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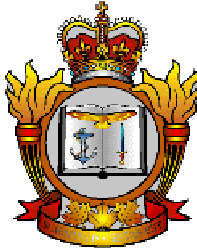

USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO UNDERSTAND NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICTS

Lt Col G.J. Lindsay

JCSP 42

Master of Defence Studies

PCEMI 42

Maîtrise en études de la défense

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Canada

CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES
JCSP 42 – PCEMI 42
2015 – 2016

MASTER OF DEFENCE STUDIES – MAÎTRISE EN ÉTUDES DE LA DÉFENSE

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Lt Col G.J. Lindsay

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ABSTRACT

At the heart of contemporary conflict is a competition between the narratives of opposing parties who use a range of military and other means to influence audiences across the battlespace and beyond. This paper reviews the development of narratives into essential tools for actors seeking to achieve success in conflict. It examines the nature of social media in order to understand why it has become a key means for disseminating narratives in order to shape the opinions and influence the behaviours of those involved. And it considers the scope for using social media analysis to understand how parties to a conflict develop and distribute narratives as they attempt to impose their point of view. It concludes that while there are significant legal, technical and human challenges to be overcome, social media analysis can be used to identify actors' narratives, track their spread and assess their impact on those participating in a conflict.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION……………………………………………………………………….....1

CONFLICT IN THE 21ST CENTURY……………………………………………………..4

The Globalised Battlespace…………………………………………………………7

Making sense of the world: conceptual foundations ……………….…….……...9

A Constructivist Approach ………………………………………….………......11

NARRATIVES……………………………………………………………………….....13

The Evolution of Narratives in Conflict……………………………………………...14

Narratives in the 21st Century: Nation States……………………………………...18

Narratives and non-State Actors……………………………………………………...21

Creating a Successful Strategic Narrative………………..………………………..22

Using Narratives Tactically……………………...………………………………...24

NARRATIVES IN SOCIAL MEDIA……………………………………………………..26

Social media in outline………………………………….…………………………26

Social Media as a Narrative Communications Tool…………………………………27

Types of social media……………………………………………………………...29

ANALYSING NARRATIVES IN SOCIAL MEDIA…………….……………….…...37

Identifying Narratives…………………………………….………………………37

Understanding the audience…………………….……………………..……..44

Social network analysis……………………………………………………………45

Relationships……………………………….…………………………….......46

Tracking the Spread ………………………….……………………………47

Volume Analysis……………………………………………………………………..47

Assessing Influence……………………………………………………………......49

Assessing narrative impact…………………………………………………………...51

Correlation and Regression Analysis…………………………….……………......52

Analytical Constraints……………………………………...………………...53

Legal/ethical…………………………………………………………………….....53

The Law…………………………………………………………………………53

Ethics……………………………………………………………………………54

Technical Challenges…………………………………………………………...56

Behavioural Challenges…………………………………………………………56

CONCLUSION……………………………………………………..…………………..60

BIBLIOGRAPHY………………………………………………………………………62

USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO UNDERSTAND NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICTS

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary conflicts, whether they are localised insurgencies, transnational terror campaigns or state-on-state confrontations, are frequently described as struggles between competing narratives.[1] While military force remains a key element of 21st Century conflict, those involved rarely achieve victory through a decisive battle. Instead, opposing parties find success by convincing others to accept their narrative; using a range of military and other means in order to do so. In recent years options for the employment of narratives have significantly increased, thanks to a proliferation in the use of social media; enabling actors to reach out across the battlespace and beyond. The impact of these developments can be seen in events as diverse as the Arab Spring; controversially described by some as the "Twitter Revolution",[2] the anti-austerity riots in London in 2012[3] and the recent Russian annexation of Crimea[4].

This paper reviews of the use of narratives in conflict and assesses the scope for social media to be employed in their dissemination. This assessment provides the foundations for addressing the central element of the thesis: a consideration of the potential to use social media analysis to understand contemporary conflicts. By undertaking this examination, the paper seeks to demonstrate that while there are challenges to be overcome, **social media**

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[1] United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Communication: The Defence Contribution* (London: HMSO, 2012), 2-11.

[2] Peter Beaumont, "The Truth about Twitter, Facebook and the Uprisings in the Arab World," The Guardian, February 25, 2011, accessed December 12, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/25/twitter-facebook-uprisings-arab-libya.

[3] Sir David Omand, Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, "Introducing Social Media Intelligence (SOCMINT)" *Intelligence and National Security*Vol 27, No 6, December 2012: 801-2.

[4] Patrick Howell O'Neill "Russia Says its Troops aren't in Crimea, but this Soldier's Photos Suggest Otherwise" *Daily Dot*, March 6, 2014, accessed 12 September 2015 http://www.dailydot.com/news/russia-crimea-social-network/.

analysis can be used to identify actors' narratives, track their spread and assess their impact on those participating in a conflict.

The paper starts with a review of the nature of conflict in the 21st Century, outlining how for the liberal powers, entering into a conflict is in most cases a matter of choice. Governments must decide to intervene and their publics be persuaded to support intervention; often over an extended period. As a result, the opinion of people thousands of miles from the "front-line" can be as much a factor in the eventual outcome as the military capabilities deployed on the ground.

If conflicts are a competition between points of view, then it is essential to understand how people interpret information they receive from competing actors. The paper shows that if actors are to develop narratives that appeal to members of their intended audiences, they must understand how cultural and societal norms affect an individual's interpretive framework. It then looks in some detail at the use of narratives in conflict, how they have evolved from being of secondary importance to the current situation where they are central to success. It reflects on how state and non-state actors are responding to these developments; often turning to social media in order to do so.

