

Narrative in the Operations Process

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Abstract

To counter the threat posed by adversary information activities, the U.S. Army has developed a new warfighting function, “engagement” which will institutionalize lessons learned over the past decade of warfare. Like mission command, sustainment, intelligence, or other warfighting functions that are critical to the successful prosecution of warfare, the ability to engage a population in a way that is credible, logical and emotional to people is far more likely to compel them to the national will than lethal options. The military as a whole, and more specifically the strategic land forces (consisting of the Army, Marine Corps and U.S. Special Operations Command), are now in the process of determining the best way to implement engagement as a full-fledged function of strategic landpower. This paper will make the case that *narrative* is one of the key elements of engagement.

The past ten years of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan have taught the U.S. military that future wars of the 21st century will be characterized by low intensity conflicts in increasingly complex environments. In spite of the U.S. military’s preponderance of power and overwhelming ability to dominate an adversary in traditional maneuver warfare, resilient insurgencies have demonstrated their potential to successfully conduct asymmetric warfare. This has proven successful, at least in the near term, when employed against U.S. and coalition forces. While the military has consistently fulfilled its responsibility to defeat the enemy’s conventional forces and seize, occupy and defend land areas, it has not been as successful in the war of ideologies. We will outline how narrative should align to the military decision making process, and give an example of a successful narrative operation (Voices of Moderate Islam) that can serve as vignette for demonstrating how to conduct a narrative in U.S. led operations. We also make the case for greater academic focus on the topic of narrative in a military context: The acceptance of “engagement” as a function of warfare is still premature so a close cooperation is necessary between the military and academic disciplines that study narrative. Collaborative partnerships with academia will be critical. Finally, we argue that the doctrinal institutionalization of narrative as part of the military decision making process (MDMP) will enable military commanders to effectively achieve the desired goals of national policy.

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1 Background: Why narrative?

It is hard to argue that the United States’ capacity to defeat conventional enemies on a battlefield, or project power overseas, has done anything but increase since the end of the Cold War. Yet, even as the military’s ability to conduct traditional “maneuver warfare” has increased, its ability to counter violent extremist messages, in comparison remains less



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developed. Dr. Sebastian Gorka, of the National Defense University, pointed out: “Today we face a foe who knows that wars start with ideas, and depends on them far more than weapons.” [1, p. 1] Because of this capability gap, extremist organizations have been able to capitalize on a variety of information to replenish their ranks and sway neutral populations to provide safe havens and materiel support. Insurgents and violent extremists in Iraq, Afghanistan, North Africa, the Pacific and other areas have enjoyed, and still enjoy, a period in which they could spread their ideas.

In 2013, the ground forces of the United States military, consisting of the U.S. Army, the U.S. Marine Corps, and U.S. Special Operations Command collaborated to create the Strategic Landpower Taskforce. The Task Force was designed to analyze the lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan and make recommendations on how to rebalance the force to focus on engagement and preventing war. In October of 2013, the taskforce produced its findings in “Strategic Landpower: Winning the Clash of Wills.” Endorsed by the heads of each branch, the report acknowledged “the fundamental premise that people are the center of all national engagements, it is equally self-evident that war, or more broadly, conflict, is also an inherently human endeavor.” [5, p. 2] As such, technology and overwhelming firepower will not be enough to subdue an enemy insurgency.

Because of this, the concept of “Engagement,” as a warfighting function that will be executed across the force, has been accepted as doctrinally necessary. The U.S. Army’s functional concept for Engagement is defined as, “the capabilities and skills necessary to work with host nations, regional partners, and indigenous populations in a culturally attuned manner that allows bridging language barriers, opening lines of communication and connections with key political and military leaders in a way that is both immediate and lasting.” [8] At present time, the U.S. Army is attempting to integrate the findings of the taskforce into meaningful, actionable doctrine and left wondering what constitutes effective engagement for the conventional force.

