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**NARRATIVE INTELLIGENCE IN
INTERNET-BASED
MILITARY INFORMATION
SUPPORT OPERATIONS:
A CYBERPSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE UNDER THE
IRREGULAR WARFARE CONSTRUCT**

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Abstract

In the digital age, misinformation has become a pervasive challenge, particularly in the context of military information support operations (MISO). Conceptualizing narrative intelligence as a critical tool in countering misinformation within the irregular warfare construct—and examining the role of cyberpsychology in shaping narrative strategies—allows for insight into the effective deployment of narrative intelligence in internet-based MISO. This study highlights the advantages of narrative in misinformation operations, including emotional connection, memorability, contextualization, counternarratives, community building, and adaptability. Drawing on empirical evidence from psychology, communication studies, and information warfare research, case studies demonstrate the efficacy of narrative-based approaches in influencing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in digital environments. Meta-analyses of narrative persuasion and studies on countering violent extremism provide robust support for the strategic use of narratives in MISO. The integration of cyberpsychology principles offers a deeper understanding of online behavior and information consumption patterns, enhancing the effectiveness of narrative intelligence strategies. Findings indicate that by harnessing the power of narrative intelligence and leveraging cyberpsychology insights, MISO forces can effectively combat misinformation and promote accurate, evidence-based information in the digital battlespace. Continual adaptation in narrative intelligence approaches to meet the evolving challenges of the 21st-century information environment

is necessary. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on information warfare tactics and provides practical implications for MISO practitioners in navigating the complex landscape of digital influence operations.

Introduction

The rapid proliferation of the internet and social media has transformed the landscape of information warfare, presenting new challenges and opportunities for MISO. In this digital age, misinformation has emerged as a significant threat, undermining the integrity of information and eroding trust in institutions. As irregular warfare (IW) increasingly moves into the cyber domain, the need for effective strategies to counter misinformation has become paramount. Therefore, the conceptualization of narrative intelligence as a critical tool in internet-based MISO will be explored by drawing upon the principles of cyberpsychology to inform narrative strategies.¹ *Information warfare*, broadly defined, is the use and management of information to gain a competitive advantage over an adversary. It differs from traditional warfare, which primarily involves physical confrontation, by focusing on the cognitive and psychological aspects of conflict.² Unlike hybrid warfare, which blends conventional and unconventional methods, information warfare in the context of IW emphasizes the manipulation of information flows and perceptions to achieve strategic objectives.³ This approach is particularly relevant in the digital age, where the battlespace extends beyond physical territories into the realm of social media, online communities, and digital platforms. In

this context, narrative intelligence emerges as a crucial capability for navigating the complex information environment and effectively countering adversarial narratives.⁴

Cyberpsychology and Narrative Intelligence in the Context of MISO Operations

Cyberpsychology, the study of human behavior and mental processes in the context of digital technologies, offers valuable insights into the dynamics of online communication and information consumption.⁵ When applied to the IW construct, cyberpsychology can inform the development of narrative intelligence strategies that effectively counter misinformation and influence target audiences.⁶

MISO are operations designed to develop and convey messages and devise actions to influence select foreign groups and promote themes to change the attitudes and behaviors of those groups.⁷ Under the IW construct, MISO employs a range of psychological operations techniques, including narrative-based strategies, to shape the information environment and influence target audiences.⁸ Effective MISO requires a deep understanding of the cultural, social, and psychological factors that influence target audiences and the ability to adapt messaging strategies to evolving operational environments and emerging technologies.⁹

Narrative intelligence refers to the ability to understand, create, and manipulate narratives to achieve specific objectives.¹⁰ In the context of internet-based MISO,

narrative intelligence involves crafting compelling stories that resonate with target audiences, evoke emotional responses, and promote desired attitudes and behaviors.¹¹ By leveraging the power of storytelling, MISO forces can effectively counteract misinformation campaigns and shape the information environment.¹²



In an insurgency-affected region, understanding why certain communities align with insurgent narratives might reveal generations-old grievances or cultural beliefs that traditional military intelligence might miss.