The paper then turns to a review of social media. Before it is possible to consider the scope for using social media analysis understand conflicts, it is necessary to develop a thorough understanding of the different types of social media available, and in particular their potential as a means for delivering narratives in conflict situations.

The section on social media analysis looks in detail at the challenges involved with identifying actors' narratives in conflict situations, such as having to deal with the way social media has accelerated the trend to break down narratives into a series of loosely structured elements. It shows how it is possible to track these elements across the battlespace and

beyond in order to assess the spread of a narrative from its originator to the intended and other audiences. And it looks at options for assessing the impact of narratives on the opinions and behaviours of those who encounter them. The section concludes with an assessment of the legal, technical and human obstacles that require to be addressed if social media analysis is to reach its full potential.

In concluding, the paper confirms that social media now plays a vital role in the competition between narratives, which is a key feature of contemporary conflict. And that though there are challenges to be overcome, social media analysis provides an opportunity to understand how narratives reach and affect those participating in conflict, both on the battlefield and beyond.

CONFLICT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In the 21st Century conflicts rarely involve nation states fighting battles of attrition to set the conditions for peace by destroying the enemy. Instead, for Western nations in particular, military operations will be undertaken as an integral part of a political campaign involving friendly and neutral populations as well as enemy groups within and beyond the immediate combat area.[5]

Russia's recent wars in Chechnya refute Smith's provocative assertion that "war no longer exists."[6] Wars of survival have yet to become a thing of the past. There will still be battles to secure critical resources; while ethnic groups, minorities in particular, such as the Kurds of Kobane,[7] will likely find themselves persecuted and take up arms as a result.

Some such conflicts will be fought between enemy states, acting singly or in alliances. And where the opportunity arises, commanders will still seek to achieve a decisive result against a clearly defined enemy – the aim being "victory" through a clash of arms. Examples of such events in the latter part of the twentieth century include the destruction of Iraq's armed forces after they invaded Kuwait and the defeat of Argentine forces by the British in 1982.

These events were "wars" in the Clausewitzian sense, with military action leading to conditions for peace. But despite apparent military success at the time, their final outcomes have not proved completely clear cut. The peace that followed the ejection of Iraqi forces from Kuwait proved only temporary. In the case of the Falklands, there was a "mutually

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[5] Indeed Simpson contends that contemporary conflict, with its absence of decisive victories and a plethora of competing interests, can best be understood through the lens of political campaigns.
Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First-Century Combat as Politics* (London: Hust & Co, 2012), 4-5.

[6] Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: the Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2005), 1.

[7] Antonia Todorova, "Turkish Security Discourses and Policies: The Kurdish Question," *Information and Security* Vol.23:2 (2015): 115.

recognised"[8] outcome; the defeat of the Argentinian invasion force. British success on the battlefield has not however, overcome the long-standing Argentinian narrative that the Islands rightfully belong to Argentina; a view maintained by its government and that has widespread support in Latin America.[9]

Rather than being a clash of arms between two enemies, most contemporary conflicts involve a wide range of parties with a variety of different interests, many of whom are not physically present on the battlefield itself. For the liberal powers, a fight for survival, while by no means impossible, is unlikely in the short term. Instead, they find themselves considering whether to become involved in "wars of choice" with extended periods of military (and political) activity rather than finite military campaigns that set the conditions for peace.

When they do become involved in these situations, Western nations will find themselves in complex conflicts with multiple actors that spread well beyond the battle space. In such conflicts, each party will have its own opinion about what is going on and what form "victory" should take. The purpose of combat will be to become able to impose one's own view on the other parties. Or as Simpson puts it "defeat occurs when one side accepts the verdict given by the other."[10]

In some cases, western powers will be able to impose control on an opponent through the threat or use of military action. NATO for example used its military power, manifested in Operation Deliberate Force, to coerce the regime of Slobodan Milošević into signing the Dayton Accords in 1995. Maintaining control over an opponent through purely military

[8] Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*, 35.
[9] For instance the South American trading block Mercosur, reaffirmed its support of the Argentinian position in July 2015
"Falklands' oil industry: Mercosur special declaration in support of Argentina's Malvinas dispute" *Merco Press, South Atlantic News Agency*, July 21, 2015, accessed 9 August 2015, http://en.mercopress.com/2015/07/21/falklands-oil-industry-mercosur-special-declaration-in-support-of-argentina-s-malvinas-dispute.
[10] Simpson, *War from the Ground Up,* 35

means is however, problematic. For example, despite its overwhelming capability on the ground, the Russian Federation was unable to force President Saakashvili from power in 2009.

From the perspective of western powers, contemporary conflict can therefore be seen as an on-going struggle to persuade, in much the same way as political parties seek to convince an electorate of their case[11]. The process might well involve physical destruction; armed force after all can continue to be highly persuasive. But military combat is most unlikely to be the only, or even the primary, means of prosecuting the campaign to convince those involved in the conflict to accept the desired outcome.

Just as a political campaign seeks to command a majority rather than attain universal support, so must actors in contemporary conflicts accept that rarely will it be possible to impose a view on everyone involved. There continue to be cases where one party seeks the total destruction of another; the Sri Lankan government's campaign against the Tamil Tigers being a case in point[12]. But ethical grounds as well as practical logic mean that liberal powers will avoid attempting total destruction of opposition forces where their own survival is not at stake.