To engage a local population in a way that is meaningful, the military must consider the best vehicles to transport information to the target population. As the operational environment becomes increasingly urbanized and communication technology becomes more accessible, the military is left coping with the “rising velocity of communication.” [5] One potential capability is the use of narrative in U.S. led operations. Narrative is the mind’s default means of understanding making it a natural vehicle for engagement. People have an inherent tendency to explain and understand the world through stories; narrative must be harnessed by the warfighter to reach friendly, opposition or neutral populations in ways that might not otherwise be possible. In cultures or geographic areas that rely heavily on oral traditions, such as societies that historically have lower levels of literacy, narratives are extremely potent at achieving trust and confidence.

Because adversaries maintain the considerable advantage of the ability to draw on a stock of cultural knowledge while executing their own narratives, it becomes crucial that the Department of Defense use all source intelligence to obtain the prevailing narratives. All source intelligence provides the ability to recognize, classify and track narrative communication by adversaries and attribute it to different groups. This becomes even more critical in the battle for words, deeds and images which we believe are the primary ways to deliver a narrative. To rectify this analysis gap, a better understanding of the importance of narrative and its delivery at the most junior level in U.S. led operations is necessary.

2 Principles of narrative for the operational environment

Narrative in a military context is “a brief description of a commander’s story used to visualize the effects the commander wants to achieve in the information environment to support and shape their operational environments.” [3, pp. 1–4, ¶1–20] The mission narrative should be understood by every warfighter and must provide the context and framework from which warfighters will conduct their engagements. In modern, urban insurgencies, lasting strategic success will not be a function of enemy units eliminated or targets destroyed. A successful strategic outcome rests, as it has since time immemorial, on “winning the contest of wills.” [5] This end state can be more effectively accomplished through narrative in U.S. led operations.

Corman *et al.* [2], and others, have proposed that there are three prevailing levels of narrative understanding: a master narrative, local narrative, and personal narrative. The master narrative is a prevailing narrative that spans a very broad population base from which multiple local narratives emerge. The local narratives are more geographically represented as they provide more specific context to the immediate surroundings a population center lives in. From the local narratives emerge personal narratives. These are the stories every individual tells and is expressed through the medium of local and master narratives. Together, these three levels of narrative understand roughly mesh with the strategic, operational and tactical levels of thinking that the military is used to operating within.

If narrative is to be successfully integrated into military operations, or even be its driving force, better attention must be devoted to understanding the principles of narrative development. The strategic (master-level) narrative must flow to the operational (local) level and ultimately down to the tactical level where the individual Soldier on the ground interacts daily with the local population delivering personal narratives. As such, the narratives being crafted at the strategic level must be both internally accepted and externally focused. Even the most credible story will fail to take root if it is not accepted by the storyteller himself. Additionally, the narrative itself must be externally focused and resonate with the local belief system of the audience to be viable for any period of time. Specifically, narratives must contain the three basic elements of communication which has been understood since Aristotle first wrote his principles of rhetoric: they must be credible within pre-existing ideology, touch the individual on an emotional level, and be logical to the local belief system-ethos, pathos, and logos. Without these three elements, narratives will not be sustainable for any length of time and is ultimately destined to fail as a tool of any military importance.

There is little doubt to the effectiveness of a carefully crafted narrative in reaching otherwise closed audiences making the understanding of how to transport the narrative critical to its use in operations. “Understanding the characteristics of narrative transport could not only help with influence and deterrence in terms of the types of messages that may be most effective, but also temporal actionable approaches, when individuals or groups might be more receptive to additional messaging or ideas while in narrative transport.” [7, p. 40] A recent paper published by the Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment with the support of the Department of Defense noted the usefulness of harnessing emerging neuroscientific and neurotechnological developments as a tool to influence and deter potential adversaries. The paper noted:

There is empirical evidence that experiencing a narrative can be transformational, and can induce long-term effects upon audiences’ beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral intentions and actions. Therefore, the prudent use of narratives may be a crucial approach through which to influence the beliefs of those who (are predisposed to) disagree with the position espoused in the persuasive message. ix [7, p. 9]

Although the Department of Defense has taken the first steps in collaborating with the scientific community on the topic of “engagement,” much closer working relationships need to be forged in order to truly tap into the potential of narrative as a military tool.

