphate.

Binding myths are precisely what weaponized narrative attacks.

Humans biologically need purpose and meaning as surely as they need food. There is striking evidence that folk who achieve a sense of purpose (“eudemonic well-being”) live longer, have a lower risk of heart disease and stroke, sleep better, and have better sex. “If people are

STORY HAS ENABLED US TO IMAGINE THINGS COLLECTIVELY. THAT'S WHY SAPIENS RULE THE WORLD, WHEREAS ANTS EAT OUR LEFTOVERS AND CHIMPS ARE LOCKED UP IN ZOOS AND RESEARCH LABORATORIES.

living longer, there's got to be some biology underpinning to that," says Steven Cole of UCLA, who has long studied how loneliness and stress increases the expression of genes that cause inflammation, which can lead to Alzheimer's and cancer. "There may be something saying 'be less frightened, or less worried, anxious or uncertain....' Things that you value can override things that you fear," he says.³

Lead to trust little of what their leaders say, little their intelligence services say, little their professional media and fact checkers say, and little scientists say, individuals are being

physically attacked. This is weaponized narrative at work.

As change accelerates, we all feel the ground moving beneath the feet of our children and jobs and communities. Any sane primate, when the ground moves beneath her feet, looks for something apparently solid to hang on to. Anybody will attract attention who offers apparently simple explanations, powerfully expounded.

Our existing stories are pretty robust – "Give me your huddled masses..." is a good example. But any story breaks down if it gets too complex. With clever attacks on our foundational narratives we can get driven back to simpler worlds – where we focus on how people are not like "Us," and therefore should be attacked.

The phrase "whose story wins" originated with the writings of John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt of RAND two decades ago.⁴ They foresaw narrative as central to the future of networks. History has proven them prescient. "Challenges to identity are perceived as existential threats," notes Rhonda Zaharana of American University.⁵ The struggle for identity lies at the nexus of war and peace.

Only now has technology allowed narrative attacks to come so fast and ferocious as to overwhelm defenses. Violence over world views is to be feared. History shows battles of fundamental narratives can lead to hundred-year wars.

Those who crave power tomorrow are deeply studying the events in the United States today, and thinking about how they will craft their turn to try. The stories they will tell as they stake out their respective turfs will compete: The stories will be about what is dying and about what is being born — whether we are witnessing the end of something or the beginning of something.

Those who succeed in telling the most convincing stories will win. The battle between those narratives is our new permanent condition.

Let us remember one thing:

It has been argued that weaponized narrative can only destroy.

Maybe. But it's banal to note that breaking is easier than building. Story, as the basis of what it means to be human, is much more powerful than that.

We have existence proof that if you have a good story, twelve apostles, four evangelists and a St. Paul, you can change history.

You really can.

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² *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, by Yuval Noah Harari. New York: HarperCollins, 2015, pages 24-25.

³ "Why am I here: Having a purpose to what you do could help you live longer – and better," by Teal Burrell, *New Scientist*, 28 January 2017, page 30. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg23331100-500-a-meaning-to-life-how-a-sense-of-purpose-can-keep-you-healthy/> accessed 16 February 2017.

⁴ *The Advent Of Netwar*, by John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1996. http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR789.html accessed 10 March 2017. Also available in print form.

⁵ "Reassessing 'Whose Story Wins': The Trajectory of Identity Resilience in Narrative Contests," by R.S. Zaharana. *International Journal of Communication* (10). Los Angeles: USC Annenberg, pages 4407-4438. <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5121/1775> accessed 18 February 2017.

What is Weaponized Narrative?

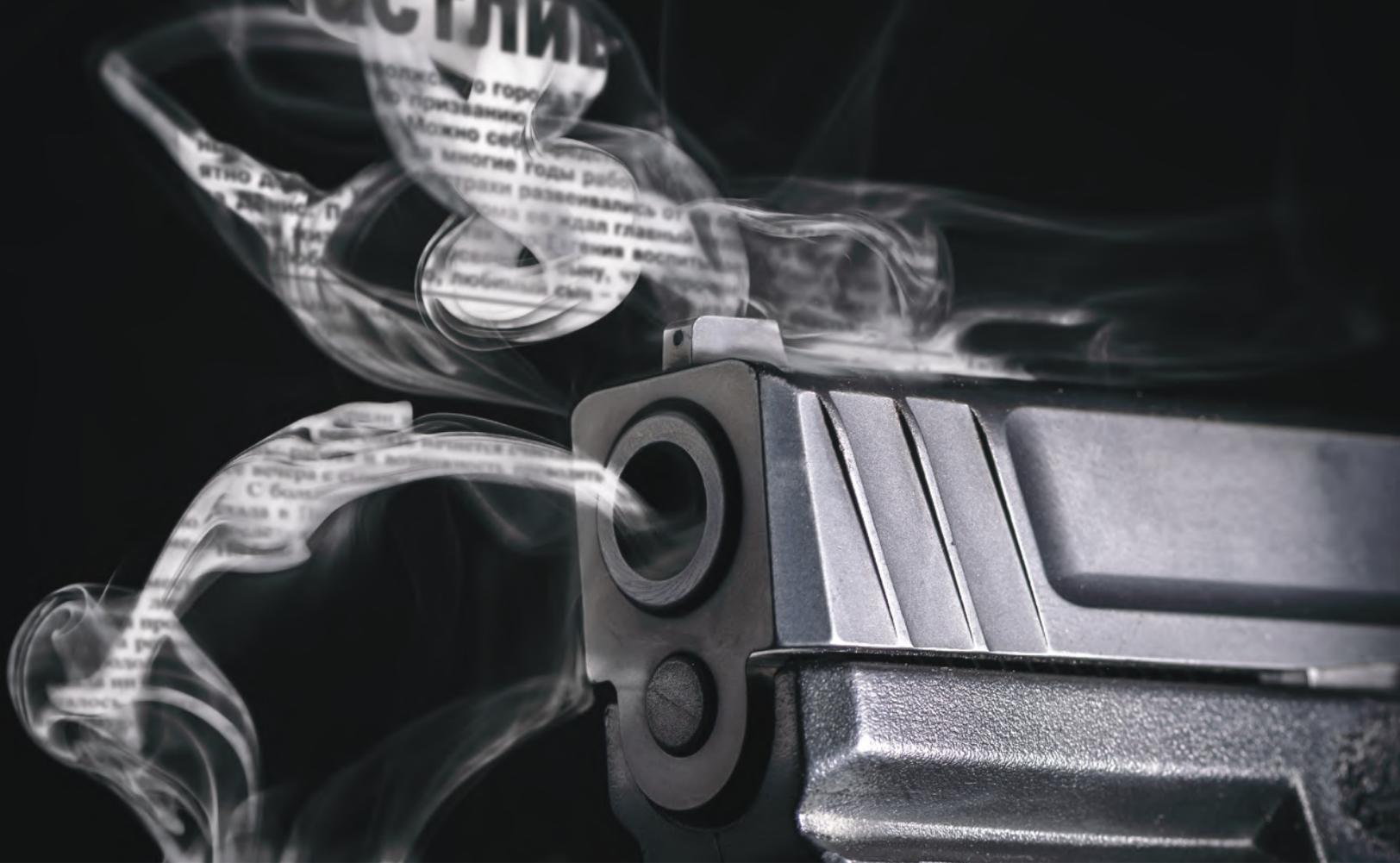
Weaponized narrative is warfare in the information environment – using words and images rather than bombs and bullets. The victims are truth, reason, and reflection. Against the United States, for example, it aims to weaken society by attacking fundamental agreements on what it means to be an American.

