

THE NARRATIVE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Miranda Holmstrom

In the Strategic Communications (StratCom) community, we work to get effects, actions, and changes in behaviour from our target audiences. Intuitively one would argue that we are on a mission to persuade people to do things differently, or at least to change their opinions. ‘Winning hearts and minds’ may seem easy, especially when you have the truth, logic, or at least a lot of money on your side. However, years of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan haven’t proven this to be wrong, and through the fields of social psychology and behavioural economics we now know that there is indeed a bit more to it. Attitudes do not necessarily predict behaviour. Why then is a narrative still so important, or why does propaganda work at all?

Barely seventy years have passed since the violent ideological mass movements of the early 20th century. Yet, we seem utterly shocked that another has come into existence, or worse, that propaganda is still so effective. It goes against our sense that the individual and his or her opinion are the cornerstone of democracy; it is unnerving that opinions can be so fragile. We like to think that individuals are capable of living and thinking rationally, that one’s character determines if one does good or evil, and that we can all, at least in the end, discern the truth from lies. The individual is after all the master of his or her own life. Propaganda should not work, especially in the 21st century.

The ‘sanctity of the individual’ is itself a narrative, albeit one that feels ‘true’ because it is so widely accepted in Western Democracies. In order to create narratives and ideals for others it is vital to be aware of the contents of our own narrative framework. Western values such as individuality, life, freedom of choice, rationality, and the ability to think and make decisions for oneself, are not shared by everyone. Unless we understand how we ourselves are influenced by narratives and acknowledge what we take for granted, we inhibit our ability to understand and counter propaganda.

Recent developments in the field of psychology and advertising suggest that attitudes do not necessarily predict behaviour and that people’s actions depend on far more than just their opinion. It is important to understand that the type of opinion created through propaganda is quite different from the average, fluctuating personal opinion.

The phenomenon of social media has made it possible for everyone to play a part in furthering ideas, whether consciously or subconsciously. In order to harness the power of social media it is imperative that we have a simple, yet complete narrative that can easily be reproduced. It needs to explain the past and the present, and provide a hopeful and attainable picture of the future. Most of all, a propaganda narrative must resonate with the needs and beliefs of the target audiences.

In view of the current information war with Russia and the violent extremist ideology of radical Islamists, it is necessary to understand precisely what a propaganda narrative is and what it isn't; how an individual and a mass movement needs it, why a narrative that works well for a Western democratic audience doesn't work in other environments, and what, if anything, the West can influence in the new intensified battlefield of narratives.

In this article I explain what an effective narrative is and why it works at the level of propaganda, how different audiences perceive the ideas of democracy and authoritarian leadership differently depending both on their cultural experience and personality traits, and I present a case that the intelligent use of propaganda from our side is necessary to counter terrorist propaganda.

The Past, Present, and Future

A narrative is commonly thought of as a story or a plot that provides a framework for the information it contains. In the context of information warfare the narrative takes on a different meaning. The type of story we are talking about here is a minimalist one—stripped down and streamlined; it is most certainly not meant to be entertainment. Jason Logue offers the following description, 'A narrative is a simple, credible and overall representation of a conceptual ideal designed to convey the organization's self-concept, values, rationale, legitimacy, moral basis and vision.'¹ A narrative is not just one clever little story, nor is it as wide ranging as a strategy. Rather, a narrative provides explanations. It describes the past, justifies the present, and presents a vision of the future. It offers a framework for the plot and the setting of a story. It provides context for raw information and facts, and helps to shape how we perceive ourselves and the world in which we live. Multiple interconnected narratives provide the intent and the justification of a strategy to different target audiences.

The narrative has been the main rhetorical and educational device used in the field of history. Cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner suggests that people are 22 times

.....
 1 Logue J, 'The Narrative', published online at <https://medium.com/the-bridge/narrative-31b3ec-c1c631> (last accessed 29 October 2015).

more likely to remember a fact wrapped in a story than an independent fact,² and research by the University of California found a high, 0.92, correlation between narrative in text and the amount of information recalled.³ People need stories to make sense of the world.⁴ The amount of complex information and knowledge on a vast variety of topics that becomes available on a daily basis is insurmountable. More and more pure information or facts only muddles our understanding of the world. An overabundance of information eventually leads to a more simplistic, rather than more nuanced image of the world. A few facts can be remembered, but a constant stream of information leads to summary judgment. It is easier for the human mind to remember and make decisions based on meaningful stories than to remember strings of data.