Contemporary conflicts are unlikely therefore, to have decisive battles leading to the end of the campaign. While some recent conflicts (eg in the former Yugoslavia) do appear to have led to lasting peace, many, notably Afghanistan and Israel/Palestine have seen major military operations followed by a protracted period of political and sometimes military action to deny "defeated" groups the chance to re-establish the capability to challenge the peace.

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[11] Ibid, 232

[12] Jayshree Bajoria, "The Sri Lankan Conflict" *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 18, 2009, accessed 7 November 2015, http://www.cfr.org/terrorist-organizations-and-networks/sri-lankan-conflict/p11407.

The Globalised Battlespace

Technology is changing the battlespace and the actors within it. Industrial-scale wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw wars spread from the front line to the "home front". Nations recognised the need to maintain morale at home and also the opportunities to be gained from undermining the morale of the enemy's civil population.[13] Decisive results however, were still sought by engaging the enemy's forces in combat. When civilian targets were attacked, this was done in order to reduce a state's capacity to wage war either by destroying military-industrial targets or physically attacking centres of population in the hope of creating fear and thus undermining the morale of the target population.

In contemporary conflict, civilian populations are now common targets. Combatants no longer need to mass physical force against them. The networked nature of western society in particular, means small-scale physical attacks can impact across a population. This fact is recognised by non-state actors who lack the capacity to combat western military forces in open battle but who seek the capability to impact on western publics. They may carry out physical acts (to achieve "propaganda of the deed") or operate in cyberspace in an attempt to appear to achieve tactical success against more capable adversaries. As a result, many contemporary conflicts are "a battle of views and opinions on an international scale that extends far beyond the geographic boundaries of violence in the conflict."[14]

While the liberal powers can expect to continue to deploy personnel to physically counter non-state actors, their opponents' ability to reach out physically or virtually across the world means that increasingly, states will find themselves dealing with a "Global Joint Operational

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[13] For example the British Political Warfare Executive was formed in August 1941 in order "to undermine enemy morale and resistance by various forms of propaganda."
United Kingdom National Archives, *FO 898: Political Warfare Executive and Foreign Office, Political Intelligence Department*: *Papers*, accessed 27 July 215, http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C8197.
[14]United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Communication: The Defence Contribution*, 2-1.

Area."[15] Thus a conflict's dynamics can be influenced as much by the behaviours of audiences at home as by the population living in the conflict zone itself.

In addition to becoming globalised, the battlespace has now become a place where the information environment is as crucial as land, sea, air and space. UK doctrine identifies three domains within this environment:[16]

> **The Cognitive Domain**. The cognitive domain is "where individual and organizational collective consciousness exists",[17] both in the area of the physical conflict and beyond. Bearing in mind that modern conflict involves competing ideas, this domain is critical to success. It can be influenced by the actions of combatants but also by a range of other factors, from group culture to an individual's mental health.
>
> **The Virtual Domain**. The virtual domain (in US doctrine the informational dimension)[18] is the abstract space where information is processed (eg created, shared and stored). This space links the cognitive and physical domains because it exists within elements of the physical domain such as computer networks and is then passed to the cognitive domain as individuals think about the products that result from the information processing.
>
> **The Physical domain**. The physical domain comprises the real world of air, sea, land and space. It is where physical interaction such as combat takes place. The physical

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[15] United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, Defence Concepts and Doctrine Centre, *Strategic Trends Programme: Future Character of Conflict*, February 2010, 18.
[16] United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Communication: The Defence Contribution,* 2-4.
[17] Robert Cordray III and Marc J. Romanych, "Mapping the Information Environment" *IOSphere.* Summer 2005: 7, accessed October 15, 2015, http://www.au.af.mil/info-ops/iosphere/iosphere_summer05_cordray.pdf.
[18] United States Department of Defense, "Information Operations" *Joint Publication 3-13*, November 2012, 1-3.

domain also includes the communications infrastructure such as radio stations and cable networks used by actors in the conflict.

By providing a place for the development of narratives, and by enabling them to be exchanged and interact with users, social media brings these three domains together, thus performing an integrating function on the battlespace.

Making sense of the world: conceptual foundations

If the core requirement for actors in a conflict is to impose meaning[19], it is essential to understand how this can take place. There are a range of views on how individuals make sense of the world. Religious leaders propose that meaning derives from the Divine. They state that humans should interpret the world through a lens offered by their religion's teachings, often drawing on ancient texts which codify its beliefs. Adherents can be expected to develop their attitudes to conflict on the basis of their religion's teachings.

We only have to look to the recent conflict in Afghanistan to see this approach at work. For example in 1996, Mullah Omar, used a "politico-religious stunt … of enormous importance"[20] to stamp his authority on the disparate group of fighters known to the West as the Taliban, by wearing a garment purported to be the cloak of Mohammed.[21] Through this deeply symbolic act, he encouraged the Pashtun people to perceive his insurgency through an Islamic lens. His aim was to persuade them to see the Quetta Shura of the Taliban[22] as a body leading a resistance by loyal followers of Islam against apostates and foreign non-believers.

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[19] Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*, 5.
[20] Thomas H Johnson and M Chris Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan", *Orbis* Vol. 51, Issue 1, Winter 2007, 79.
[21] Shahid Afsar, Chis Samples, Thomas Wood, "The Taliban: An Organizational Analysis", *Military Review*. May - June 2008, 60.
[22] Jeffrey Dressler and Carl Forsberg, "The Quetta Shura Taliban in Southern Afghanistan: Organization, Operations, and Shadow Governance" Institute for the Study of War, December 2009, 1, accessed October 20, 2015, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/QuettaShuraTaliban_1.pdf.