3 Operations success through narrative: Voices of Moderate Islam

The use of narrative in operations can be highly effective at shaping the perceptions of a given population. A vignette on how narrative in U.S. led operations can successfully reach a population that otherwise might be difficult to engage is Operation “Voices of Moderate Islam” (VoMI). VoMI, which was executed in Afghanistan in August of 2010, was designed to resonate with pre-existing indigenous narratives and tap into the wider cultural pulse of Afghanistan. The end goal of the program was to counter the adversary’s prevailing narrative in order to degrade their recruiting efforts and de-legitimize their local operations. The prevailing narrative in Afghanistan’s Logar and Wardak provinces was that the Coalition Forces were attempting to supplant Islam with Christianity. VoMI was built with this in mind and tailored to the goal of using narrative as a vehicle to render a critical thread of the Taliban narrative irrelevant by demonstrating that the US and Coalition Forces were not at war with Islam.

During the operation, Soldiers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team accompanied 33 “Afghan Key Communicators” on an Islamic pilgrimage through Jordan en route to Saudi Arabia. These “Key Communicators” were handpicked from the general population to represent a wide swath of Afghan society and included village elders, members of the Afghan National Security Forces, former Taliban reintegrees, and other influential individuals. During the trip, which was planned during the holy month of Ramadan, the Key Communicators performed the rite of Umrah and earned the honorific “Hajji.” With this honor bestowed on them through the largesse of their American and Coalition Force partners, the Afghans readily returned to their home villages and began to disseminate unscripted narratives that painted a very different, but credible picture than the one the adversary was providing. For a fraction of the cost of a single aircraft sortie, the United States was able to counter the opposition’s prevailing narrative by demonstrating that the Coalition was not attempting to supplant Islam with Christianity, nor was the West at war with Islam. At some point in the operation each participant internalized the coalition message: that multi-national efforts in Afghanistan did not constitute a “war on Islam.” Participants in the program had their beliefs fundamentally changed. Many of the Afghans had never left their home villages before, much less traveled on an airplane to a foreign nation. The personal narratives the participants would have and tell for the rest of their lives would then challenge the belief system of every member of their society who believed Coalition Forces were against Islam and in Afghanistan to Spread Christianity. One participant explained the experience: “I can speak for us all when I say, we never knew that American bases here had mosques on them, or that you had Muslim Soldiers in your Army, or that you would allow them to pray, and observe Ramadan. I thought you were only about killing – but now I see so much more.” Another participant noted: “This journey is our life. When we return, we will tell others what we saw here, we will tell others what you did for us. Everyone will know of the respect you have shown us.”[9, p. 15] Because these men are credible to their society, their story is logical, and it matters to the people the narrative exists. Because the words the participants use line up with the deeds the participants preformed, and they have multiple images documenting their story the narrative spreads.

While VoMI is a memorable example of narrative in U.S. led operations, it is not enough. The human domain is the key terrain in the asymmetric battlefield and to win this terrain, a credible narrative must be consistently delivered to the indigenous population over the length of the campaign, not an individual unit's deployment. Unlike maneuver warfare, in which physical terrain might be won or lost through decisive action, the human domain must be won through consistent and synchronized narratives at all three levels. A strategic (master) narrative, which contains the elements of national interest, must be part of the campaign design. An Operational (local) narrative, which caters to a geographic region, dovetails alongside the strategic narrative at the operational level for tactical commands to plan off of. When that's done the personal narrative, which is most often executed at the tactical level through one-on-one interaction, will be a strategically synced narrative producing effective engagements over a sustained period of time.