In new and changing environments the need for an explanatory story becomes even more pressing. When a situation cannot be evaluated based on previous patterns, or when opinion is not yet structured, there is a void that needs to be filled. Without an analytical framework that helps structure opinion, people are more susceptible to influence operations. Facts alone cannot ease the feeling of being lost intellectually. Narratives answer the basic human need for structure and predictability. If one side fails to provide a meaningful narrative, others will fill the void. For instance, after the invasion in Iraq, rumours were prolific because they provided answers to the new disturbing information landscape.⁵

It is not just the volume and intensity of information that creates a need for narratives. Many complex topics require an impossible amount of intellectual resources to truly process all relevant information in order to create an informed opinion. No one has the time or the resources to independently generate an informed opinion for every topic that demands our attention. Therefore people need simple stories that provide them with relevant information, talking points, and an explanation of how the topic in question fits into their worldview. These explanations usually come with value judgements that have been granted the status of truth by the volume of their supporters and the opinions of experts and thought-leaders.

We all feel the need to have an opinion on things that matter. In fact, democratic governments demand a certain level of knowledge and understanding from their citizens, as well the ability to judge current issues. Within society it has become a sin

2 Bruner J S , *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Harvard University Press, 1986)

3 Graesser, Hauft-Smith, Cohen, and Pyles, 'Advanced outlines, familiarity, text genre, and retention of prose', *Journal of Experimental Education* 48 (1980), 209-220.

4 Weick K, *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1979).

5 Tatham S *Losing Arab Hearts and Minds: The Coalition, Al-Jazeera and Muslim Public Opinion*. (Hurst & Co, 2006)

to be uninformed, so much so that people create opinions about events they have no first hand knowledge of, or aren't even real. The American TV show, Jimmy Kimmel Live, includes the popular 'Lie Witness News' segment, which bears witness to just how uninformed and completely wrong, but steadfast, opinions can be. The results are often comical. People on the street are asked for their opinions about fictional events such as 'the speech Martin Luther King gave this morning' or 'the birth of Obama's son'. Although the situations are fictitious or impossible, the segment is filled with individuals who are willing to share their opinions, even though no opinion should be present at all.

Drawing on behavioural economics and marketing related studies, contemporary discourse in the StratCom community indicates that personal attitudes or opinions do not predict behaviour.⁶ While in this discourse, the focus is on the individual and the individual decision making process, it is the business of propaganda to focus on the individual as a member of a group. Russia's information warfare does not seek to convince every individual it is right, instead it seeks to influence public opinion. Violent extremism in turn persuades individuals to join a cause, to get a group of people to take a certain action. '[P]ropaganda reaches individuals enclosed in the mass and as participants in that mass, yet it also aims at a crowd, but only as a body composed of individuals.'⁷ Propaganda is, therefore, inherently a social phenomenon, which uses mass communications, and focuses on mass psychology and public opinion.

To be clear, there is a significant difference between a person's public and private opinion. Studies in the field of social psychology have proven time and again that there can be a serious dichotomy between what one thinks in private versus what one does in public due to processes such as groupthink and conformity.⁸ Yet the kind of public opinion that results from a careful propagation of ideas is an entirely different beast. In the excellent words of Jacques Ellul: This opinion is no longer a belief at times unsure of itself, spreading slowly by word of mouth, and difficult for opinion surveys to pinpoint. It is projected outside itself, meets itself and hears itself on the screen and the airwaves invested with power, grandeur, magnificence. Such opinion learns to believe in itself, certain now that it is 'truth' because it has seen itself revealed and promulgated on all sides by powerful media.⁹

6 Ellul J, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 6.

7 Pinker S, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and Its Causes*, (Penguin, New York, 2011) Chapter 8.

8 Ellul, *Propaganda*, p. 211.

9 Ibid.

In the sphere of StratCom for the defence community the narrative is a framework of creating or reinforcing opinions as well as collective beliefs and transforming them into action. What sets this type of narrative apart from simply another marketing campaign or brand strategy is that it calls for action not based on one's individual needs, but for the needs of the group. There is usually a sense of self-sacrifice required for an ideal future. It changes a passive crowd into a participating crowd. At a minimum, it demands the support of the audience, but, preferably, it creates and crystallizes collective ideological motivations. The propaganda narrative aims to use facts and rationale to create an irrational response. It furnishes a complete system for explaining the world, and with it the problems the group is facing.