This use of Islamic symbolism is a demonstration of the power of narrative. An analysis of the Taliban movement will identify a wide range of factors that affect its fortunes, from the influence of the Ghilzai tribe to the ability to access safe havens in Pakistan. But one of the organization's main strengths has been its ability to describe the insurgency as a legitimate inheritor of the jihadist elements of the Prophet Mohammed's legacy. Through such acts as wearing the Prophet's cloak, Mullah Omar was able to draw on a narrative that exploited Islam and its teachings to give his campaign legitimacy and garner support from within the country and beyond.[23]

The idea that individuals should interpret the world through religious belief has been challenged in Europe ever since the Enlightenment. This movement was based on the rise of science; with observation, measurement and analysis being employed to "reveal the laws which governed the natural and the social worlds."[24] Its followers took the view that "beyond human consciousness, there is an objective reality"[25]. As a result, many Western concepts are based on logic with meaning stemming from the development of hypotheses which can be proved or disproved using scientific methodology.

At the same time as scientists were developing theories to explain natural phenomena, Europe was also being exposed to alternative religious concepts. Notably the so-called "British Orientalists" brought back Hindu texts from India leading "some European thinkers to a new sense of cultural relativism and a belief that philosophical and religious systems, even Christianity, were largely human constructs."[26] This led to a view that the interpretation of

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[23] By drawing on Deobandi, rather than traditional Pashtu teachings, the Taliban leadership puts forward an interpretation of Islam which places loyalty to the faith as the supreme obligation, thus requiring adherents to wage war on non-belivers and apostates. This enables the movement to reach out beyond the Pashtun lands rather than be constrained to simply being a Pashtun nationalist movement.

[24] Stewart J Brown and Timothy Tackett Ed., *Christianity: Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution 1660-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5.

[25] Sven-Erik Sj strand, J rgen Sandberg, and Mats Tyrstrup, *Invisible management: the social construction of leadership* (London: Thomson Learning, 2001), 30.

[26] Brown Tackett, *Christianity: Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution 1660-1815*, 6.

scientific observations and the development of meaning might depend on the religious and cultural frameworks accepted by society.

A Constructivist Approach

Rather than being a competition between good and evil defined in religious or metaphysical terms, conflict is a struggle between people and their ideas. Each party to the conflict will have its own view of "who is right" based on concepts derived from lived experiences which cause each actor to "socially and symbolically construct and sustain their own organisational realities."[27]

This sense of reality is derived through a process known as "socialisation"[28], in which an individual develops an understanding of the world by playing roles with those around him. In the key formative years, role playing involves an individual's close family. Thus children are likely to follow the same belief systems as their parents. In adulthood, the process continues and widens to include for instance, work colleagues.

Through the repetition of behaviours, the roles of the individual and those around him become internalised and lead the individual to develop a "world which becomes subjectively real to him."[29] This process provides both an understanding of behavioural norms and (crucially when it comes to an individual's understanding of conflict) an identity within a particular society. Thus to take an Afghan example once more, through interaction with family and respected village elders, a young Pashtu male will develop a sense of belonging to his tribe and an understanding of what is expected of him by his religion and his neighbours.

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[27] Dennis A Gioia, and Evelyn Pitre, "Multiparadigm Perspectives on Theory Building,". *The Academy of Management Review* 15, no, 4 (1990), XXX. (584–602)

[28] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1991), 150.

[29] Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* 91

The second key element is the extent to which the requirement to achieve meaning can drive behaviours. If we accept that conflicts are a matter of socially constructed rather than objective truth, then we can conclude that behaviours of different combatants can be driven by different beliefs over what the conflict is about and how it is to be resolved. Barnett[30] for instance, proposes that the Six Day War in 1967 was driven by Nasser's determination that Egypt should be the champion of Arab identity – which could be achieved through opposition to Israel; even though this was likely to lead to defeat on the battlefield. In the 21st Century, western politicians and commanders seeking to make decisions about conflict situations, using criteria based on their own sense of reality, might well find themselves surprised by opponents whose culture and identity means they view the situation in a completely different light.

This is not to deny the role of military action in conflict. After all, the question of "who gets to do the socialising is often a matter of who gets to kill whom first."[31] But it does show that success in a conflict might be as much about having a dominant narrative as effective conventional forces.

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[30] Michael N. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 148.
[31] Richard Rorty *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge univertiy Press, 1989). 185.

NARRATIVES

Narratives are "thematic and sequenced accounts that convey meaning from authors to participants about specific events."[32] They provide a framework which enable people to make sense of the world and can be found for instance in "myth, legend, fables, tales, short storied, epics, history, tragedy … stained-glass windows, movies, local news and conversations."[33]

Western concepts of narratives began with Aristotle who described a narrative as "an artfully arranged telling of events for the purpose of persuasion."[34] Media and other commentators often refer to narratives as if they are some form of political script. But narratives "are not merely a set of words but... a more holistic idea sweeping up not just the entire corpus of texts and speeches dealing with a specific event but all the supporting symbolism and imagery."[35] A true narrative therefore is not just a simple story; it is a "mode of reasoning… a primary way we cognitively process social information"[36] which enables us to make sense of a complex world.

