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A Battle of Narratives

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Narrative as an Influence Factor in Information Operations

By Amy Zalman

A casual onlooker of the contemporary national security community might conclude that “narrative” is among its most pressing concerns. US Army Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, cites narrative, “an organizational scheme expressed in story form,” as central to insurgencies. According to FM 3-24, narratives perform an array of duties: they channel ideology, express collective identity, model behavior, provide reasons for actions, and aid in interpreting others.¹ The 2010 *Joint Operating Environment* (JOE) identifies a global “Battle of Narratives” in which the United States must prevail or risk losing “support for policies and operations” and ruining its “reputation and position in the world.”² In 2006, National Security expert Michael Vlahos called war narratives, those stories that help domestic audiences make sense of military engagement, “the foundation of all strategy, upon which all else—policy, rhetoric, and action—is built.”³ Yet, despite the urgency of this call, the military has found it difficult to create compelling narratives—or stories—either to express its overall strategic aims, or to communicate in discrete situations, such as civilian deaths. This situation can improve if the defense community develops a stronger grasp of what makes up a narrative and how to use one to greatest effect. At present, despite the

ubiquity of the word, the concept it represents is poorly understood.

Although there has been a steady stream of articles and papers on narrative as a military function in the last several years, most of these have discussed narrative within the larger system of information operations, to include information collection and internal and external dissemination. Alternatively, articles have put forth academic theories from narratology or anthropology in order to describe the general worth of their application for defense purposes. A survey of how the concept is employed on popular blogs and web forums on defense issues suggests that “narrative” is a fuzzy notion as an instrument or practice.⁴ Generally, discussants are comfortable using the concept of narrative the way a historian might: to order and interpret past events, or to compare conflicting accounts. The “war on terror narrative,” “Anbar narrative” and “surge narrative” have entered common usage. Narrative has become a synonym for “account” or “version of events.”

Members of the defense community are more vague when the discussion turns to narrative as an active function of information operations or public diplomacy. Narratives are described as amorphous concepts, such as “democracy” or “freedom” (e.g.: “We must learn how to tell our story of freedom better”). Alternatively, writers use “narrative” where one might otherwise use the term

“propaganda,” or “message.” Indeed, as Rob Thornton observed in a highly debated Small Wars Council blog: “Often when we discuss a ‘narrative’ at the tactical level, we think of ‘talking points,’ things to say to the media, things not to talk about, things not to put on a handbill, or on some other media, or things like that.”⁵ There is a widespread belief that stories are “simple,” and, as a result, that they should be phrased simply. When commentators offer potential narratives for consideration, these are often framed as declarative statements or future intentions, such as: “We will repair the reservoir” or “We are bringing aid to you.” While descriptive statements, and directives about what to say or not say, have a function, confusing these actions with “narrative” does a disservice to the potential of creating, telling and listening to stories on the battlefield to shape the direction of events. The real power of narrative is squandered when the term is repeatedly drafted into use for crude propaganda chores.

We typically think of stories as if they are discrete objects containing an objectively recognizable meaning that narrators can simply pass intact to audiences. This premise underwrote many of the United States’ public diplomacy efforts in the years following the September 11 attacks because, although public officials repeatedly suggested that the country must “tell its story” to the rest of the



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world, we typically did so as if the particular drama of American democracy is such a self-evident tale that we need only distribute it better in order for the rest of the world to appreciate it. When, as our plummeting reputation made clear, this approach did not work, we became much more attuned to the cultural distance between the United States and those that we most desired to reach in the Middle East, North Africa, Southeast Asia and elsewhere. We translated our story into other languages and put it into formats familiar to our target audiences. When that did not work either, we threw up our hands and, to a large degree, gave up. The ubiquitous phrase among the defense community, “it’s not what you say, but what they hear,” only confirmed the premise that a story is like a hermetically sealed ball that is either caught or dropped by its intended audience. Whereas, what we said formerly meant everything, it now meant nothing because, as the phrase indicated, we believed that they were going to hear what they wanted to anyway.

We could have communicated better if we understood that stories lie neither entirely in the hands of those who tell them, nor in those of the audience. Rather, they are intersubjective events—occurrences during which two or more people mutually create a shared subjective experience. Narratives are created from the unique meeting of narrator and listener. It matters what we say *and* it matters how they hear. A battle of narratives will never be won through efforts simply to erase or drown out others’ stories. They will simply surface elsewhere or at another time, as all suppressed voices eventually do. Rather, success at using narrative requires understanding where and how narratives come to have meaning, and exploiting opportunities for audiences to shape new meanings in those that already exist.