4 The way forward: Narrative as part of Military Decision Making Process

A mission narrative is an operation which is planned, resourced and executed with the purpose of delivering a U.S. or coalition narrative in the area of operation and can be implemented into the military decision making processes. Special Operations Forces use narratives in their operations, whereas conventional forces do not because it is not established in Joint or Army doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities (DOTMLPF) apart from Special Operations Forces. This capability gap severely hinders the conventional forces' ability to engage with local population centers in a meaningful way, thus degrading both mission command [6, p. 1] (defined as the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations) and the national interest in general.

A necessary step toward solving this capability gap is to better understand the problem as it pertains to the conventional force. Partnerships between the Department of Defense and academia are critical in this phase. Great strides are being made in the fields of human psychology, neuroscience, sociology, anthropology and neuro-linguistics. Academics working in these fields have significant elements to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role narrative can play in military operations. Many public and private research universities across the country already operate through contracts with the Defense Department and are being resourced to better understand the science behind narrative in the context of military operations.

As a tool to transport narrative, the power of visual information is often under-utilized in operations. If information operations rely on "words, deeds and images" then equal emphasis needs to be put on training military units to harness imagery in order to convey their narrative. Fortunately, these capabilities already exist within every branch of the armed services. For example, the US Army already trains and fields Combat Documentation and Production Specialists. Major Stewart Brown, the commander of the 55th Signal Company, noted "The power of visual information targeted at a specific audience, provides an extremely powerful tool that leaders must be willing and able to leverage for successful engagements. The recent successful engagements in Jordan supported by Soldiers from the 55th Signal Company (Combat Camera) indicate that not only is this holistic approach to engagement

necessary, but the capability is real and available.”¹ These Soldiers are equipped with cutting edge audio/visual technology and editing software, and are frequently embedded with special operations and conventional forces today around the world. If the conventional military were to utilize these specialized “Visual Scouts” as combat enablers in addition to combat documenters, they could produce narrative imagery in a much more effective way for the Army with minimal financial investment.

5 Conclusion: Doctrinal changes

Great improvements are being made in the military’s ability to convey messages, but more is needed in the future if “Engagement” is to be an effective warfighting function. Case studies, extensive research, analytical tools, narrative-specific intelligence methodology, and most importantly, doctrine, needs to be created if narrative is to be harnessed as a critical element of engagement. Additionally, measures of effectiveness will need to be developed, tested, and implemented to ensure the sustainability of the narrative. In spite of these future challenges, a carefully crafted and disseminated narrative can be a powerful vehicle for engagement. The message, if tailored in a way that has a culturally credible storyteller, will be adopted, assimilated, and spread to the intended audience in a way that other messages could not.

In the end, commanders will need to incorporate a synced narrative into their planning process from the strategic level down to the tactical level. Through a change in doctrine, Battalion and Company commanders will need to understand the narrative that their superiors create and ensure their Soldiers are trained and equipped to disseminate that narrative with words, deeds, and images. Thomas Elkjer Nissen, of the Royal Danish Defence College, noted the implications for operational planning in the Danish Defense Journal *Militaert Tidsskrift*:

Based on the premise that a commander receives not only a mission or task, but also an accompanying strategic narrative, Narrative Led Operations start with the commander’s intent, which then again drives the operational planning process. To give the narrative the primacy needed, the commander’s intent in the planning process, the narrative must be stated in the very beginning of higher levels of planning directive, ideally right after the mission statement, just as the commander in his intent should articulate not only in physical effects, but also in informational effects to be achieved. [4, p. 75]

Narrative in U.S. led operations must be recognized as essential to the successful planning and prosecution of military operations. The doctrinal change will entail growing pains and take time, but ultimately make the conventional Army more successful in the operational environment. It is imperative that both military culture and doctrine refocus on the current enemy, which uses ideology and misinformation as a weapon against U.S. forces. Because strategic culture influences how we view our adversary, it becomes critical to adapt our military culture more rapidly than our opponent does. [1, p. 33] It is only by incorporating mission narrative into every step of the Military Decision Making Process that the actions of the force will be readily understood by the local population and facilitate sustained influence in support of achieving the commander’s end-state.

¹ Major Stew Brown. Personal Interview. 18 March 2014.

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