How Does Weaponized Narrative Work?

A fast-moving information deluge is the ideal battleground for this kind of warfare – for guerrillas and terrorists as well as adversary states. A firehose of narrative attacks gives the targeted populace little time to process and evaluate. It is cognitively disorienting and confusing – especially if the opponents barely realize what’s hitting them. Opportunities abound for emotional manipulation undermining the opponent’s will to resist.

How Do You Recognize Weaponized Narratives?

Efforts by Russia to meddle in the elections of Western democracies – including France and Germany as well as the United States – are in the news. The Islamic State’s weaponized narrative has been highly effective. Even political movements have caught on, as one can see in the rise of the alt-right in the United States and Europe. In short, many different types of adversaries have found weaponized narratives advantageous in this battlespace. Additional recent targets have included the Ukraine, Brexit, NATO, the Baltics, and even the Pope.



The End of Enlightenment 1.0: Why Weaponized Narrative Won't Go Away

By Brad Allenby

The United States is uniquely susceptible to weaponized narrative. That's because the U.S. is the world's leading Enlightenment power, founded on the principles of applied rationality, balance of power, and individual rights voiced by such philosophers as Voltaire, Locke, and Montesquieu. The Founding Fathers – Franklin, Washington, Jefferson, Adams - were luminaries of the Enlightenment. Its culture and strength, and the soft power of American exceptionalism – “the Shining City on the Hill” – are thus uniquely susceptible to the passing of the original version of the Enlightenment. Or, to put it in terms that some adversaries might embrace, bringing down the curtain on Enlightenment version 1.0 is the ultimate form of asymmetric warfare.

After all, empires weaken and fall not because they are overwhelmed by superior outside force, but because they fail internally, and are thus at some point easily taken down by challengers. So

with some states: for example, the Russians deployed weaponized narrative successfully against the Ukrainians because that state was already split, with the eastern portions being culturally inclined towards Russia even as the western portions inclined towards the West.

Similarly, Russian efforts in the American election were successful, and similar efforts in Europe may well bring continuing success, not because the Russians have created social conflict and fragmentation, but because they are adeptly taking advantage of existing conditions. “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves . . .”.

Respond as the U.S. will in the short term with effective countermeasures, in the long term it will be vulnerable to weaponized narrative, unless and until fundamental weaknesses in American political and social culture are addressed. If they are not, failure is likely. And such weaknesses cannot be addressed until the U.S. figures out how to transition to a new, more complex and less ordered Enlightenment 2.0 while maintaining its core values.

So what is different now? Isn't this just another form of hysteria? No, because a number of trends are coming together to create a unique historical period. This allows weaponized narrative to become a weapon of choice against superbly but standardly armed adversaries – most obviously, the United States. These trends include but are not limited to:

- Accelerating and unpredictable change across the entire frontier of technology;
- Rejection of the universalist Western values that formed the basis of the post-WWII world order;
- Erosion of the nation-state model of international governance;
- Democratization of large-scale violence;
- Fundamentalism rising in response to unprecedented complexity; and
- Conflict explicitly undermining civilizations being adopted strategically by China and Russia.⁶

Unpredictable and accelerating change has destabilized individual psychologies, institutions, and cultures. Predictably, folk flee to fundamentalisms of all kinds. Fundamentalism is particularly attractive because it provides a powerful narrative, and thus a powerful identity, with which to oppose overwhelming complexity. Moreover, fundamentalism provides ready-made answers that need not be tested against Enlightenment-style rationality. Indeed, the rise of such communities are existence proof of the decline of the Enlightenment 1.0 model.

States founded on Enlightenment principles of democracy, openness, and “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” are highly vulnerable to such pressures. If their governance tasks become more complex and subtle but their personnel, stakeholders, and voters become more simplistic, that’s a failure mode.

Institutions, particularly in the United States and Europe, tend to be justified by explicit applied rationality. They develop and deploy fact-based policies within strong ethical structures. They are thus endangered by any significant move towards a post-factual, morally relativistic environment. For the U.S. military, this is a fundamental challenge, as the essay on the Marines in this White Paper suggests.

Geopolitical shifts have augmented such challenges. For example, after World War II few questioned the ethical principles of the victors – Europe and especially the United States. These were enshrined in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. But the Western “universal values” appearing in that document have turned out not to be so universal after all: Russia, China, and a number of Islamic entities now reject them.

This rejection of a dominant global model is also seen on the institutional side. Private military companies, large multinationals and non-governmental organizations of all stripes increasingly function as independent power centers. Self-defining religious communities claim ideological and temporal power in many guises. Especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, large areas of the world increasingly lapse into what Sean McFate calls “durable disorder” – a neomedieval devil’s brew of religions, ideologies, clans, governments, armed activists, and various internal and external powers.⁷

In short, commitment to larger state and social identities is weakening. The state-based Westphalian system of international law and institutions – while still dominant in many ways – is failing. It is being replaced by a pastiche of private, public, non- and quasi-governmental, and ad hoc institutions, power centers, and interests. Geopolitics is growing ever more complex even as the societies and institutions that must manage them are retreating into more simplistic narratives.

The current environment is the chaotic combination of unpredictable and accelerating evolution in all these domains. Russia strikes out with weaponized narrative even as it fails internally. China is determined to rise against the reigning superpower, the United States. The Islamic State is only the most aggressive and well-known face of advancing global fundamentalism. None of

these trends look likely to reverse absent some sort of global collapse. Each outbreak of fundamentalism, or nativistic nationalism, reflects its own idiosyncratic environment. Yet the tides are global and inclusive.

It is not that the original Enlightenment has failed. Indeed, the problem is the opposite: the Enlightenment – with its emphasis on scientific observation and experiment, and applied rationality – has succeeded spectacularly. It has led to a world of economic, technological and population growth that is accelerating change. It is the complexity of this success that we are finding so challenging.

A new world is being born. It is post-factual, post-modern, complex and unpredictable, privileging narratives and emotion over applied rationality and fact-based policy. In doing so, it makes obsolete the society that built it, and in which all of us have grown up. Whether this evolution is historically positive or negative is not knowable; indeed, it at least in part up to us, and our responses to this new age, to determine.

Recall that the birth of what would become the Enlightenment was viewed as a catastrophe by popes and kings, too. The rise of the printing press circa 1450 – the foundational revolutionary means of storing, sharing and distributing our ideas that led first to the Reformation, and then the Enlightenment, and then democracy and science itself – may seem an unalloyed good from the perspective of half a millennium. But its privileging of bottom-up individual decision-making and thinking over top-down authority was a wild creed-fueled ride that bloodied much of Europe.