The narrative crystallizes what were just vague inclinations into solid ideas or 'truths'. It plays on feelings and simmering passions already present, reinforcing opinions, hardening prevailing stereotypes and creating automatic reflexes. The simplification process described earlier aides to the crystallization of an explicit public opinion. Nuances and gradations diffuse the story, and an explicit public opinion needs the 'you are either with us or against us' mentality to keep dissenting opinion at bay.

The most important part of this kind of narrative is the Problem. Without it there is no need for action since there is no need for a solution. In literature, story structure is called narrative framework. It uses a set-up, a conflict, and a resolution. Within the set-up stage the individual is taught to see his or her own situation in a context that is related to society as a whole. Information is used to inform the public and to propagate ideas. The conflict stage is concerned with the problem. The present is shown to be in dire need of improvement, due to some Evil's actions. One's personal problems are made out to be part of a larger societal problem. Finally, in the resolution phase a solution is being offered. There is a highly desirable future waiting that is just around the corner, as long as the individual takes action.

One does not need to look too far to find examples of this problem in action. The Danish cartoons, Charlie Hebdo's creations, any undertaking of the Israeli army, these are all 'problems' based in reality but explained and hardened through propaganda which has justified violent action all over the world.

Through this hardening process the narrative codifies standards, furnishes thought patterns, and makes ideas irrefutable and solid. Details and subtleties disappear and the idea becomes impervious to reasoning or contrary information. In effect, the narrative has created 'truth'. To use the snowball metaphor, single ideas or 'truths' gain more traction rolling downhill. They become more compact and more resistant to outside forces. Put these snowballs together on a set trajectory with the right amount of momentum, and it can become a destructive avalanche. As Henry

Kissinger said,¹⁰ ‘It’s not a matter of what is true that counts but a matter of what is perceived to be true.’

Truth, as in a fact or piece of information, has no intrinsic value. It is up to the narrative to create that value. Therefore, it is fruitless to expect much from simply providing information. Facts might make a narrative credible, but over time it is the impression that remains. Studies from Hovland and Weiss¹¹ have shown over and over again that even if we distrust the source of the information at the time of intake, we will forget that distrust and remember the message, or at least the impression of that message. The truth in the narrative is therefore not in its verifiability, but in its verisimilitude—the appearance of it being real or true. However, for the individual, the truth provides the motivation and justification he or she needs. The more the truth is believed, the more extreme the individual’s view.

Social Media and the Narrative

‘This war will bring about the realization that the nations of the earth are made up of individuals, not masses. The common man will be the new factor in the world-wide collective mania that will sweep the earth.’¹²

On the 24 August 2015 one billion people logged on to their Facebook account—one in every seven people worldwide saw what their friends had posted along with the news on their personalized feed. This increased connectivity has brought many changes, not in the least to the global media environment. The influence of Social Media during the Arab Spring is well known. The demonstrations in Iran are often referred to as the ‘Twitter Revolution’, and Facebook played an influential role in the Ukrainian Maidan protests. According to Olga Onuch from Oxford University, Facebook wasn’t just instrumental in the organization, but also helped with the creation and spread of the demands being made. ‘We have noticed a pattern whereby a sign or slogan first goes viral on Facebook, and then seems to show up more often in protester signs.’¹³

Maajid Nawaz proclaimed in 2011 that we live in the age of behaviour, where identity is no longer purely linked to an ethnicity or nation state, and where ideas and subsequent calls for action move freely across borders aided by the technology

10 Tatham, *Losing Arab Hearts and Minds*.

11 Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Chapter 8.

12 Miller H, ‘Of Art and the Future’, in *Sunday After the War*, (New Directions, 1944).

13 Onuch O, ‘Social networks and social media in Ukrainian “Euromaidan” protests’, in *The Washington Post*, 02 January 2014.

of social media.¹⁴ Personal and cultural identities are now predominantly defined by ideas and narratives, rather than nationalities or ethnicity.

ISIS is trying to destroy the current nationalist identities in the Middle East by rewriting the history of the Arab people to justify a Caliphate. Similarly, Russia has tried or is working on undermining the other nationalist identities in its target areas, replacing them with a Russian nationalist identity instead. Identity provides a baseline of narratives that have already been accepted. Destroying that baseline would allow for a completely new interpretation of history and the justification for a new course of action.