An example of narrative intelligence in the context of IW represents a sophisticated understanding of how stories, cultural narratives, and information flow shape the operational environment. At its core, it involves the ability to comprehend, analyze, and influence the complex web of narratives that exist within conflict zones, particularly in unconventional warfare settings where the battle for hearts and minds often supersedes traditional military objectives. In IW, narrative intelligence manifests through multiple interconnected layers. The first layer involves understanding the deep-rooted cultural and historical narratives that shape local perceptions and behaviors. For



■ Source: Illustrations by Daniel Ackerman/Foundation for Defense of Democracies

instance, in an insurgency-affected region, understanding why certain communities align with insurgent narratives might reveal generations-old grievances or cultural beliefs that traditional military intelligence might miss. These insights become crucial for operational planning and execution.

The practical application of narrative intelligence in IW requires forces to operate within and influence existing narrative frameworks rather than attempting to impose external ones. Consider a scenario where Special Forces operators enter a tribal region: success depends not just on their tactical capabilities but also on their ability to understand and work within local power structures, respect traditional decision-making processes, and align their

operations with culturally acceptable norms. This might mean allowing local leaders to take credit for successful initiatives or adapting operational timelines to respect local customs and traditions.

Crucially, narrative intelligence in IW extends beyond mere cultural awareness. It involves active monitoring and analysis of how stories spread through communities, how different groups interpret and modify these narratives, and how competing narratives interact and evolve. For example, insurgent groups might spread stories through social media about government forces disrespecting local customs, while counter-insurgency forces need to not only counter these narratives but also create and

maintain credible alternative narratives that resonate with local populations.

The effectiveness of narrative intelligence in IW can be measured through changes in local behavior patterns, shifts in community allegiances, and the degradation of enemy narrative effectiveness. Success often manifests subtly—perhaps in increased information sharing from local communities, reduced support for insurgent groups, or greater participation in government-initiated programs. These outcomes emerge not from direct force but from the careful understanding and manipulation of the narrative environment that shapes people’s perceptions and decisions.

The challenges in applying narrative intelligence to IW are significant. They require patience, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to think in terms of long-term influence rather than immediate tactical victories. Forces must be prepared to invest time in building relationships, understanding local dynamics, and creating sustainable narrative frameworks that support strategic objectives while remaining authentic to local cultural contexts. This approach represents a fundamental shift from traditional military thinking, emphasizing the power of stories and perception in shaping operational success.

Advantages of Narrative in MISO Operations

Emotional connection, memorability, contextualization, counter-narratives, community building, and adaptability are hallmarks of narrative intelligence.¹³ Therefore, strategies for implementing narrative intelligence in internet-based

MISO, highlighting the importance of understanding target audiences, crafting compelling narratives, leveraging digital platforms, and continuously monitoring and adapting to the evolving information environment will be explained. Furthermore, empirical evidence will be presented to support the efficacy of narrative intelligence in information operations, drawing from studies in psychology, communication, and information warfare.¹⁴

Emotional connection: Narratives have the unique ability to evoke emotions and connect with audiences on a personal level.¹⁵ By crafting narratives that appeal to emotions such as empathy, hope, or fear, MISO forces can effectively counter misinformation with authentic and relatable content.

Memorability: Humans are wired to remember stories and information presented in a narrative format becomes more memorable and easier to recall.¹⁶ By embedding key messages within engaging narratives, MISO forces can ensure that their content leaves a lasting impression on target audiences.

Contextualization: Misinformation often thrives by taking facts out of context or distorting them to fit a particular narrative. By presenting information within a comprehensive narrative framework, MISO forces can provide much-needed context and perspective, helping audiences better understand complex issues.¹⁷

Counter-narratives: In the battle against misinformation, simply debunking false claims may not be enough. MISO forces must provide alternative narratives that offer a

more accurate and nuanced perspective.¹⁸ By creating and promoting counter-narratives that address the underlying motivations behind misinformation and present credible evidence-based information, MISO forces can effectively undermine the credibility of false narratives.

Community building: Narratives have the power to bring people together around shared values and experiences. By fostering a sense of community and encouraging collaboration and dialogue, narrative-based MISO can amplify their impact and reach a wider audience.¹⁹

Adaptability: In the fast-paced world of the internet, misinformation evolves rapidly, adapting to new platforms and technologies. Narrative-based approaches offer flexibility and adaptability, allowing MISO forces to tailor their messaging to different audiences and platforms effectively.²⁰

Empirical Evidence Supporting Narrative Intelligence in MISO

The conceptualization of narrative intelligence as a critical tool in MISO is supported by a growing body of empirical evidence. This research spans various disciplines, including psychology, communication studies, and information warfare, providing a robust foundation for the application of narrative-based approaches in countering misinformation and shaping perceptions in the digital age.