If ours is a similar inflection point in history, we must prepare. It is easy to focus on what is dying as the role of scientific truth erodes in favor of narrative truth. It is child's play to imagine how any complex system can fall apart – that's lazy dystopianism.

What we must do is understand what is being born. And create new narratives to capture this new reality. Is this Enlightenment ver. 2.0?

Remember:

The very dawn of a new cultural age speaks to the success of applied rationality and of science, of human rights and values, of less violence and more institutional governance, and of innovation

BRINGING DOWN THE CURTAIN ON ENLIGHTENMENT VER. 1.0 IS THE ULTIMATE FORM OF ASYMMETRIC WARFARE.

and creativity. In spite of those post-modernists who are so sunk in cynicism and snark that they can appreciate nothing above their own false pseudo-intellectual pretensions, and their ability to drag others down with them, it speaks to human progress. It is a strange form of false pride to assume the dystopian alternative, that we have somehow peaked, and that all that remains before us is tragedy and tears. Weaponized narrative is indeed a challenge, especially to institutions optimized for the conditions of the original Enlightenment. But there is a future to build, and what it will look like is at least in part up to us, and our responses to this new age, to determine.

Incremental and immediate responses to weaponized narrative attacks are required and important, but completely inadequate alone, even if the U.S. military is dedicated to preservation of the Constitution and of the nation.

For all of us, it is equally critical to understand, and try to manage, the transition of existing institutions, capabilities, and values to the completely different world that is even now growing around us.

Anything less is dereliction of duty.

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⁶ This is obviously a gross oversimplification. Those who are interested might begin by perusing Rosa Brooks, 2016, *How Everything Became War and War Became Everything* (Simon & Schuster, New York); Lawrence Freedman, 2013, *Strategy* (Oxford University Press, Oxford); Braden Allenby and Daniel Sarewitz, 2011, *The Techno-Human Condition* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA); and, of course, Samuel Huntington, 1996, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon & Schuster, New York). Among the many excellent books on post-factual, post-modern Russia – an exemplar of the practice of weaponized warfare – are Charles Glover, 2016, *Black Wind, White Snow* (Yale University Press, New Haven); Arkady Ostrovsky, 2015, *The Invention of Russia* (Viking, New York); and Peter Pomerantsev, 2014, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible* (PublicAffairs, New York). The best short statements of Chinese and Russian strategies of civilizational conflict are in Q. Liang and W. Xiansui, 1999, *Unrestricted Warfare* (People's Liberation Army: CIA trans.), available at <http://www.c4i.org/unrestricted.pdf> (this version is highly preferable to others which distort the original content, such as that available on Amazon.com, *Unrestricted Warfare: China's Master Plan to Destroy America*, which obviously is playing to a different agenda), and V. Gerasimov, 2013, "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying Out Combat Operations," <https://inmoscowshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>, (Robert Coalson ed. & trans.), originally published Feb. 27, 2013 in *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier* (Russ.).

⁷ *The Modern Mercenary*, by Sean McFate. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, page 74.



The Trust Crisis: *Whose* “Facts”?

By Daniel Rothenberg

When people mistrust each other, facts that should serve as a baseline for discussion, conversation and debate become the front line of conflict. In fact, a lack of trust threatens the very possibility of reasoned communication.

Think, for example, about human-caused climate change. Scientists may agree that carbon emissions are warming the planet, yet the issue is commonly dismissed as a hoax by powerful politicians and influential social commentators. In fact, around half of Americans believe that rising temperatures are either caused by natural phenomena or that the evidence is unclear or nonexistent. The issue here is not one of fact, but of mistrust and its related domain, politics. While nearly nine out of ten Democrats accept the idea that human activity is warming the environment, less than one in four Republicans accept this, despite the science.

Consider another case: the citizenship of Barack Obama. Many commentators, politicians and others who came to be known as “birthers” suggested that Obama was not born in the United

States and was therefore ineligible to be president. The Hawaiian government then released official birth certificates demonstrating that he had been born in the state. Nevertheless, over one in ten Americans and a quarter of Republicans still doubted the veracity of Obama's U.S. birth.

It is not that "birthers" suggest that all government documents are false. Rather they believe those associated with the citizenship of the first African American president are forgeries – signs of a corrupt, manipulative system. Since an existing document can be doctored or a new one created, its authenticity is ultimately an issue of trust: trust that the state can and will appropriately regulate such papers. If a government loses this trust, the veracity of any formally issued document – or perhaps any claim – is open to question.

Many disputes about the veracity of key issues cannot be successfully addressed by providing those who question with better, more accurate facts. Providing evidence to contradict the positions of climate change deniers and "birthers" – or, for that matter, those who question the efficacy and safety of common vaccines, claim that violent crime throughout the U.S. is rising or affirm that all GMO crops are dangerous – tends to make matters worse. Both sides leave more angry, more frustrated and more dismissive of the other.

Some have suggested that this situation defines a "post-factual" world. This idea is misleading. It is not the salience and veracity of facts that has disappeared. Rather, we are witnessing profound challenges to truth within conditions of radical uncertainty. We are experiencing a trust crisis.

When sources of information are open to endless criticism and open rejection, facts – about science, identity, recommendations, policies, etc. – lose their solidity. People no longer respond to data, but to the source of data. They turn with great intensity to those who present information they sense is most trustworthy. The more widespread the uncertainty, the more

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fiercely they cleave to the sources they come to trust over the solidity and coherence of the information presented.

For many in today's world, key political issues exist in a state of deeply-rooted, deeply-felt mistrust. Social institutions, from Congress to industry to the scientific establishment to the media, are viewed with profound suspicion. As such, the information they present – the facts that undergird their statements and reporting – are open to fundamental questioning. Engaging this situation requires respecting the position of those who mistrust, understanding that it is not necessarily the facts that present the problem. The problem is the widely held, emotionally resonant suspicions of traditionally empowered sources.

For those deploying weaponized narrative, to focus on those ideas that undermine trust creates the greatest impact. It also enables core strategic and tactical goals. Sometimes the most effective form of a dangerous story is not one which factually challenges dominant beliefs. Even better is to question the legitimacy of those actors and institutions that a society relies upon to provide solidity and coherence to the larger social, cultural and political order.

The transformative power of the stories that undergird climate-change denial, “birthers” and the anti-vaccine movement is in their attack on a unifying narrative: those who lay claim to authority in our society are not to be trusted. Weaponized narrative builds on this and mirrors this logic.

So, what can be done to contest emotionally resonant claims with limited basis in fact and little if any possibility of verification? Those who adhere to sources presenting claims not backed up by verification cannot be moved by countervailing claims alone. Regardless of what is written or said, they cannot be reached through those sources and institutions viewed as suspicious. This is because a sense of anger, rage and, above all, mistrust, defines the conditions of possible communication, creating enormous obstacles to reasoned discussion.