The classical Greek view of narratives proposes that the persuasive power of a narrative stems from its structure ie from having a beginning, middle and end.[37] In particular, the plot line itself will be persuasive. As Dailey and Browning suggest[38], the plot should be structured in a way that makes people aware of a problem, takes them through actions that stem from it and provides a conclusion that suggests moral implications. Thus individuals exposed to the narrative, do not just get presented with a story. They are also encouraged to

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[32] Commander Steve A Tatham *Strategic Communication: A Primer* (Shrivenham: Defence Academy of the UK, 2008), 9.

[33] Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 428.

[34] Ajit Maan, "Calls to Terrorism and Other Weak Narratives," *Narrative and Conflict: Explorations of Theory and Practice*, Volume 2, Issue 1, (April 2015): 79.

[35] Tatham *Strategic Communication,* 9.

[36] Stephanie L Dailey and Larry Browning, "Retelling Stories in Organizations: Understanding the Functions of Narrative Repetition." *Academy of Management Review* Vol. 39, No. 1 (2014): 23.

[37] Maan. "Calls to Terrorism," 80.

[38] Dailey and Browning, "Retelling Stories," 23.

accept the conclusions suggested within it and interpret other situations on the basis of the narrative's framework.

Successful narratives will be told and re-told until the conclusions contained within the story become the social norm - "the way we do things here."[39] This telling and re-telling leaves the story open to reinterpretation as it is passed on. Thus the core elements of the narrative must be strong enough to remain intact when the story is passed on by new story-tellers. This is of particular importance in the digital age when those who tell the story can be social media users, not constrained by social norms that might apply when the interaction is done face-to-face.

The Evolution of Narratives in Conflict

Narratives provide a framework for developing a sense of identity which affects behaviour.[40] This is particularly the case in conflict situations where "societies develop their own narratives which, from their viewpoint, become the only true narratives."[41] The study of narrative is therefore "central to understanding how all aspects of conflict are defined, constructed and understood."[42]

Although the study of "narrative" beyond the world of literature is a recent phenomenon, persuasive stories have supported nations' war efforts since ancient times. For instance, according to Thucydides' account of, Pericles' Funeral Oration,[43] Athens had a strong narrative based on concepts such as democracy, education and opportunity; which was used to rally Athenian citizens during the Peloponnesian War. Likewise, the Roman Empire was

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[39] Sjöstrand, Sandberg and Tyrstrup, "Invisible Management," 43.
[40] Maan *Calls to Terrorism*, 79.
[41] Rauf R Garagozov "Narrative Approach to Interethnic Conflict" *Narrative and Conflict: Explorations of Theory and Practice* Volume 2, Issue 1, (April 2015): 1.
[42] Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, "Strategic Narrative: a New Means to Understand Soft Power," *Media, War and Conflict* Vol 7 No. 1 (2014): 79.
[43] Thucydides, *Pericles' Funeral Oration* Human Rights Library, University of Minnesota. Accessed August 2 2015. http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/education/thucydides.html

based on "the idea that Rome represented peace, good government, and the rule of law …and that the societies with which Rome was in conflict were … barbaric, lawless and dangerous".[44] This idea of Roman civilisation in competition with barbarism ran alongside the concept of a "commonwealth" within the Empire where those peoples who submitted to Roman rule would profit from rather than be destroyed by it.

During those eras when wars principally involved the armed forces of kingdoms and then nation states who fielded small numbers of pressed men and mercenaries, there was little need for narratives to either bolster support at home or undermine the opponent's morale. While some fought for a religious cause, most soldiers were motivated by personal loyalty or for money.[45]

As Clausewitz observes,[46] the French Revolution saw a paradigm shift in the European approach to warfare. The revolution led to the development of a citizen army actively supported by the nation as a whole so that "the plans of generals --schooled in eighteenth-century wars of manoeuvre and drill - were useless in the face of armies inspired by patriotism and revolutionary fervour."[47] The narrative of the Revolution; of liberty, equality and fraternity, penetrated all aspects of the Republic's campaigns, from maintaining morale at the front line to the generation of material support from home.

The American Civil War (telling known as the War Between States and also the War of Northern Aggression in some Southern quarters, where there is still a different interpretation

[44] Neil Faulkener . The Official Truth, Propaganda in the Roman Empire. BBC Website. Accessed August 2, 2015. http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/romanpropaganda_article_01.shtml.
[45] Paul Scannell, *Conflict and Soldiers' Literature in Early Modern Europe: The Reality of War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015): 156.
[46] Janeen Klinger, "The Social Science of Carl von Clausewitz," *Parameters* (Spring 2006): 87.
[47] Kirsten Cale, "Cultural Wars," *Marxist Review of Books,* (November, 1994). Accessed August 3 2015. http://www.clausewitz.com/readings/CaleReview.htm

of events[48], saw populations move to war as a result of competing narratives. This conflict can accurately be described as a competition between narratives with the North attempting to impose "cultural hegemony" on the South which rejected the North's interpretation of American identity.

The First World War is commonly perceived as a war of attrition between armies in the field. Such an interpretation however, ignores that fact that Allied success was not achieved exclusively on the battlefield. While "military action bulks large"[49], success was not exclusively a consequence Allied military might. Propaganda played an important, if supporting role. For example, by the time a 'Directorate of Propaganda in Enemy Countries' was established in London in early 1918, the British had developed a narrative that portrayed the allied cause as being one of liberation from militarism – of all peoples, including those of the Axis nations. At the same time, the naval blockade of Germany led to widespread shortages and hardships that undermined the moral of the German home front and its front line soldiers. Thus an idealistic narrative inspired by Woodrow Wilson was bolstered by one of economic and military might.