One significant study by Braddock and Dillard conducted a meta-analysis of narrative persuasion research, examining 74 studies with over 17,000 participants.²¹ Their findings revealed that narratives have

a significant effect on beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors, supporting the potential efficacy of narrative-based approaches in MISO. In the context of countering violent extremism, in which MISO is used, Braddock and Horgan explored the use of counter-narratives. Their research provided empirical support for the effectiveness of strategically constructed narratives in disrupting the radicalization process and countering extremist ideologies.²²

Empirical studies collectively support the potential of narrative intelligence as a powerful tool in MISO, particularly in the context of internet-based operations and IW.

The power of narratives in shaping collective memory and identity can be a crucial aspect of MISO, as demonstrated in a study by Hammack and Pilecki.²³ Their research highlighted how narratives can be used to construct and maintain group identities, offering insights into how narrative intelligence can be leveraged in information operations.

In the realm of cyberpsychology, Meshi, Tamir, and Heekeren conducted neuroimaging studies that revealed how social media use affects cognitive and affective processes.²⁴ Their findings provide

a neurological basis for understanding how digital narratives can influence decision-making and behavior, supporting the integration of cyberpsychology principles in narrative-based MISO.

Finally, a comprehensive study by Wardle and Derakhshan for the Council of Europe examined the challenges of information disorder in the digital age.²⁵ Their research provided empirical evidence for the effectiveness of narrative-based strategies in combating misinformation, further supporting the importance of narrative intelligence in modern information warfare.

These empirical studies collectively support the potential of narrative intelligence

as a powerful tool in MISO, particularly in the context of internet-based operations and IW. They provide a scientific foundation for the development and implementation of narrative-based strategies in countering misinformation, shaping perceptions, and achieving strategic objectives in the complex digital information environment.

Implementing Narrative Intelligence in Internet-Based MISO

To effectively implement narrative intelligence in internet-based MISO, MISO forces must adopt a strategic approach that integrates cyberpsychology principles. This involves:



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1. Understanding the target audience.

MISO forces must conduct thorough research to understand the cultural, social, and psychological characteristics of the target audience. This includes identifying their values, beliefs, motivations, and information consumption habits.²⁶

2. Crafting compelling narratives.

Based on the target audience analysis, MISO forces should develop narratives that resonate with the target audience's experiences and emotions. These narratives should be authentic, relatable, and grounded in evidence-based information.²⁷

3. Leveraging digital platforms.

MISO forces must strategically leverage digital platforms, such as social media, blogs, and online communities, to disseminate their narratives effectively. This involves understanding the unique dynamics and algorithms of each platform and tailoring content accordingly.²⁸

4. Monitoring and adapting:

Continuous monitoring of the information environment is crucial when assessing the impact of narrative-based MISO and adapting strategies as needed. MISO forces need to be prepared to adjust their narratives in response to evolving misinformation tactics and changing audience dynamics.²⁹

5. Collaborating and coordinating:

Effective narrative-based MISO requires collaboration and coordination across military units, government agencies, and partner organizations. By fostering a shared understanding of narrative intelligence and establishing clear communication channels, MISO forces can amplify their impact and achieve strategic objectives.³⁰



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Future Uses of Narrative Intelligence

The future of narrative intelligence in MISO will likely be shaped by emerging technologies and changing patterns of human interaction in digital spaces. As artificial intelligence and machine learning capabilities advance, MISO forces will likely develop sophisticated tools for real-time narrative analysis and adaptation. These systems could automatically detect emerging narratives across multiple platforms, analyze their potential impact, and generate counter-narratives that are culturally nuanced and psychologically targeted. This technological augmentation of narrative intelligence will enable faster response times to misinformation campaigns while maintaining the cultural authenticity that is crucial for effective MISO operations.