The best path forward, then, is to address the actual problem. The impact and dangers of this radical uncertainty can only be countered by either playing off the inherent vulnerabilities of the situation or building on what is, in fact, trusted. There are two key strategies.

First, one can delegitimize the sources being used. Those poised to accept and embrace this mode

of discourse have a heightened awareness and sensitivity to the idea of manipulation. The claims they adhere to are often rendered powerful as much through their critique of traditional sources as through the coherence of what is presented. As such, this is a group that already views those who traffic in information as potentially suspect. And, just as more verifiable, self-critical sources are routinely undermined, newly emerging sources of weaponized narrative can be questioned and delegitimized as well.

Second, within a context of rising uncertainty, valid claims build on the significance of networks of trust. A friend forwards a link to a website. Colleagues explain a political issue. Neighbors, family, those of the same faith community and others raise questions and imbue controversies with a sense of personally resonant seriousness.

Yet, these forms of enabling truth claims are fluid. That is, their strength for validating information – including weaponized narratives – is also their core vulnerability. That is, when countervailing and corrective ideas can be presented from and through these networks, these claims emerge with significant validity. In this way, the conversation can be shifted from within to undermine stories that stray from factual veracity.

Among the best ways to disarm various allegations – that the Pope endorsed Trump, that Clinton was working for a secret group of global bankers, that Clinton was responsible for multiple murders over decades – is for stories undermining or, even better, mocking, such accounts to find their way onto the same digital pathways.

People have long lived through uncertainty and cleaved to those they trust. Yet the rapidity and complexity of our information-rich world are new and present distinct challenges. While there is no singular answer to the risks and dangers of weaponized narrative, the way forward requires that we fight mistrust with trust.



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“Truth”: Why Spock Is Such an Unusual Character

By Jon Herrmann

In a post-modern world, what replaces rationality as our basis for “truth”?

The question assumes that the average person has been using rationality as his or her basis for deciding that something is “true” – in accordance with reality. But what if that’s not the case? Even economists now recognize that individuals do not always make prudent and logical decisions. That’s why Daniel Kahneman won the 2002 Nobel Prize in economics for his “behavioral economics.”

What if most people handle political choices by rationally choosing not to spend their lives studying the issues? What if most people, instead, find a leader or party that they can agree with (a proxy), and thereafter support what the proxy supports?

Some political scientists and sociologists go further, indicating that the average voter will usually

“The virtuous cycle can begin with one. When fake news is posted to someone’s social media feed, even one friend saying ‘Hey, that might not be true’ increases the likelihood of the truth coming out.”

shift their preferences to match the chosen proxy instead of changing proxies. Other studies suggest voters often convince themselves that the proxy aligns with their views, despite statements or events to the contrary. Most people seem to think that most political issues don’t affect them, or that their vote doesn’t matter, so they don’t decide on the truth for themselves.

It’s hard to gauge truth all by ourselves, though – especially if we’re looking for the common ground of a shared truth. Many groups share a

common truth - religious communities, for example. To some extent, ideologies are also a shared truth. But shared truths can be used to manipulate us unless we study those foundational truths. To detect a forgery, for example, you have to have studied many real paper dollars.

When we look at what’s changing in society, the main difference may not be in the populace, but the proxies that the people choose to follow. Once, societal pressure pushed people to follow “reputable” proxies. With the advent of the Internet, it’s much easier to merely seem to be a credible proxy. Social media sites don’t vet opinion leaders the way traditional media did. Those without serious credibility (or, to offer the alt viewpoint, those opposing traditional elites) can now reach people without elite intermediaries like the media or established politicians. And to the average American, one website may look as credible as another.

People have always looked for an opinion leader who says what the listener already believes. But if a listener agreed with a disreputable speaker, then the listener’s friends disapproved. The average person – not wanting to face disapproval – found another proxy. After choosing the more respectable and mainstream proxy, the average person would often moderate their own views. Most people, following moderate proxies, became more moderate.

The change is that less moderate, more partisan (and strident) sources can now appear more credible. Further, social networks connect homogeneous circles of friends (online, and often in person). This homogeneity allows extremists to support other extremists. The support of the social structure protects and promotes extremism. Studies show that a small group of like-minded people can sustain and increase a minority perspective. If that perspective is good, then this is a good effect. But if the perspective is dangerous – such as neo-Nazism – then the homogeneous group that protects and fosters it is fertile ground for serious societal problems.

For example, it's well documented that everyone seems to hate Congress – except for their representative, the only good person in Washington. And most folk decry hatred, partisanship, and bitterness.

However, when asked if they will cooperate with an ideological rival, then unwillingness to compromise seems honorable – and even necessary. Those who compromise are seen as “out of touch.” The homogeneous social network creates the appearance of universal agreement with whatever one believes, undermining self-examination. Those who disagree – or even seem less fervent – may be ostracized or even threatened.

Since no white paper can change human nature or persuade folk to study and vote on the issues, what can be done? Several ideas offer hope. I'll mention a few here, because their combination could create synergy, boosting defenses against everything from “fake news” and phishing scams to weaponized narrative.

Research shows that critical thinking is like a muscle. The more you use it, the stronger it gets. The more you exercise your critical thinking, with greater cognitive ease can you distinguish truth from falsehood.

Several professions routinely evaluate information and its use. Detectives and investigators search for truth, as do journalists and law professionals. Psychologists and behavioral economists study techniques that make the mind respond without questioning. Theologians and philosophers critically examine texts and thinking. Intelligence analysts examine everything from satellite images to social media posts for signs of truth. These professions can offer insights to improve resistance to “alternative facts.”

Resisting misleading or confusing information is more difficult now. The Web makes it easy for a propagandist to create multiple mutually-supporting, linked stories. The average reader is unlikely to dig into one story to ask “Is this true?” Most people instead “surf” the Web, hitting the high points and going with the flow of information. This method of flickering attention from point to point, rather than contemplating one subject, creates a vulnerability to falsehood.

The simple act of questioning “Is this information true?” could be a significant improvement in the pursuit of truth. One questioner sparks others. Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal noted that it takes a network to defeat a network. Propagandists use networks (social and fabricated, such as botnets) to spread confusion and disinformation. It would be wise to develop a network to promote truth and counter falsehood.

Crowdsourcing could reignite challenges to the disreputable and restore the social disapproval that moderated behavior in the past. The virtuous cycle can begin with one. Studies show that one dissenting voice has a tremendous impact, encouraging others to challenge assertions. When fake news is posted to someone’s social media feed, even one friend saying “Hey, that might not be true” increases the likelihood of the truth coming out. That may be difficult. It’s easier to accept information that aligns with one’s preexisting beliefs. However, if the average person understands why truth matters, then we’re more likely to question. If enough people are motivated to question, then questions can unearth the truth.

Maintaining intellectually and ideologically diverse social circles can also bolster the search for truth. Friends with divergent views challenge our beliefs.