Having come of age in the First World War, propaganda was used extensively between 1939 and 1945. Combatant nations found it necessary to develop narratives that would resonate within their own and opposing populations. For example, in November 1940, the British War Cabinet produced a memorandum on Propaganda Policy which directed that the British would wage psychological warfare with "the simultaneous object of destroying the moral force of the enemy's cause and of sustaining and eventually enforcing conviction of the moral

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[48] Pamela Creed, "An American Conflict of Mind: Competing Narratives of National Identity and Values" (PhD diss, George Mason University, 2007).
[49] Basil Liddle Hart, *History of the First World War* (Trowbridge: Cassel and Co, 1973): 590.

force of our own cause".[50] This propaganda campaign would be based on key narratives such as "our determination to keep on fighting until victory is assured" and "our control of the sea communications of Europe and the ultimate physical effect on the German people of our rigorous blockade."[51] These narratives were spread overseas by the Political Warfare Executive which targeted the enemy, while at home the British Film Unit produced a series of patriotic films to reinforce domestic morale.

"The Cold War was a competition between two social-economic systems that regarded each other as natural enemies."[52] Each side had a distinct ideology; ie the advancement of capitalism and democracy on one hand and communism on the other. This competition between the world's two superpowers permeated public opinion and culture and also national policy. For example, the power of the narrative of ideological struggle led to the fall of the Shah in Iran in 1979 being seen at the time by US policy makers and the public in the context of an assertive Soviet Union and a humiliated United States, rather than a result of Islamic and patriotic fervour in Iran.[53]

The overall narratives employed by each side in the Cold War were not however, monolithic. For example, West Germany pursued a policy of 'Ostpolitik' aimed at improving relations with the DDR before the US attempted détente with the Soviet Union, while in the 1980s there was a significant gap between German and American reactions to military intervention in Poland.[54] Likewise, the Soviets were prepared to deal with non-socialist leaders when it suited. None-the-less, both sides promoted their ideologies systematically to audiences at

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[50] "Propaganda Policy: Joint Memorandum by the Minister of Information and the Minister of Economic Warfare," accessed August 7, 2015. http://www.psywar.org/pdf_WarCabinetMemos.pdf.
[51] "Draft memorandum for Political Warfare Executive," *British National Archives file FO 898/3*, accessed August 7, 2015. http://www.psywar.org/appreciation.php.
[52] John L Harper, *The Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press , 2011), 244.
[53] Peter Savigear, *Cold War or Détente in the 1980s: The International Politics of American-Soviet Relations* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1987), 163.
[54] Richard Crockatt, *The Fifty Years War: the United States and the Soviet Union in World Politics, 1941 – 1991* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995), 278.

home and abroad. This was not just a matter of official material in organs such as Pravda or Radio Free Europe. The narrative of a free and affluent West was just as likely to be picked up by citizens of Eastern Europe listening to commercial German radio or on the BBC.

Fortunately, the Cold War did not see military conflict between the two competing ideologies in Europe. It is notable that where the confrontation did turn "hot", both superpowers focussed on military options rather than on developing successful narratives at home and in the areas of operations. Notably in Vietnam, where the US (subscribing to Eisenhower's Domino Theory, that unless checked, Communism would spread from one country to another[55]) intervened in order to stop the spread of communism in South East Asia, the American approach was to seek victory through military force rather than engage in a narrative competition. This led the US into expensive battles to control areas of sparsely inhabited territory, rather than resource work to build support in the Mekong Delta where the vast bulk of South Vietnamese lived.[56]

Narratives in the 21st Century: Nation States

Since the end of the Cold War, Western governments have increasingly seen conflict as essentially a competition between narratives; with military force being applied to support the narrative rather than the other way round. Their premise has become that "a struggle for power is at root a struggle to shape widely accepted views of the world."[57] For example, British military doctrine states that narratives:

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[55] Jerome Slater, "The Domino Theory and International Politics: The Case of Vietnam," *Security Studies* Vol 3, No. 2 (1993): 187-188.
[56] Crockatt, *The Fifty Years War,* 238.
[57] Freedman, *Strategy*, 432.

> "should provide the overall *raison d'être* for our operations. The best narratives are short and succinct… if the strategy is correct, the narrative may not need to change over time."[58]

While Western militaries haven't always given narratives the priority that they deserve,[59] concepts such as "narrative-led operations" are increasingly considered by military thinkers.[60]

Governments use narratives as a strategic tool for persuading domestic and foreign audiences to accept their administration's view of the world. They aim to develop a core "statement of identity around which government, people and armed forces … can unite."[61] Such a narrative will extract ideas from topics as diverse as a nation's ancient history, the values of its people and the goals of its government; into a series of stories[62] which express the essence of a nation's purpose, in a way that can be understood by all.

For example, in "A strong Britain in an age of uncertainty"[63] the UK Government attempts to set out a strategic narrative of a nation which respects human rights, is an active member of the international community and a force for stability in the world. These characteristics draw heavily on Britain's history as a democratic, outwards-looking nation and are set out with the aim of convincing people of the validity of Western concepts such as free speech and respect for international law.

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[58] United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Communication: the Defence Contribution*, Joint Doctrine Note 1/12 (2012), 2-10.

[59] For example in 2007, Johnson and Mason argue that rather than developoing a convincing narrative, coalition forces in Afghanistan were following the same approach of battalion level clearance missions that had proved unsuccessful in Vietnam. Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan", *Orbis,* Vol. 51, Iss. 1 (Winter 2007): 73.

[60] Thomas Elkjer Nissen, "Narrative-Led Operations," Militært Tidsskrift, Vol. 141. No. 4 (January 2013): 73.