The remainder of this article reviews briefly several of the basic elements of narrative, explains how they achieve influence, and offers preliminary suggestions for their application.

The Elements of Narrative

Narrator and Audience:

Although “audience” is often the last item considered by communicators when

they begin to construct a narrative, it should be the first, since without one no story is complete. Public diplomacy and information operations have progressed substantially in this arena by recognizing that different communities hear in different ways, based on their own linguistic and cultural customs. This is a good start. But it does not go far enough in explaining the degree to which audiences are active participants in establishing what a narrative means when they hear it.

In the late 1960s, literary theorists began to question how much of the meaning of any given poem or novel resides in the text itself. They concluded, based on their own examination of literary works and on empirical studies of how people draw meaning from what they read, that readers supply a great deal of that meaning. In order to explain why whole groups of people often reach similar conclusions about a work, literary theorist Stanley Fish developed the concept of “interpretive communities,” which he described as “made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around.”⁶ Many literary critics considered Fish’s claim radical because it suggested that readers were not simply extracting the meaning embedded in a text, but instead implementing a strategy for recreating it in their own terms. It was also threateningly anarchic—if audiences could so easily overthrow the established authority of written texts, could social disorder be far behind? Nevertheless, since the mid-1970s, the general principle that audiences actively participate in creating the meaning of what they read and hear has become a commonplace across the social sciences and humanities, and beyond. Practitioners in fields such as marketing and advertising, public relations, and crisis communication increasingly view communication as a two-way conversation between firms and their consumers. Analysts use the concept

of interpretive communities to explain how public policy and institutions such as the justice system function.

Several useful guidelines for communicators flow from the recognition that the audience is an author, as well as the recipient, of any narrative. First, and most basic, is that the historical experiences and cultural outlook of the audience is an authentic, irreducible part of their worldview. Audiences will without exception always interpret stories in their terms.

This worldview will be the basis for how the audience “writes” the narrative that is being conveyed. Communicators can learn to see and appreciate an audience’s narrative style, provided they can also learn to see and appreciate their own cultural and ideological preconceptions. This is a challenging task in several respects. It requires trying to see others without the ideological and cultural blinders that limit our own views of the world. It also requires suspending judgment toward what we do hear, which can be difficult when it offends our basic values or appears to violate the logical facts. For example, as Richard Halloran observed in *Parameters* in 2007, Islamist extremists read the US objective to promote democracy in the Middle East as simply another in a long history of efforts to force foreign values on Muslim societies. Yet, it is difficult “for Westerners to imagine anyone disagreeing with this goal.”⁷ It is difficult because we have not taken seriously the need to look at the world from the perspectives of others, which requires stretching our imaginations and suspending judgment. There is a factual basis in what extremists claim: the Crusades launched by the Roman Catholic Church from the 11th – 13th centuries. The rest, however, is interpretation, since the Crusades took place in a historical context vastly different from the present moment, and the ‘foreign values’ of the 11th century are not those of the 21st. There are alternative narratives, but we will only arrive at them if we accept the authenticity of the worldview of our audience. For example, as a result of the encounter between Christian Europe and the Muslims, the West gained immense knowledge in fields from architecture to chemistry to textile production.



Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers provide security during a joint combat patrol mission in Sarwar Kariz, Afghanistan. (DoD photo by Staff Sgt. Dayton Mitchell, U.S. Air Force/Released)

Muslims were not, as in the extremist version of what happened, victims of the West, but rather, its benefactors. Without undermining the innovations and knowledge the West has contributed to the world, or whitewashing the fact of Western imperialism in the more recent past, it is possible to tell a story that does not have foreign domination and Muslim victimhood as its central drama.