The integration of narrative intelligence with other aspects of information warfare will become increasingly seamless and sophisticated. Cyber operations could be synchronized with narrative strategies, allowing for coordinated efforts that combine technical and psychological approaches. For example, offensive



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cyber operations and electronic warfare capabilities might be used to limit the spread of adversarial narratives in specific regions while simultaneously deploying counter-narratives through multiple digital channels. This convergence of capabilities will create new opportunities for comprehensive information warfare strategies that leverage both technological and psychological advantages to achieve MISO objectives.

The future battlefield will likely see narrative intelligence becoming a cornerstone of military planning and operations, rather than a supplementary consideration. MISO forces will need to develop specialized units that combine expertise in psychology, cultural anthropology, digital communications, and military strategy. These units will work to create persistent narrative frameworks that can be rapidly adapted to changing

By crafting compelling alternative stories, MISO forces can effectively challenge and dismantle misinformation campaigns, a strategy supported by research on information disorder in the digital age.

circumstances while maintaining strategic coherence. The success of MISO operations may increasingly depend on the ability to shape and maintain narrative superiority across both physical and digital domains, making narrative intelligence a critical component of military power in the 21st century.

Conclusion

In the ever-evolving landscape of information warfare, narrative intelligence emerges as a critical tool for countering misinformation within the IW construct. As the digital age continues to reshape the battlespace, extending it beyond physical territories into the realm of social media, online communities, and digital platforms, the need for sophisticated, psychologically informed approaches to MISO has never been more pressing. By harnessing the power of storytelling and leveraging cyberpsychology principles, MISO practitioners can effectively combat false narratives and promote accurate, evidence-based information when conducting internet-based operations.

The synergy between narrative intelligence and cyberpsychology provides a robust framework for understanding and influencing human behavior in digital environments. This approach acknowledges that in the information age, perceptions and narratives can be as impactful as physical actions in shaping outcomes. The advantages of narrative-based approaches in MISO are multifaceted and powerful, as demonstrated by a growing body of empirical evidence. Meta-analyses of narrative persuasion research have revealed significant effects on beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors, supporting the potential efficacy of narrative-based approaches in MISO. Studies in countering violent extremism have provided empirical support for the effectiveness of strategically constructed narratives in disrupting

radicalization processes and countering extremist ideologies.

Narratives have the unique ability to evoke emotions, creating a deeper, more lasting impact than mere facts alone. Information presented in narrative form is more easily remembered and recalled, enhancing the longevity of MISO efforts. This memorability is supported by neuroimaging studies that reveal how digital narratives can influence decision-making and behavior, providing a neurological basis for the integration of cyberpsychology principles in narrative-based MISO. Narratives also provide a framework for understanding complex situations, countering the often-fragmented nature of online information. By crafting compelling alternative stories, MISO forces can effectively challenge and dismantle misinformation campaigns, a strategy supported by research on information disorder in the digital age.

Furthermore, narratives can foster a sense of shared identity and values, creating resilient communities resistant to adversarial influence. This community-building aspect is particularly crucial in the context of IW, where the lines between combatants and civilians, and between physical and digital battlespaces, are increasingly blurred. The flexible nature of narratives allows for quick adaptation to changing circumstances and diverse audiences across various digital platforms, an essential capability in the rapidly evolving information environment.

As the information landscape continues to evolve at a rapid pace, driven by technological advancements and changing social dynamics, the conceptualization and implementation of narrative intelligence

will remain essential for success in online IW operations. MISO practitioners must continually refine their understanding of digital behaviors, platform dynamics, and emerging trends in online communication to effectively leverage narrative intelligence. Moreover, the integration of narrative intelligence with other aspects of information warfare, such as cyber operations and electronic warfare, presents opportunities for developing more comprehensive and effective strategies. This holistic approach to information warfare, grounded in a deep understanding of human psychology and digital behavior, will be crucial in navigating the complex challenges of the 21st-century battlespace.

As information increasingly becomes a central front in modern conflicts, narrative intelligence stands out as a vital capability for military forces. By embracing this concept and continually adapting it to the changing digital landscape, MISO practitioners can enhance their ability to shape perceptions, influence behaviors, and achieve strategic objectives in the intricate and ever-shifting realm of information warfare. The future of MISO lies not just in mastering technology, but in understanding and influencing the human element at the heart of all conflicts – a task for which narrative intelligence, informed by cyberpsychology and supported by empirical evidence, is uniquely suited. 📌

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