In his book *Propaganda, the formation of men's attitudes*, Jacques Ellul differentiates between horizontal and vertical propaganda.¹⁵ Vertical propaganda meaning coming from the top down, where a select group of propagandists conjures up ideas and feeds that down to the people. It is a traditional one-way communication strategy. Horizontal propaganda is about individuals making contact with other individuals. It harkens back to the basic need of human beings to be connected to others, to build a relationship, and to be part of the group.

Vertical propaganda is the marketing campaign whereas horizontal propaganda provides the sales force. In larger private businesses, marketing departments equip the salespeople with information, scripts, interpretations, and slogans that the salesperson then uses to create a personal and custom approach that addresses the needs, doubts, and reservations of the individual targeted. In the field of StratCom the narratives are used to sell a strategically relevant idea or cause that people need to be convinced of.

The innovations that modern communication technology have brought us simply allow for a much easier way for people to congregate and participate. Similar to the oral agitprop of the USSR and Mao's political study groups, people come together through social media and create one of the most effective propaganda settings one could ask for. This doesn't even require much, if any, coordination from above to set up. Social media allows people to gather largely by themselves out of the human propensity to seek contact with others, or out of the intellectual need to look for information and explanations that better fit one's personal situation.

The social nature of the group motivates or empowers people to publicly declare their adherence to the ideals of the group with conviction. Social psychologist Michael

.....
14 Nawaz M, A Global Culture to Fight Extremism, (Ted Talk, 2011), Online https://www.ted.com/talks/maajid_nawaz_a_global_culture_to_fight_extremism?language=en (last accessed 29 November 2015)

15 Ellul, Propaganda.

Macy suggests that as extremist ideology takes hold in a society, the more sceptical parts of the community overestimate the degree of compliance by others, which in turn creates a false conformity from those elements that don't necessarily agree with the ideology itself.¹⁶ There is usually a price to pay for non-conformity, so those who privately might disagree are nonetheless eager to prove their conformity by enforcing the group ideology on the sceptics around them. A spiral of false conformity and enforcement is thereby created, allowing an extremist ideology to spread.

Horizontal propaganda inherently demands and creates participation, thereby playing on some of the more basic processes of social psychology. The opinions of people within a group become more similar and more extreme, or polarize. 'Each individual helps to form the opinion of the group, but the group helps each individual to discover the correct line.'¹⁷

This process lowers the bar to share in the creation of 'proper convictions and solutions'. In groups subjected to propaganda, the individual is conscious of becoming part of a discussion where content is 'presented in didactic fashion and addressed to the intelligence'.¹⁸ An individual will find the socially acceptable truth through a false sense of freedom and reasoning, aided by the group. Once someone has found the 'truth' they in turn become propagandists and help others to reach the same conclusions.

The simplicity and strength of the narrative keeps this process going. Intellectual indoctrination, where an individual is lead through a propagation process with carefully selected questions and information to reach the right conclusion. This enables the individual to not merely recite the message when spreading 'the truth', but also to clearly and logically recreate the reasoning that brought them to that conclusion. The process of indoctrination creates the illusion of choice, free will, and personal decision-making, but the results in compliant individuals. This approach allows for the narrative to be spread effectively. In our modern multi-faceted media environment it is imperative to have a simple narrative that can be recreated and reproduced.

Horizontal propaganda allows for decentralization. As Dr Steve Tatham said, 'Decentralizing control, often to the point of discomfort, allows for far greater agility

16 Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Chapter 8.

17 Ellul, *Propaganda*, p.81.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

and speed of response.¹⁹ It also breeds personal initiative as displayed by, e.g. the German soldiers of Hitler's army, or of the 'lone wolf' terrorists of the 21st century.²⁰ Social media is our latest means of communicating horizontally, and the power of the tool has changed the game. Social media should certainly be used in modern information campaigns, but it is important to realize it is merely a different tool that can be used to spread a message. It has always been the message that counts most.

The Counter-Narrative

The battle of narratives is fought on many different fronts, addressing many different target audiences. The counter-narrative discussion is usually understood from a black and white perspective, but a counter-narrative does not necessarily have to contradict what the adversary is saying. Indeed, a more successful course of action would be to build on some of the stories already known to be truths and offer a different, but not necessarily opposing explanation of the current situation and path forward. This difference is more than just semantics. The argument to be won is not one of we are right and they are wrong. It is the argument of what the future is going to look like.