Setting:

A story has to occur in a particular place, at a particular time. If it lacks these, it meanders and collapses and no one pays it any attention. Time and place create several effects. They make a story vivid and memorable. A story anchored in time and place can be repeated in much the same way, and thus passed on from person to person, even from generation to generation. The announcement that a reconstruction team will repair a reservoir in an Afghan province offers its audience little incentive to identify with and support the effort. In contrast, a dramatic tale of the destruction of the reservoir set in a specific time and place engages its listener from the start and gives him a reason to invest in its repair. A reservoir repair story might begin this way (from the point of view of the audience): "In my father's era, this was a fertile area. We grew everything that we needed here, and our animals had plen-

ty of pastureland. Now, because of the drought, we barely have enough water for ourselves, let alone for animals. The reservoirs were destroyed even further during the years of fighting. The government is not helping us. We are afraid we will have to leave if we do not find a way to solve this problem"

The events that open a story accrete symbolic meaning as they are repeated over time. The American Revolution served as the beginning of the story that President Lincoln told at Gettysburg: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." An American hearing these words today will hear shades not only of the American Revolution, but also of the Civil War and the emancipation of American slaves.

Stories may begin using the conventions of myth or folktale, and be set in a vague distant past (once upon a time) and place. The folktale's ability to influence lies in its lack of specificity, which is a sign to its audience that it contains a timeless moral or truth. Folktales often contain generic character types, such as heroes and villains. Such characters represent and reinforce collective social values by demonstrating how to act and how not to act. Many Bedouin folktales celebrate generosity by rewarding

characters that demonstrate this prized characteristic of Arab nomads, and punishing those who are miserly, for example. Folktales also exert a subtle form of social control by reinforcing and giving fictional expression to collective norms. Cinderella, in the seventeenth century French version which has been passed down in the West, has variants in many cultures. It tells the story of a young girl who, despite cruel mistreatment by her stepmother and stepsister, wins the hands of the Prince by being sweet and obedient. In its original form the tale teaches young girls that happiness is attained by winning a Prince, and that they can attain it, but only if they behave properly. When times have changed, however, the Cinderella story has been elastic enough to change with it. In the 1970s, the Cinderella story was reconceived by feminist writers as an independent and even rebellious heroine. Conventional story forms are thus useful structures for influence, because they are both recognizable and accepted by their audiences and can be updated with new values to fit new circumstances.

Setting a story in the distant past is also a way to relay contemporary values. Folkloric form may convert historical events into useful lessons for the present. In Afghanistan, for example, where storytelling is a valued art, there are a variety of folkloric forms that people use to recount history. *Riwayat* (narration) is used in several Afghan languages to describe a kind of story that tells history. "These stories help keep in memory a particular historical event and the meaning attributed to it; they also present a narrative pattern for successful transmission of this historical knowledge Stories in the genre of *riwayat* are always *meaningful stories* about the past that were successfully kept in cultural memory in order to become meaningful history for the present."⁸ Ethnographer Lutz Rzehak asked Afghans to recount their experiences under the Taliban, several years after their fall; some structured their tales in the traditional narrative form.

One man recounted the story of a friend who, during the period of Taliban rule, intended to visit his daughter on a Friday afternoon. After perform-

ing his Friday prayers, he began on his way. But Taliban standing guard near a mosque where prayers had not yet concluded stopped him [different mosques have slightly different conventions, and some services take longer than others]. They threatened to beat the man unless he joined the prayers, despite the man's protests that he had already performed his noon prayers. Nevertheless, he acceded. Following his second set of prayers, he continued on his way, until he was stopped by Taliban yet again, near another mosque still in prayer, and commanded to join. This time, the man refused. After being beaten, he was taken to a Taliban commander, who asked him how many bows there are in a prayer. The man replied that there are ten bows for a Muslim, and thirty for the Taliban. When asked why, he explained how he had been commanded to pray two extra times—20 bows extra—by the Taliban. Although, as Rhezak explains, certain elements of the story as it was told to him do not fit the *riwayat* mold, this primary section ridiculing the strict and excessive piety of the Taliban does. In this form, it may live on to become part of Afghans collective characterization of the Taliban.⁹

Beginnings influence listeners because they help supply important meaning about what kind of story is about to be told. Understanding when others' stories begin sharpens our understanding—both of the storytellers we are puzzling over, and of ourselves. For many Americans, for example, the “story” of the US presence in Afghanistan begins on September 11, 2001. This particular event profoundly influences how subsequent events and motivations are understood. Many Afghans however, may not see unfolding events as having begun at the same time. For Afghans, current events represent simply the most recent chapter in a much longer tale of efforts by foreigners to subdue Afghanistan. The American sense of urgency or justification in its mission will not resonate with Afghans, because they do not place events inside the same historical narrative.