That can be uncomfortable. We have to grasp the importance of truth enough to accept potential discomfort and effort. The question isn’t one of ability to find the truth, but rather if enough people care enough about the truth to seek it.



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Marines: Tell It to The

By Kurt M. Sanger and Brad Allenby

The most significant difficulty with U.S. use of weaponized narrative is that, quite simply, the kind of duplicity and moral relativism that lies behind its success is profoundly un-American. Ironically, this may also suggest an important counter to such attacks.

We can best illustrate this by looking at the United States Marine Corps. The Marine Corps expects honor, courage and commitment to influence every moment and every decision in a Marine's life. These values are imprinted on recruits and officer candidates in many ways, the most powerful of which is through the many hours in initial training spent learning the Corps' history – the battles, the stories of Marine heroes, and the institution's unique place in the American culture. Nearing the end of boot camp and Officer Candidates School, these values are manifested in the character of Marines visible even in minor gestures – the way one respectfully greets a stranger, folds a tee shirt, or merely listens to someone else talk while looking them in the eye without dreaming of interrupting. Binding Marines to those who created the values and

“Almost as dangerous as a Marine who cannot be trusted is a Marine who cannot trust.”

earned the Corps’ reputation enables this transformation. The spirits of Marines past stand beside those on active duty, forever whispering, “never let us down.”

The foundation of the Corps’ character makes the prospects of weaponized narrative a formidable challenge. What are the implications of weaponized narrative to an

institution that cherishes honor, justice and integrity? How can an institution committed to these values use such a weapon? How can such a weapon target the institution?

Using weaponized narrative against adversaries would be outside the mission and the traditions of the Marine Corps. Tactical deception of enemy forces and using misinformation to lure them into making bad decisions is fair game; deceiving a civilian population is unnatural and counterproductive, and lies far beyond either the training or the culture of the Marine Corps. The hostility that weaponized narratives show to the truth is directly averse to the Marine Corps’ most treasured values. Especially in counterinsurgencies, in which winning the support of a population is the central issue, the credibility of the forces living among those populations is essential.

The more concerning issue is how weaponized narrative might affect the Marine Corps. Given what weaponized narratives have done to other communities, the manner in which Marines are developed, and how Marine values are sustained over generations despite rapid turnover in the service, the Corps could find itself an attractive target for this novel threat.

There are some indications, for example, that moral injury may occur when weaponized narratives undermine the strong identities that characterize the American warrior generally, and the Marine Corps in particular. (“Moral injury” is debilitating psychological or spiritual damage resulting from transgression of deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.)^{8 9}

Further, as the Corps seeks to replace Marines ending their service, the impact of weaponized narratives on young Americans who join may have long-term effects on the institution.

An individual Marine needs a lot more than integrity to be valuable to his or her unit, but without it,

a Marine is nothing. Almost as dangerous as a Marine who cannot be trusted, however, is a Marine who cannot trust. If young Americans grow up suspicious of government institutions and leaders they may still seek to join the Marine Corps, but their ability to function in it will be diminished.

So there is clearly a potential threat from well-conceived weaponized narrative attack. But there is another side to this picture. One of the strongest counters to campaigns of weaponized narrative against the United States as a whole is the soft power of American culture, which is open, accepting, and multicultural, rewards initiative, and is based on individual rights and responsibilities. Even something most Americans take for granted – the rule of law rather than the arbitrary whim of the powerful – resonates strongly with those who have never known such stability and accountability. At another level, the same is true of the Marine Corps. The attractiveness of the strong role model of the Marine – with an identity that necessarily demands sacrifice, honor, and integrity – should not be underestimated. This is especially true for young people who have had their identity challenged by weaponized narratives of various kinds, or indeed from the warring narratives of all kinds that increasingly infest the world.

It would be premature to suggest that this weaponized narrative threat to the Marine Corps – or the U.S. military generally – has been understood, much less successfully countered. Recognizing that it poses a significant challenge is, however, the first step, and that step is being taken.

Nonetheless, undue pessimism would also be premature: the very characteristics of the Marine Corps that make them potentially vulnerable to such weapons might also be an unexpected source of significant resilience against them.



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⁸ *Moral Injury: Unseen Wounds in an Age of Barbarism*, by Tom Frame. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2015.

⁹ *War And Moral Injury: A Reader*, Robert Emmet Meagher and Douglas A. Pryer, eds. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017.



Strategy: Thinking Forward

By Jeff Kubiak

Good strategists are those who fundamentally understand what’s different. Strategy comes into being when there is “a sense of actual or imminent instability, a changing context that induces conflict.”¹⁰ The central concerns of strategy are power, interaction, and decisions. Each of these concerns must be critically rethought in the upheaval of our age.

Since strategy is about how to think forward, I suggest that weaponized narrative strategy is served by combining some simple insights from complex systems theory with what we know about narratives and scripts.

Trust in many traditional institutions has eroded, but trust hasn’t disappeared. It has atomized from large, heterogeneous, and largely contiguous communities to micropowers many have called “walled communities” or “echo chambers” – a host of smaller networks of like-minded or single-issue individuals who could be distributed anywhere on the globe. This increases the number of relevant actors dramatically, increasing the complexity of strategy at every level.

The information environment now resembles a complex ecosystem more than some complicated machine that could be directed through rational, scientific institutions. The attributes of such complex systems include nonlinearity (system outcome disproportionate to an input), opaque cause and effect (traditional understanding of cause and effect fail to achieve desired outcomes), feedback (blowback), and emergent properties (the whole is different than the sum of its parts).

The more complex the world appears, the more pronounced is the role emotions plays in the decision making of individuals. Consider the behavioral economics framework devised by 2002 Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman and his colleague Amos Tversky. System One thinking – the subconscious, intuitive and often emotional response to a situation – is often left uncorrected by an overwhelmed System Two thinking process that is susceptible to accepting oversimplified rationalizations. The uncertainty and frustration that complexity creates in the mind of decision makers at all levels can increase the likelihood of accepting narratives that just feel right despite the lack of facts – or even contrary to facts.

Military theorist John Boyd explained organizational decision making using what he called the OODA loop; the cyclical processing through Observation, Orientation, Deciding, and Acting. The central component of the OODA loop for Boyd was orientation. Orientation was the construction of mental images or schema that shaped our observation, decisions and acting. Constant adjustment of one's orientation assured the intake of the relevant information and processes to ensure rapid and efficient decision-making and action.

Boyd knew that orientation was built into institutions/hierarchy/SOPs and doctrine. When that orientation was congruent with the environment, it enabled the organization to cycle through the OODA loop at a rate faster than the opponent. During times when the environment was changing slowly, these institutions would grow and execute nearly automatically. However, during times of rapid change, these institutions needed to be destroyed and recreated as one's orientation was adjusted to match reality. Applying Boyd's thinking to the strategic concerns of our surging information environment would suggest that old institutions need to be completely rebuilt.