Our narrative should be a simple and clear message sharing our perspective of world history, our intentions, and our vision for the future. Notice how there is no mention of truth, facts, or information? That is not to say that these should be included. The story factor should fall somewhere in between fairy tale and encyclopaedia entry, between superhero arrogance and apologetic fear. It needs to be real and it needs to be the truth, but that doesn't mean it has to be verifiable. Intentions, motivations, and interpretations are what give value to a narrative. They can be contested, but not disproven. Our adversaries make use of this tactic all the time. As we speak, many different explanations of our behaviour are circulating the Internet. Some of these explanations are far better known and convincing than the ones we consider to be the truth. At the very least we need to reclaim our own intent, and shine a light on the intentions of the enemy.

Anti-Western narratives are not just rumours or lies, they are an attack on our culture and values and we should counter them for two reasons, especially if we are not involved in a declared war. One reason is to prevent such narratives from becoming truths. Narratives spread like rumours. In fact, one can argue that rumours in and of

19 Tatham S, The Solution to Russian Propaganda is not EU or NATO Propaganda but Advanced Social Science to Understand and Mitigate its Effect in Targeted Populations, Centre for Security and Strategic Research, National Defence Academy of Latvia.

July 2015, Online <http://www.stratcomcoe.org/steve-tatham-solution-russian-propaganda-not-eu-or-nato-propaganda-advanced-social-science>

20 Leuprecht C, Hataley T, Moskalenko S and McCauley C, 'Winning the Battle but Losing the War?' in Perspectives on Terrorism, August (2009) Volume 3, Issue 2, 25-35.

themselves are narratives that are used as ammunition. Once our own explanations inhabit the media space, they can be used to support a larger end goal. Context-free narrative is portable and can to be used anytime and anywhere for illustrative purposes. The other reason to counter our opponents' narratives is to attain Sun Tzu's 'supreme excellence' of war, by 'breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting'.²¹ After all, we are in it to win it.

Successful counter-propaganda must include an interpretation of the past, explanation of the present, and vision for the future. The audience must be given another story of what the future will look like at a conceptual level. Counter-propaganda is not a plan that can be tracked, but rather an ideological vision that will always be somewhat out of reach. It is important to note that a centralized response is not always as effective as an agile local response, as WWII resistance propaganda shows. It is often best to support the genuine, and therefore convincing and meaningful response of local resistance groups.

Democracy vs. Democratization

It is natural to assume that our narrative should include calls to action for the promotion of democracy, based on the theory that democracies do not go to war against one another. But should we really engage in a propaganda war to accomplish this end? Selective use of information, a lack of dissent, the creation of proper convictions, the illusion of choice—surely this is not democratic. Our values include diversity, choice, tolerance, and respect. It is important to understand that '[...] we are dealing here with psychological warfare, and that we adjust ourselves to the enemy's train of thought, and that proceeding from there, the people that we subject to our propaganda are not those whom we want to see become democratic but whom we want to defeat.'²²

However, supporting plurality does not prevent us from taking a stand on just what our values and intentions are. By doing so, we are not censoring others, if anything we support discussion. Nonetheless, we should be able to back up our narrative with reason. Some of the lessons drawn from propaganda are not necessarily anti-democratic. In fact, we see similar facets coming up in political election campaigns over and over again.

Much of the Information Activity in contemporary conflicts is directed towards democratization. But there is a difference between fervently selling the idea of

21 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*. (Filiquarian, 2006), p. 13.

22 Ellul, *Propaganda*, p. 244.

democracy and the actual process of democratization. As noble as this goal this might be, a successful narrative and strategy created according to guidelines set out in this paper does not create democratic behaviour.

In order to spur people into action, the goal is to excite and arouse people in favour of one particular narrative, one problem, one solution. There is only one way to agree, but there are many ways to disagree. In a democracy we celebrate this plurality of opinion. But doubts and diffusion do not allow for a strong call for action, nor do they create a holy cause to dedicate one's life to. The availability of information, lack of censorship, and an absence of dogmatism lead to a vast variety of opinions. Democracy creates a psychological climate that both offers and expects a certain level of participation, and gives each citizen the opportunity and responsibility to use reason to create their own informed opinion. Reason or rationality are attributes necessary in a democratic society. Non-democratic forms of government do not encourage independent reasoning, because those in power decide what the people are supposed to be thinking—there is no need to figure it out yourself.