[61] Paul Cornish, "The US and Counter Insurgency," *International Affairs*, 85, No. 1 (2009): 76.

[62] Thomas Elkjer Nissen, "The Ever Changing Narrative of Conflict: How the Role of War Narratives Changes from Mobilizing for the Battle of Perceptions to Influencing History" in *Democracy Managers* ed. Carsten Jensen (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Defence College, 2013): 73.

[63] HM Government, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy (*Norwich: The Stationery Office, 2010).

When it comes to conflict, a strategic narrative will set the context as to why a nation has become involved. For example, during the Cold War, the respective US and Soviet strategic narratives of a bastion of liberty and the champion of socialist solidarity respectively, provided interpretative frameworks for their peoples, which aimed to justify participation in proxy wars across the world. In a world where a state's actions can be subject to intense scrutiny[64], a narrative that legitimizes participation in a conflict is essential to democratic nations if support – or at least acquiescence to on-going involvement - is to be maintained.

The State of Israel provides an example of the need for a convincing strategic narrative. Prior to the Six Day War in 1967, Israel was relatively well-regarded in Europe. It was able both to present itself as an island of democracy surrounded by autocracies and to some extent trade on sympathies for the Jewish cause in the years following from the Holocaust. With the Holocaust now in the distant part, Israel's image has moved "from Kibbutz to Kibush,"[65] i.e. from a pioneering democracy to an occupying power; with the result that it has lost support amongst both European publics and to a degree, decision-makers. Despite considerable investment in channels for disseminating messages, the state of Israel is now widely perceived a barrier to peace and an oppressor of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.[66]

The decline in Israel's reputation is a reflection of the poverty of its national strategic narrative. Rather than building on Israel's successes, in such fields as technology, art and the economy, those elements of narrative which do exist tend to dwell on the Israel: Palestine conflict, despite the fact that to be effective, national narratives need to be about the nation

[64] Nissen, *The Ever Changing Narrative of Conflict*, 74.
[65] Reut Institute *Building a Political Firewall against the Assault on Israel's Legitimacy: London as a Case Study* (2010): accessed November 14 2015, http://www.reutnstitute.org/data/uploads/PDFver/20101219%20London%20Case%20Study.pdf..
[66]Lea Landman, "Winning the Battle of the Narrative" (report for 10th Annual Herzliya Conference. January 31 – February 3 2010).

itself, not its relationship with other ones. The result is a narrative that fails to address rational concerns in Europe (e.g. the failure to make peace with the Palestinians), or create an emotionally appealing brand as a small nation with a vibrant civil society that wishes to leave in peace with its neighbours. Unless such shortcomings are addressed, Israel is likely to be perceived in Europe as increasingly illegitimate, with (despite on-going support from the US), a gradual reduction in its strategic flexibility.

Narratives and non-State Actors

Insurgency movements and others with limited resources have also recognised the utility of narratives as a strategic tool. They see an opportunity to level the odds against their more capable opponents by seeking to develop a powerful narrative of their own and to undermine those of their enemies. Bearing in mind that insurgent groups' resources tend to be dwarfed by the governments they seek to undermine, this concentration on ideology and narrative is hardly surprising. If nothing else, insurgent groups need an attractive narrative in order to persuade people to join and replace fallen fighters.[67]

A fine example of a simple but all embracing narrative is that of the Taliban: "Our party, the Taliban. Our people and Nation, Pashtun. Our economy, the poppy. Our constitution, the Sharia. Our form of government, the Emirate."[68] This narrative takes heed of the past, draws on current economic and social issues and religion and projects a vision of a future of an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. It demonstrates that a strategic narrative is about much more than policy or military action. All sectors of society can contribute to it, resulting in a consensus around a shared meaning[69]. This simple but powerful message can then be

[67] Angel Rabasa et al, *Beyond Al Qaeda: the Global Jihadist movement* (Santa Monica: Rand, 2006): 8.
[68] Charles R Lister, "Accounting for the Resilience of the Taliban," *E International Relations* March 2011, accessed August 10 2015, http://www.e-ir.info/2011/03/30/accounting-for-the-resilience-of-the-taliban/.
[69] Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, "Strategic Narrative: a New Means to Understand Soft Power," *Media, War and Conflict*. Vol 7 No. 1 (2014): 71.

consolidated each time a member of the Taliban undertakes an act that is seen to support, Sharia, the poppy and so on; or for that matter when a member of the Afghan National Security Forces or NATO acts in a way which appears to contravene these ideas.

Creating a Successful Strategic Narrative

No matter who constructs them, all elements of the strategic narrative – both words and deeds – must reflect values inherent within society if they are to resonate across it. A narrative's ability to resonate with a target audience is not simply a matter of paying due heed to history and cultural norms, although both are essential. As Simpson observes,[70] a successful strategic narrative needs to be effective across three dimensions. First, it must appeal at the rational level, standing up to intellectual scrutiny. Second, it must work at the emotional level, resonating with an individual's lived experience. Finally – and this is a point that is sometimes missed - it must have a strong moral component that can bring together the logical and emotional dimensions in order to make the narrative work in the long term.

The "war on terror" narrative developed by the Bush administration is a case in point. Rightly or wrongly, in the minds of many Americans, this narrative has succeeded in simplifying a complex issue; brigading a wide variety of insurgencies, state-sponsored actors and terrorist networks, into a single global movement.[71] It has also brought together several strands of thought to create a cohesive idea of American identity. Thus the narrative works at the domestic level by depicting terrorists as targeting American territory and the people who inhabit it, simply because they are American. This commentary on a global jihadist network draws out the idea of "American values" through the depiction of a movement that is opposed to them.