What this suggests to me is that a fully new organization should be built around this new orientation and tasked with engaging adversaries in the information realm. The Department of Defense – built around Enlightenment-era rationalization and its accompanying hierarchy – may still be suitable for responding to major industrial-age combat operations. But it is fundamentally misfit to the current information environment.

“The Department of Defense – built around Enlightenment-era rationalization and its accompanying hierarchy – may still be suitable for responding to major industrial-age combat operations. But it is fundamentally misfit to the current information environment.”

The same holds true for some laws and regulations that deal with the information realm. Rand Waltzman, the former DARPA program manager, has argued for the creation of a new Center for Information Environment Security, as well as the overturn of U.S. law 50 U.S. Code § 3093(f) which effectively prohibits the government from action “intended to influence United States political processes, public opinion, policies, or media.”¹¹ Organizing for achieving continuing advantage in the current environment demands these things.

Strategy design should also consider some insights of complexity theory.

These include:

- “You can never do just one thing.” This statement of Columbia’s Robert Jervis¹² has a dual meaning. First, every action in a system is likely to generate more than one outcome – possibly the desired outcome plus an unintended outcome. Additionally, when acting in a complex system you should act along multiple approaches. Jervis explains how one might approach complexity: “First, people can constrain other actors and reduce if not eliminate the extent to which their environment is highly systemic and characterized by unintended consequences. Second, although ... people often fail to appreciate that they are operating in a system, understanding may enable them to compensate for the results that would otherwise occur. Third, people may be

able to proceed toward their goals indirectly and can apply multiple policies, either simultaneously or sequentially, in order to correct for or take advantage of the fact that in a system, consequences are multiple.”

- Act to learn. David Snowden’s Cynefin Framework¹³ suggests that in complex environments “we can understand why things happen only in retrospect. Instructive patterns, however, can emerge if the leader conducts experiments that are safe to fail. That is why, instead of attempting to impose a course of action, leaders must patiently allow the path forward to reveal itself. They need to probe first, then sense, and then respond.”
- “Plans are worthless but planning is everything.” This famous Eisenhower aphorism captures the implicit understanding that all plans contain assumptions about cause and effect that will prove false in execution. However, if the unintended consequences are thought through in the planning phase then organizations are much more likely to achieve better outcomes.

Narratives have power to hold an audience – and therefore have power – as long as the behaviors of the central actors stay consistent with expectations. Narratives can fall apart when an actor strays from his role. An example and thought experiment might be useful.

On March 22, 1775, Edmund Burke delivered a three-hour speech in the House of Commons, imploring the adoption of thirteen resolutions that would seek conciliation with the North American colonies that had threatened rebellion. Initial shows of force by the Crown in attempting to enforce compliance with the laws passed by Parliament were met with increasing resistance. Burke had a deep insight into the colonists and their unique orientation. He knew that their deepest motive force was that of liberty and hatred for tyranny. Moving against the colonists with coercive force would only play into the script the rebels had written for the Crown and therefore only serve to legitimate and strengthen the case for rebellion. Once the rebellion had consolidated around a narrative of opposing tyranny, all of the other disadvantages Britain faced – not the least of which was distance – would be made all the more troubling and costly to overcome.

Of course, the Crown had a script of its own and chose to follow it – the law is the law and the authority of the Crown must be obeyed. So, it was war and the U.S. and Britain remained serious adversaries for more than 100 years.

But what if King George and Parliament had decided to take Burke’s advice and deviate from their script knowing that the context was so very different in this case? Accepting that playing into the opponent’s script made him stronger and put you at a disadvantage, one might be wise to seek a different role, one in which the opponent was forced to actually attempt to adopt another narrative in order to maintain coherence and thus power.

That might rightfully be called strategy.



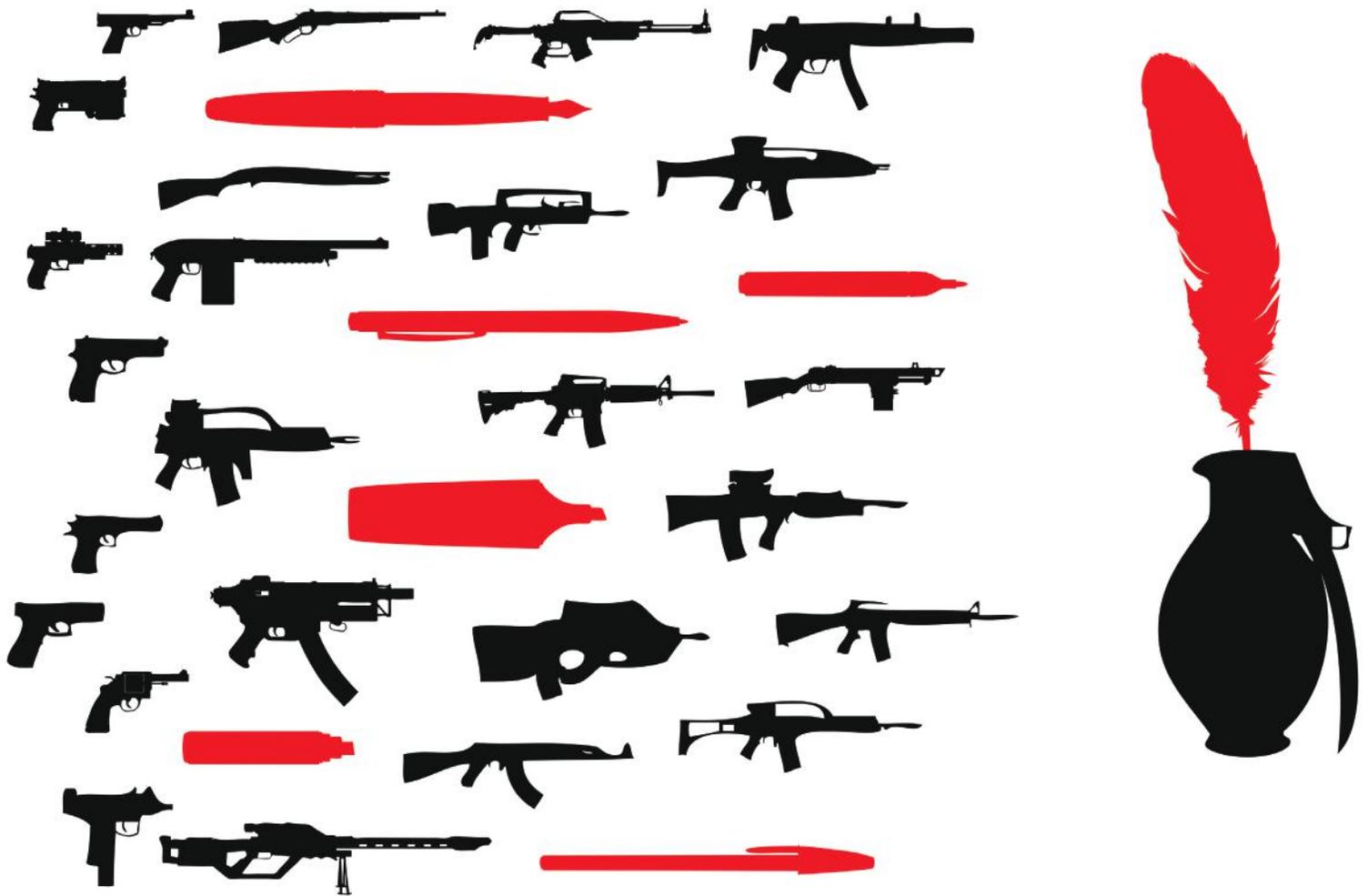
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¹⁰ *Strategy*, by Sir Lawrence Freedman. New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2013, page 611.