There are several ways that beginnings and settings can be used to enhance communicators' influence. In personal interactions with civilians, it is important to elicit and listen to sto-



US Army Master Sgt. Ruth Eggert, assigned to S-3 Operations, 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment, and US Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Angela McLane, of Joint Combat Camera Command, observe and document an informational drop mission in Iraq Aug. 21, 2008. The drop mission provides a communication path with residents of smaller Iraqi villages, allowing for an increase in local informational awareness. (U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Mario A. Quiroga/Released)

ries, as well as to information. Stories will reflect how people relate values and norms to each other, how they perceive history, and what history they think offers relevant lessons for the present. Pay attention to the formal aspects of a story: how, when and where it begins. These elements can be replicated in the stories that you tell, in order to relay new information and values.

Plot:

Plot—the events that happen in a story—provides the basic framework for every narrative. Many of our ideas about dramatic plots originated with Aristotle's *Poetics*. Written in the third century BCE, the treatise extrapolated general principles about tragic dramas from Sophocles' plays, such as *Oedipus Rex*. For Aristotle, a good plot has several defining qualities. It must have a beginning, middle and end made up of a series of events. These events must follow each other on a causal basis; it must make logical sense that one thing comes after another. It must establish events that are either probable or possible. They may or may not have actually happened, but they plausibly could in the world that has been established by the author. These events produce a change in circumstances for their characters. This may be because the situation in which the char-

acter finds himself is suddenly reversed, or because of an act of recognition that transforms the protagonist from a state of ignorance to one of new knowledge. In either event, this surprising reversal of fortune provokes strong feelings in the audience, who accompany the character on his journey from ignorance to enlightenment. In sum, dramatic action, often born from suffering or a struggle, is at the heart of plot.¹⁰

Aristotle offers much that is useful to a modern day counterinsurgent seeking to understand and counteract adversary narratives. The defense community's focus on the ideological content of the story that bin Laden offers to his followers has overshadowed the equally salient fact that it is organized around a drama of epic proportion that concludes with the transformation not only of individuals, but of an entire society. Counterterrorism expert Juan Zarate, in recent Congressional testimony, called bin Laden's tale “a simple narrative that pretends to grant meaning and heroic outlet for the young” and “explains in a simple framework the ills ... and the geopolitical discord they see on their television sets and on the Internet.”¹¹ While Zarate and other experts have led the effort to discredit bin Laden's ideology, they have failed to tell a better story. Worse, by naming our efforts a

Battle of Narratives, the United States has reinforced the premise that there is a grand struggle unfolding between two mutually exclusive authors.

A better story would actually be many stories, each anchored in the setting and worldview of its would-be protagonist, whether they are a disenfranchised second-generation American, a North African immigrant in France, or an Iraqi frustrated by the slow pace of restoring order. Each of these audiences has a distinct history and set of experiences, and each will “rewrite” the Al Qaeda narrative in a different way. Although bin Laden may offer a single plot line based on a selective reading of Islamic history, that does not mean that this is the sole interpretive strategy that his audiences have available to them. Communicators should exploit the recognition that Al Qaeda serves only as a distant inspiration for a diverse collection of local actors interpreting the basic plot of renewal through jihad. Begin by looking to understand how each community rewrites the Al Qaeda narrative in its own terms. Indeed, although we repeatedly remind ourselves that we have different audiences, we forget that bin Laden also does. As Anna Peterson has observed in relation to martyrdom narratives that mobilized Catholics in El Salvador in the 1980s:

Once formed, a narrative, to be effective, has to circulate. This means that people must find it compelling enough to retell. In the process of diffusion narratives are almost always changed; even if a leader (usually charismatic) formulates a narrative that others find compelling enough to pass (and perhaps act) on, the story that they retell is rarely identical to the one they heard. Thus we must investigate the ways and reasons mutations occur: the process by which hearers select and reject different elements of the narrative so that it resonates with, makes sense of, and/or provides comfort or hope to their own lives.¹²

In order to forge effective counter-strategies, communicators must similarly assess how different listeners mobilize the jihadist martyrdom tale. To take one example, the small group of young American Somali men who departed from their home in Minneapolis in late 2009, found that the jihadist drama resolved the apparently irresolvable complexities of their identity as Somali refugees. It also responded to the challenges they faced as community outsiders, and as young men coming to adulthood.

