

Specified Narratives

The importance of “storytelling” in modern military endeavors

by Maj Robert Benda III

The world of storytelling has been around since humans first started gathering together; it has evoked emotions within a populace to unite, divide, challenge the norm, and support the latest craze. One of the singular universal aspects is the nesting of a specific narrative within a story and its focus on an identified audience or consumer. It is this consumer that will take the ideas and concepts presented in the story through the narrative and act upon them ideally in a manner the author desires. Mark Laity describes narrative as “more than just a story. Rather, a narrative contains many stories, and—more importantly—it is an explanation of events in line with an ideology, theory, or belief, and one that points the way to future actions.”¹ In other words, a specific narrative ties the past, present, and future together for the consumer of information and can shape the way in which that consumer acts upon the information provided. On a mathematical level, the following could be used to break down a specific narrative into its most simplified form:

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of their own, exercise planners from the strategic through tactical level appear to fall in the “rinse and repeat” methodology for OAIs that are conducted in countries without answering the key questions of *why* and *what*. *Why* are we conducting this particular type of exercise in this country as opposed to its neighbor? *Why* is this country allowing us to repeatedly come back and do the same event year after year? *Why* are engagements with the same group of host nation individuals each time? *Why* do we not engage more with the local populace outside of the training areas? *What* is the overall mission we are shaping our partnership to achieve? *What* is the desired end state (focused more on the country we are conducting the OAI in than with us)? These are all very

ability,” “enhanced global partnership,” and even “deterrence” miss the mark if the planner cannot clearly articulate who the consumer of the OAI developed is intended for. Planners are too quick to point out the specific U.S. unit coming in, the mission essential tasks, or training and readiness standards a specific OAI will help that unit achieve, and fail to make the linkage to an outside entity our presence is intended for.

In its simplest form, planners develop and shape OAIs around the validation of Measures of Performance (MOP) vice Measures of Effectiveness (MOE). *Joint Publication 5-0* defines MOP as “An indicator used to measure a friendly action that is tied to measuring task accomplishment,” and MOE as “An indicator used to measure a current

Narrative = (specific Message + identified Consumer + desired Effect) or, (N=M+C+E)

Time

T

The message(s) are the supporting bits of information that reinforce the overall specific narrative and keep it resonating within the cognitive elements of the consumer in order to support a specific effect.

Looking at the above in the context of military operations, activities, and investments (OAIs) in the modern setting, being able to clearly articulate the specific narrative around each entity can reinforce standing country plans, integrated country strategies, long-term plans, and short-term executions. Against no fault

simple questions that can be answered if there was a clearly defined specified narrative that was directed toward a specified consumer(s) and linked to an effect that was measurable, observable, quantifiable, and specific.

The joint force as a whole looks to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of military power across the entire range of military operations but struggles to properly synchronize the informational aspect of OAIs to assure the intent behind each event is achieved. High-level buzz words like “interoper-

system state, with change indicated by comparing multiple observations over time.”² If every OAI friendly element participates in can only answer MOP, then the OAI is a failure, which means the associated country strategy fails, the theater campaign order that directed the specific OAI fails, and the Service interests and integrated country strategies all fail.

One could argue that if MOP is what a unit is after, then why travel to a foreign country to operate and validate a mission essential task or train-



Multinational Marine and naval forces conduct an amphibious assault exercise during UNITAS LXII in Salinas, Peru, in October 2021. An effective narrative must address why Marines are conducting this exercise and what is the destined end state of the engagement. (Photo by Sgt Lauren Brune.)

ing and readiness standard? There is a cultural shift that needs to transpire in order to ensure OAIs are more than just a Service patting itself on the back and saying they went out and did stuff that enhanced their respective Service. There is an element of influence that needs to be incorporated to properly synchronize and validate the purpose of friendly activities across the globe.

The beginning portion of this article addressed the strategic level and need to plan OAIs with the desire and intention of having a narrative resonate amongst a specific consumer. On the other end of the spectrum at the tactical level, planners and executors can provide a bottom-up refinement to the process through interactions with locals during sight surveys and planning conferences. It is during these events that specific groups or individuals who can further reinforce a friendly presence in a region can be identified and leveraged for follow-on messaging. Concurrently, information environment key terrain can be identified in order to access entry points for both friendly and adversarial messaging/propaganda. With these key pieces of information in hand, exercise planners can work with essential staff elements (Public Affairs, Civil Affairs, Operations in the Information Environ-

ment, etc.) to shape the specific messages needed across a defined time horizon and against the desired effect to ensure the purpose of the OAI is achieved and resonates with the intended consumer. If properly executed in the planning and development portions, when it comes to the overall execution (pre, during, and post) of an OAI, friendly forces can shape tactical level actions across the collective information environment. These actions will facilitate the delivery of the specific message(s) to defined consumers which can support the operational to strategic level specified narrative identified during the OAI development.

The final part of the equation is the identification and linkage of the desired effect back to an apparatus that can properly evaluate, and validate the task given to the executing agency in order to ensure the overall goal of the specific narrative is achieved. There is a fine balance between Operations in the Information Environment (OIE) and Intelligence, but this union can aid in the planning, preparation, execution, and post-execution assessment feedback loop needed in validating the desired effect is achieved against the identified consumer. OIE and Intelligence can both provide the most likely and

most dangerous courses of action a unit might face and how an adversary may manipulate the identified consumer to become desensitized to friendly messaging. Additionally, both can provide amplifying higher classification information that could directly shape how a specific narrative is incorporated across identified key terrain within the IE.

During execution, a well-developed information environment running estimate can provide the necessary situational awareness on how messages are being received by the intended consumer(s) as well as any second or third echelon consumers who may not have been the intended individual but are persuaded by what is being discussed. These second and third-tier consumers could be the source of any counter-messaging currently taking place which could prevent the established friendly specific narrative from properly resonating with the intended consumer and, in fact, ensure what we are promoting is seen as misleading or false. This last portion is critical when it comes to supporting higher's overall end state because gaps and seams could become apparent for future exploitation.

All of this is for not if planners are not looking toward the future and shaping OAIs around a MOE-based end state. Being able to incorporate into a long-range plan the need for five to ten-year goals nested within a synchronous strategy that allows for specific narratives to be developed along the way is ideal. Realizing that every action or inaction can have a lasting effect within a specific region is the driving force behind why there needs to be a focus on the importance of specified narratives in modern-day military endeavors and OAIs.

Notes

1. Donald M. Bishop, "Quotable: Mark Laity on Russia, Operationalized Use of Information, and Narrative," *John Brown's Public Diplomacy Press and Blog Review*, (October 2015), available at <http://www.publicdiplomacycouncil.org>.
2. Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *JP 5.0, Joint Planning*, (Washington, DC: 2020).