Of course, this does not mean that all citizens of democracies are purely rational beings or that reason cannot be found in non-democratic societies. A study of the German citizenry of the Weimar republic shows that these character traits do not necessarily come naturally. 'They [...] found the loose irreverent democratic order all confusion and chaos. They were shocked to realize that they had to participate in government, choose a party, and pass judgment upon political matters.'²³ Authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, require a certain level of propaganda to keep their citizens from participating in politics, which, when successful, lead to non-democratic behaviour. This does not mean that democracy cannot be a convincing theme, but the result of such a narrative would be a 'citizen who can recite indefinitely 'the sacred formulas of democracy' while acting like a storm trooper.'²⁴ As a matter of fact, in 2012 a Pew Research survey found that a vast majority of Muslims were supportive of democracy, including such values as freedom of speech and competitive elections. This raises the question of whether we need to include democracy as a theme for Western counter-narratives. Additionally, support for democracy does not necessarily lead to democracy. For example, when asked by the Afrobarometer, 72.8% of Zimbabweans supported democracy, yet, according to the Freedom House, the state of government in Zimbabwe cannot be called democratic.²⁵

.....
23 Hoffer E, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*, (New York, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2002), p. 45.

24 Ellul, *Propaganda*, p. 256.

25 Bratton M and Mattes R, 'BP67: Neither consolidating nor fully democratic: The evolution of African political regimes, 1999-2008' *Afrobarometer* (2009), Online <http://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Briefing%20paper/AfrobriefNo67.pdf> (last accessed at 29 November 2015).

Democracy is really about limiting those who seek power and empowering those who do not. In the field of information and communication, democracy results in a plurality of opinion. One way to stimulate plurality is to question assumptions and facilitate debate and discussion. This can create doubt, diffusion, and nuance, and works to lessen the validity and power of the narrative of the adversary. However, one must not expect that broadening public opinion necessarily leads to a sustainable truth, nor is undermining a negative ideology sufficient if we also want stability. To answer to the intellectual needs previously described, we need to provide answers, explanations, and a vision for the future.

It is common among both soldiers and the general public to long for the certainty we felt after winning WWII, when the allied forces were hailed as liberators. But we must acknowledge the tremendous amount of counter-propaganda that was employed during the war. Whether they came directly from the allied forces, the local resistance, or both, our narratives promoted the hope of liberation and the possibility of defeating the occupation forces, motivated people with calls for action, glorified our heroes, and provided a story that unified those who wanted peace and freedom.

Great effort went into combating the fascist narratives that were directed against the allied forces. WWII propaganda efforts included newspapers and radio broadcasts prepared by the underground resistance that spread the story of how wonderful life was in a capitalist and democratic society, discrediting the Nazi image of the Allies as 'pure evil'. By informing the general public that people in other parts of Europe didn't buy into Nazi propaganda the pitfalls of false conformity and enforcement were mitigated. The Allies' narrative focused on nationalism and on one of the most powerful motivators for action, hate. Hatred toward the atrocities that the Nazis committed against their state and against their people fuelled discontent and imparted 'stickiness', or significance, to the narrative. Hatred justified the violent actions that sometimes needed to be taken while endorsing the value of peace. However, the most valuable contribution of the WWII narratives was that of hope. That narrative carried the key to the future.

So what would a successful narrative for the Middle East look like today? More and more questions are being raised in social media wondering what a positive option for that region might look like. Are violent extremists, dictators, and corrupt governments really the only options for the Arab world? The questions in and of themselves are already part of the narrative, demonstrating that people in the region are hungry for another option. Social media offers us the unique ability to hear the various and dissenting opinions of the people who should be writing their own future.

Not a lost cause

True believers are not necessarily a lost cause, de-radicalization efforts on a local scale have been effective and there is the possibility of converting those who have a deep need for propaganda. The most ardent believers do not worship because they find a specific doctrine convincing, rather they share the need for faith in an authority that they can trust implicitly. They find salvation in the hard-line narratives, justification for previous mistakes and wrongdoing, and a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Believing means that all questions have been answered, so there are no more uncertainties—the believer is in possession of the absolute truth. The degree to which an individual accepts extremist narratives as true indicates how much of his private opinion has been replaced by public opinion, and to what extent that person has been radicalized.