Somalis like these young men began arriving as refugees in the early 1990s. Those who arrived in childhood faced sig-

nificant challenges fitting in, although they also generally assimilated the popular culture and values of their adopted home with alacrity. For some, the entry into the more complex challenges of early adulthood made the stringent order of a deeply religious worldview appealing. Then, the border war between US backed Ethiopia and the Union of Islamic Courts in Somalia that began in the mid-1990s gave dramatic expression to their own inner battle between their American and Somali identities. They were easily swayed when Somali insurgents amplified the regional struggle and began to describe it as a global jihad. For these refugees, the jihad narrative organized and made sense of their dispossession in the United States, by making it easily explained as a battle between a US proxy, Ethiopia, and Somalia. This set of circumstances and motivations are distinct to this Somali population, and will suggest specific alternative narratives and interventions that speak to the issues of this community. Although the Somalis’ story may share some characteristics with other immigrant populations elsewhere, each community has its own distinct plot and central conflict, and each will have its own unique narrative resolution.

Character:

Characters that arouse our empathy are our route into a story. Empathy is “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes.” Characters with whom we identify strongly have the potential to influence us, for we perceive them to be like ourselves, and we invest ourselves in their welfare, and in their responses to events.

Experiments into how people feel after they read fiction suggest that stories also teach us how to identify with others. In one experiment, people were given two accounts of the same event, one presented as a story and the second as a non-fiction legal brief. Afterward, those who read the story were better at guessing the emotional state of others through cues such as facial expression than those who read the nonfiction account. The researcher who conducted the study concluded that our emotional investment in fictional characters trains us in empathy:



US Army Staff Sgt. Adam Vinglas attached to the 305th Psychological Operations Company, 17th Fires Brigade, speaks with a local Iraqi businessman, while out on a joint patrol, in Al Quarnah, Iraq, Oct. 9, 2009. The patrol was conducted to assess the Iranian influence in the community. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Samantha R. Ciaramitaro/Released)

We would not read short stories and novels, or watch films and plays, which did not move us. Fiction offers simulated social worlds more various than could ever be encountered in everyday life, with characters realized in more detail than those of most people we encounter directly. In fiction, we can practice empathetic feeling by exploring our emotions in circumstances encountered by the characters, and thereby also understanding these characters.¹³

Communicators seeking to offer a countervailing model to the extremist narrative will only succeed by offering audiences characters with whom they can connect and plots with plausible challenges that they resolve in a positive way.

Such characters cannot simply be ‘heroes’ who model different behavior than that of a potential terrorist. A persuasive character to a would-be suicide bomber is a would-be suicide bomber in similar circumstances. A persuasive plot to such an audience would contain a jihadist option in it, and a genuine emotional struggle by its protagonist to determine right actions. The frequently cited fact that Islamist violence has killed more Muslims than it has other populations will be a much more powerful claim when it is made from within a fictional tale dramatizing the struggle of a potential adherent. The reversal of his fortune might come about by his surprised recognition of this fact. In order to be compelling, however, such a character cannot be a cartoonish projection of a religious zealot, but must be a three dimensional person who is likely to have all of the concerns that might trouble him, such as personal relationships and family, financial circumstances, and cultural identity. Nor can he be expected to transform beyond the bounds of plausibility. Characters that appear real to us need not be modeled on actual people. But they must display a high degree of internal consistency. The ways in which they speak, behave and respond to events must be plausible in relation to their other characteristics.

We engage more deeply with characters when we share a struggle or transformation with them. In crafting narratives for use in the foreign policy arena, we should dramatize those struggles and portray

their resolution. The complex issue of civilian deaths has been responded to with apologies and compensation—and these aptly suggest the regret and sorrow by ISAF forces in Afghanistan. They do not suggest as much about the survivors of those dead. A story portraying a character experiencing this immeasurable loss, told from his or her point of view, could prove to be an empathetic form of influence and a cathartic exercise that permits and channels the experience. Such a tale would place a character inside the complex emotional realm of death, family and war. In order to be realistic, it would leave that complexity intact, but it could afford the protagonist a chance to reflect on and try to make sense of events in their terms.

We would not send soldiers to war with the instruction to use automatic weapons, but fail to supply them with

an understanding of weapons’ different mechanisms and the circumstances in which to engage them. By the same reasoning, it cannot be fair to ask that they enter a “battle of narratives” with an impoverished idea of what a narrative is and how to use one.

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