



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

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

Weaponized narrative seeks to undermine an opponent’s civilization, identity, and will by generating complexity, confusion, and political and social schisms. It can be used tactically, as part of explicit military or geopolitical conflict; or strategically, as a way to reduce, neutralize, and defeat a civilization, state, or organization. Done well, it limits or even eliminates the need for armed force to achieve political and military aims.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But the longer-term challenges are even more profound: Post-factual politics weaken democratic governance. It enables what might be called post-modern soft authoritarianism. Such authoritarianism is not absolute in the traditional Nazi or Stalinist sense. Rather – much like Putin's Russia today – it relies on a sophisticated combination of managed public expectations, a tenuous but real political legitimacy, and the division of state power among otherwise isolated communities. These then become easy to balance against each other, the more readily to be dominated by authoritarian personalities and institutions.

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

gentler – and more effective – mechanism of narrative.

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

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

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

Power leaks away from the naïve faith in individual rationality that has characterized the last three centuries in the West.

What this may mean for military and security organizations committed to democratic states – or, indeed, for the United States as a whole – is not entirely clear. But much of what

has previously been assumed to be fixed and unchanging is turning out to be, in fact, unpredictable, unforeseeable, and random. And the rate of change is accelerating.

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

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