¹¹ “The US Is Losing at Influence Warfare. Here’s Why,” by Patrick Tucker. *Defense One*, December 5, 2016. http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2016/12/us-losing-influence-warfare-heres-why/133654/?oref=defenseone_today_nl, accessed February 20, 2017.

¹² *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life*, by Robert Jervis. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

¹³ “A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making,” by David J. Snowden. *Harvard Business Review*, November 2007, <https://hbr.org/2007/11/a-leaders-framework-for-decision-making>, accessed February 20, 2017.



Defending: Awareness and Protection

By Scott Ruston

If weaponized narrative is the new battlefield of the 21st century, how do we defend against it?

To understand why this weapon works, we must start with how narrative contributes to societal identities. A fundamental tenet of psychology holds that people conceive of themselves in terms of stories, and that one's future is projected as a continuation of the story, as yet unfinished.

By extension, societies understand themselves and their identities through stories. Stories coalesce into narrative systems, and the structure of these systems provides templates to understand subsequent systems.

For example, the many stories of immigrants coming to the United States and contributing to society traditionally coalesce into a larger system that has four broad components:

- Individual fleeing a conflict (religious persecution, famine, war, lack of prospects);
- Individual with a goal (new life in the U.S.);
- Actions (challenge to arrive in U.S., integration into U.S., finding allies, overcoming challenges); and
- Resolution (successful establishment of new life, lasting impact on U.S. society, etc.).

Shorthand titles might be “The Immigrant Narrative” or the “Land of Opportunity Narrative” or the “Huddled Masses Narrative.” (This last title particularly applies to a subset of these stories with the common element of destitute, oppressed or vulnerable main figures.) Subsequent stories about individuals coming to the US would then be understood in this context.

If new stories entering the narrative landscape of a society are usually understood within the template of such an existing success and contribution narrative, how does “weaponized narrative” derail this process and fundamentally attack the core of a society’s identity and will?

The first method is to flood the narrative landscape with alternative templates.

In the above example, the Land of Opportunity Narrative expresses fundamental values of equality, a welcoming of immigrants and a resolution of successful integration into American society. (Sometimes wildly successful – as in the story of Adolphus Busch recently celebrated with some poetic license in a Super Bowl commercial.¹⁴)

Flooding the zone with apocryphal and over-hyped stories of illegal immigrant flows and violent crimes activates an alternative narrative – one that constructs values of nativism/isolationism and law/order, but demonizes the Other. In this case, *narrative fidelity*¹⁵ is achieved by replacing one known/accepted narrative template with another known, but less widely accepted, template that promotes different values. This tactic is made doubly successful when the veracity of all stories is dubious. Because then, the falsehoods of fake news simultaneously diminish the value of and faith in accurate news, and selecting which narrative template for sense-making becomes difficult.

The second method is to introduce numerous narrative components (stories, events, characters) that disrupt the narrative coherence of a narrative system. In the 2016 election campaign, numerous stories circulated – some promoted or magnified by Russian-sponsored media outlets and internet trolls – claiming Hillary Clinton murdered FBI agents, ran a sex-trafficking ring,

sold weapons to ISIS, suffered from debilitating illness and was secretly barred from holding federal office (among many others). While lurid, these stories are also disruptive to the narrative coherence of a campaign trajectory resolving with Clinton's superior qualifications as the "best man for the job".

Both methods of weaponized narrative attacks disrupt the narrative validity of societal identity narratives, and thus cause a lack of faith in communal will and shared values.

If an adversary uses weaponized narrative to assault a society's identity and will, what are the resources for an integrated defense? As with a pathogen, the best defense is not an antidote. The best defense is awareness and protective measures.

How? Are these arcane secrets known only to strategic communication and information operations units training at secret Defense and State department facilities? No. Are these awareness and protection functions even operated by any governmental department? No.

These defenses against weaponized narrative are social institutions. Two in particular that are relevant – at least in principle – are the press and education. But they of course then become a valuable attack target.

A free press, one respected by both the government and the polity, provides a valuable service. It informs the public; it provides insights to the mechanisms of power; it reveals the actions of a wide range of societal elements (to include governance). It also plays a role in both shaping and revealing the narrative templates we use to make sense and significance of the stories uncovered and shared. When operating as a respected social institution, the press increases our awareness of both the narrative components in play and the narrative templates. When the press' status

Fidelity is the degree to which a narrative rings true with what the audience already believes.

Coherence is the consistency of internal logic, or degree the narrative hangs together.

is undermined, however – e.g., referring to the press as “the enemy of the people” – and the people lose faith in their veracity and legitimacy, then an information vacuum arises. Humans are storytelling animals and ones that despise information vacuums. They will fill information vacuums with other stories. Rumors (a form of weaponized narrative) proliferate in societies with weak media institutions, cleaving to what bits of fidelity are possible and seeking or disrupting coherence.¹⁶

The social institution of broad-based education provides the critical thinking skills to operate within the information landscape and to consciously place information into narrative template categories rather than relying solely on emotions evoked. The critical thinking skills cultivated by education allows individuals to cut through the ideological elements attached to information. From political parties to government agencies to businesses and to the press itself, all institutions utilize narrative for ideological functions. These institutions will tell stories in such a way as to universalize certain conditions, making unique situations appear common, while making the conditions seem normal and expected, or naturalizing them. They will use stories to obscure contradictions and structure the debate in ways favoring the institution.¹⁷ Unpacking how these functions operate, and especially their construction of a narrative template’s coherence, is the province of a robust education, and necessary for the responsible and credible execution of citizenship.

Currently there is a sustained assault on the value and respect of the press as a social institution with dangerous consequences. In its role of revealing the mechanisms and machinations of power, the press has always occupied an activist and moderately adversarial relationship with established power structures. The distrust of the media from the political establishment has changed, however, from a dissatisfaction with the media’s framing of sets of facts and has become an all-out assault on the professionalism and value of the press as an institution. As this assault spreads across the populace, it severely weakens the resiliency to weaponized narrative that a respected press provides.

Similarly, education is in less than robust shape. Federal spending on primary and secondary education, after dramatic post-war increases from the 1940s through late 1970s, has increased slowly in comparison to significant population growth. The Great Recession saw dramatic cuts in state funding of higher education. Valorization of standardized tests have eroded critical thinking skills development.

While increased cyber defenses and “fake news detection” widgets for social media are helpful interventions, real resilience to weaponized narrative will come from a united effort of civic groups, political leaders and the citizenry to fortify our social institutions.