Radicalization is essentially de-pluralisation of one's opinion and world view. This creates an intense sense of urgency and importance of the problems and increasingly limited set of actions considered to be available to solve the problem. Hence the narrative can lead to the most heinous of behaviour from the true believer, since the individual has been relieved of any doubt or personal conscience.

This doesn't mean that all is lost for the true believer. As both Hoffer and Ellul point out, those who are most strongly influenced by a narrative will want to throw themselves at a new narrative with as much passion and fervour as before. Germany before Hitler was ripe for radicalization and it was often a toss-up if a citizen would eventually become radicalized as a Communist or a Nazi. What makes a true believer a true believer has more to do with the psychology and character traits of the group members than with a particular ideology. This means that when a group like ISIS collapses, as terrorist organizations tend to do, the group members will still need to satisfy their hunger for the answers without which they would be intellectually and existentially lost.

Some will prefer to withdraw completely from the public opinion, but there will be certainly be a group of true believers that remains true to the ideology, and will seek to renew itself, much like the neo-Nazis or white supremacists. However, a pluralistic society will be able to contain those movements and dismiss their ideology for a peaceful one more easily.

Freedom from Being Free

While it may not be true for you, it is important to acknowledge the appeal of authoritarian or theocratic narratives. In a free society, the individual is responsible

for self-expression and self-realization. When that freedom is taken away, one is no longer held accountable for the end product of an autonomous existence. One is no longer to blame for a flawed and meaningless life. In effect the individual has been liberated from the demands of freedom. Kierkegaard expressed it thus, ‘Nobody wants to be this strenuous thing; an individual; it demands an effort. But everywhere services are readily offered through the phony substitute: a few! Let us get together and be a gathering, then we can probably manage. Therein lies mankind’s deepest demoralization.’²⁶

The Western ideal of self-advancement also includes a personal responsibility for failure. The 20th century that has not been worth writing home about for the Arab people, nor have the decades of a faltering economy given the Russians something to be proud of. And we all need to be proud. It is not hard to see why messages that remove blame by shifting it to those who call for individual responsibility, resonate so well. In the poetic words of the philosopher Pascal, contempt for the self creates ‘the most unjust and criminal passions imaginable, for [the individual] conceives a mortal hatred against that truth which blames him and convince him of his faults.’²⁷

On a final note

Propaganda still works and will continue to be a tool to motivate the masses to engage in a particular course of action. Propaganda plays on our human need for narratives that explain our past, present, and future. Social Media now provides a fascinating tool for the propagation of ideas. It draws upon numerous Social Psychology or group processes that allow for a far more global version of horizontal propaganda than the world has seen before.

However, the main strengths of social media are simultaneously weaknesses for propagandists, since social media is all about diverse and dissenting opinions. It is impossible to control content and therefore creates a medium for attacking ideas that our adversaries are already making good use of. Plurality is one of the strengths and benefits of democracy and can be achieved by asking unsettling questions, most importantly about intent, as well as providing many different explanations or offering ‘truths’.

In the battlefield of narratives, merely telling the truth is not effective enough. Nor does truth-telling necessarily persuade people to pursue a certain course of action. It

.....
26 Popova M, ‘Kierkegaard on the Individual vs. the Crowd, Why We Conform, and the Power of the Minority’, in Brainpickings.org, Online <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/11/26/kierkegaard-individual-crowd-conformity-minority/> (last accessed on 29 October 2015)

27 Hoffer, *The True Believer*, p. 9.

is akin to swatting away the individual wasps, but leaving the wasps' nest intact. The ideal of the democratic society is an excellent narrative theme, but it will not create democratic behaviour. Freedom as we know it is not necessarily as appealing as we tend to think. To counter violent extremism we need a narrative that creates at least as much passion and hope for the future. Common anti-US / anti-Western narratives need to be attacked head on, not just for the sake of current issues, but also to create room to manoeuvre in future conflict.

Different situations call for different narratives and different levels of influence operations, but they always do. Every situation that we encounter calls for a narrative, a strategic psychological format, an overarching account of events. The lack of an inspirational narrative will create despair for the individual and chaos for society, leaving a vacuum to be filled for someone with less peaceful intentions. We must not fail to share our story. 'History is remembered history.'²⁸ If we do not provide a believable explanation of the current situation, someone else will. If we do not explain our intent for the future, someone else will. If we do not write history, someone else will.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Miranda Holmstrom is a Psychological Operations Specialist with the US Army