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¹⁴ “Budweiser’s Super Bowl Ad And The Great Debate Over What It Means To Be An American,” by Maria Godoy, NPR, 3 February 2017. <http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2017/02/03/513263766/budweiser-s-super-bowl-ad-misses-the-real-timelier-story-about-immigrants-and-be> Accessed 24 February 2017.

¹⁵ Definitions of narrative fidelity and coherence adapted from “Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument,” by Walter R. Fisher. *Communications Monographs*, 51(1), 1-22 (1984).

¹⁶ For more on rumors as weaponized narratives see: Bernardi, B., P.H. Cheong, C. Lundry and S.W. Ruston (2012) *Narrative Landmines: Rumors, Islamist Extremism and the Struggle for Strategic Influence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press).

¹⁷ For more on the social functions of ideology, see: “Out of their heads and into their conversation: countering extremist ideology” by A. S. Trethewey and B. Goodall. Consortium for Consortium for Strategic Communication Report #0902, (2009) <http://csc.asu.edu/2009/09/14/out-of-their-heads-and-into-their-conversation-countering-extremist-ideology/> accessed 3 March 2017.



Towards an Adequate Response

By Herbert Lin

Weaponized narrative is guerrilla warfare and terrorism in the information environment, using words and images rather than bombs and bullets. The victims are truth, reason, and reflection.

A fast-moving information deluge is the ideal battleground for these guerrillas and terrorists. A firehose of narrative flow gives the targeted populace little time to process and evaluate. It's cognitively disorienting and confusing. Opportunities for emotional manipulation abound.

Who uses weaponized narratives? In the news recently are the efforts by Russia to meddle in the elections of Western democracies. But non-state actors (the Islamic State comes to mind) demonstrate high sophistication. Even political movements have caught on, as one can see in the rise of the alt-right in the United States and Europe. In short, weaponized narratives are useful tools for many different types of adversaries in this combat.

How can democracies deal with the onslaught of weaponized narratives? What is possible and will work?

Although the volume and velocity of information has increased by orders of magnitude in the past few decades, the architecture of the human mind has not changed much in the last few thousand years. Human beings still have the same built-in cognitive and perceptual limitations

“Weaponized narrative is guerrilla warfare and terrorism in the information environment, using words and images rather than bombs and bullets. The victims are truth, reason, and reflection.”

that they have always had.

To cope, some people turn to traditional curators and their online equivalents—newspapers, for example—to professionally filter and sift incoming information. To the extent these financially diminished services can still provide useful and factual information from multiple points of view, these readers have at least some tools to cope with weaponized narratives.

But many others turn to social media and search engines to filter the information ocean. These alternatives do not provide the kind of “smart” editorial function that traditional intermediaries provide, and these readers have no particular incentive to seek information that contradicts or challenges their prior beliefs. These individuals are not what the Founding Fathers had in mind when they placed their trust in a well-informed citizenry.

What to do?

It’s helpful to start with some ideas that are unlikely to help very much. For example, the U.S. response to Soviet propaganda in the Cold War was to launch Radio Free Europe and Voice of America to provide alternative information sources. These services operated as independent journalism outlets providing truthful information – generally unfiltered by the U.S. government – to those behind the Iron Curtain, though of course they were not seen that way by the Soviets.

But it is hard to imagine such an approach helping very much today. Target audiences of weaponized narrative today are in the Western democracies. There, individuals have—and are supposed to have—considerable freedom as well as the legal right to choose their own information sources. Any approach to countering weaponized narratives will have to refrain

“Americans pride themselves on being an inventive people. Let us launch the brainstorming of our defense against these attacks in the spirit of showing them what we’re made of.”

from exercising government control over content. Our freedom of speech guarantees enable Russia, foreign terrorist groups, and extreme political movements to encourage and celebrate the public expression of raw emotion—anger, fear, anxiety—through the use of weaponized narratives. Such narratives channel powerful destructive and delegitimizing forces against government and responsible media.

Meanwhile, Radio Free Europe and Voice of America operated at

a pace that would be completely inadequate in countering the hostile narratives offered today. That’s why the Global Engagement Center will likely prove to be an inadequate response. The GEC is an interagency office established by Executive Order in 2016 to “lead the coordination, integration, and synchronization of Government-wide communications activities directed at foreign audiences abroad in order to counter the messaging and diminish the influence of international terrorist organizations”. It is not designed to focus on adversary nations, much less domestic guerrillas. And any effort to coordinate and synchronize government-wide communications will happen much more slowly than our adversaries can generate new narratives. Just ask—will Russia or the Islamic State be asking their lawyers about how they should coordinate their narrative operations against the West?

On the citizen side, efforts to improve civic participation and engagement are always important. But the scale of the effort needed to move that needle is enormous, especially given that people resist the absorption of knowledge and information that disturbs their prior beliefs.

If solutions lie not with government and not with individual citizens, perhaps the private sector can play a meaningful role. Some major actors have indeed acknowledged a degree of responsibility to countering weaponized narratives. For example, Facebook is deploying a new protocol to flag questionable news sites. If an independent fact checker determines that

a site is fake news, Facebook will label it “disputed” and push the connection to the end of an individual’s news feed. Google bans fake news web sites from using its online advertising service. Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook shut down accounts that they determine are promoting terrorist content.

Such measures are helpful but inadequate to stem the rising tide of weaponized narratives. Some would advocate for more intrusive or aggressive steps, such as cutting off prominent users who are “obviously” disseminating misinformation. But for the most part, private companies have no legal responsibility to protect the expression of all points of view—they only need to behave in accord with their Terms of Service (TOS), the voluntary agreement that governs their interaction with users. So far, goes the argument, these companies have interpreted TOS agreements so narrowly that a lot of misinformation and inflammatory rhetoric flows. But these private companies also respond to shareholder and advertiser concerns, and in the end, they quite properly intend to make a profit. What is “obviously” misinformation to one user may not be obvious to others. Broad interpretations of TOS agreements run the risk of alienating a large part of their user base.

So, in the end, weaponized narratives are a big problem for modern democracies. But the past solutions that come to mind are inadequate or bad or unlikely to work on the necessary scale.

This is a significant challenge. We should face it, realizing that past tactics and defenses are likely inadequate.

Americans pride themselves on being an inventive people. Let us launch the brainstorming of our defense against these attacks in the spirit of showing them what we’re made of.



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**“The Internet has accelerated
a phenomenon of people finding
one another with all sorts of
consequences, some wonderful
and some terrifying.”**

**Murray Gell-Mann,
Nobel-winning pioneer
in complex systems, 2001**

**WORDS ARE,
OF COURSE, THE MOST
POWERFUL DRUG
USED BY MANKIND.
NOT ONLY DO WORDS INFECT,
EGOTIZE, NARCOTIZE,
AND PARALYZE,
BUT THEY ENTER INTO AND
COLOUR THE MINUTEST
CELLS OF THE BRAIN.**

RUDYARD KIPLING, 1923