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[70] Simpson, *War from the Ground Up,* 213.
[71] Amy Zalman & Johnathan Clarke, "The Global War on Terror: A Narrative in Need of a Rewrite," *Ethics & International Affairs*, Vol. 23, Issue 2 (Summer 2009): 101.

While the narrative of a United States at odds with Islamist extremism was some time in the making, it came of age as a response to the 9/11 attacks. At that time it was a highly effective emotional appeal to an American people, drawing for instance on the well-established sense of America acting in defence of "freedom"; a term with a strong emotional appeal in the United States.[72]

At the same time, the narrative had the ability to appeal from an intellectual perspective, in that a global jihadist movement genuinely threatened US interests in the Middle East and beyond. Intellectual challenges to the War on Terror narrative have been and continue to be possible. It is possible for example, to undermine it by pointing out that the campaign against the Saddam Hussein regime was against a government with a secular ideology which was completely at odds with and extremist Islamic ideology. But such intellectual challenges appear to have limited impact on decision makers, as even now under President Obama, many Bush policies remain in place.[73]

The on-going success in the US of this narrative is perhaps a consequence of a strong moral component that underpins it. The War on Terror narrative draws on the idea of American exceptionalism, "the informal ideology that endows Americans with the conviction that their nation is an exemplary one."[74] Although there have been Americans who have challenged the narrative, (in the case of the Iraq occupation, in large numbers) by drawing on this idea of America and Americans being exceptional, with a unique place in the world, the narrative remains intact in the United States.

[72] Simpson, *War from the Ground Up,* 208.
[73] Zalman and Clarke, *Global War on Terror*, 109.
[74] Robert G Patman, "Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror", *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 27 No. 6 (2006): 964.

The idea of exceptionalism does not extend to Europe. It is the case that in Europe, concerns about the threat from terrorism remain.[75] For example in 2011, 91% of respondents to a European Commission survey identified terrorism as "important" or "very important".[76] Moreover a significant proportion of Europeans support US counter-terrorism efforts, albeit in considerably smaller numbers than in America itself. However, while the numbers of Europeans who support US policy have now recovered, there was a considerable drop-off in support for the US during the latter part of the Bush Presidency. While support for the Bush Presidency's approach also fell away to some extent in the USA itself, the effect was much more noticeable in Europe.[77]

Unlike in the Middle East where a rejection of the War on Terror narrative is probably a reflection of a general anti-American trend,[78] Europeans are generally well-disposed towards the USA. So, the drop in European public support for the American approach to terrorism may well have been a result of difficulties with the War on Terror narrative itself. Many Europeans might have agreed with the approach from an emotional and intellectual perspective. But Europe has a strong tradition of collective action. By acting on the basis of a "coalition of the willing" rather than as a member of formal international networks, the US approach was contrary to many European's moral concepts. As a result, the narrative has proved to be harder to sustain in Europe than it has been in the USA.

Using Narratives Tactically

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[75] Jeremy Allouche & Jeremy Lind, "Public Attitudes to Global Uncertainties: A Research Synthesis", *Institute of Development Studies* (November 2010), accessed September 5, 2015, http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/ESRC%20Global%20Uncertainties%20Research%20Synthesis%20FINAL_tcm8-14632.pdf.

[76] European Commission, "Internal Security," *Special Eurobarometer* No, 371(November 2011), accessed September 6, 2015, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_371_en.pdf.

[77] Pew Research Center, "Views of the U.S. and American Foreign Policy*", Global Attitudes and Trends Survey* (June 2012), accessed September 9, 2015, http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/06/13/chapter-1-views-of-the-u-s-and-american-foreign-policy-4/.

[78] Ibid.

Narratives are not for the exclusive use of strategists. While activity on the ground should be consistent with the overall strategic context, in a conflict scenario narratives will be developed for particular operational areas or specific operations. For example, while the International Security Assistance Force's operational narrative for Afghanistan covered a wide range of aspects, the material produced for audiences in western provinces such as Herat, focussed primarily on development issues. This was due to the comparatively benign security situation and the importance of building the local economy to bring about lasting change. It has to be borne in mind however, that narratives developed to meet local circumstances may travel beyond the target audience. For example, material targeted at Herat could be taken across the border due to the relatively free movement of people from western Afghanistan into Iran, while thanks to social media, the same material might be picked up by Farsi speakers across the world.

NARRATIVES IN SOCIAL MEDIA

The latest evolution in the use of narratives in conflict has arisen with the development of social media. Social media provides a new delivery means for actors aiming to disseminate narratives on the battlefield and beyond. At the same time, social media offers analysts new ways to identify, track and monitor the impact of narratives deployed against audiences involved in conflicts.

In order to assess the potential for social media analysis to provide an insight into the use of narratives in conflict, it is necessary to review the nature of social media. It is essential to understand what social media is; the types of platforms available, and their strengths and weaknesses with respect to both disseminating narratives and providing an analytical tool. An understanding of the main analytical methodologies and the potential constraints faced by social media analysts is also required. The next section of this paper therefore sets out the key characteristics of social media and considers how different platforms can be used in conflict settings. It then goes on to assess the potential to use social media analysis to understand how narratives are affecting a conflict and the possible challenges in doing so.

Social media in outline

There are numerous definitions of social media. Relatively typical examples include the Oxford Internet Institute's definition of social media as "websites or other internet based services where the content being communicated is created by the people who use the service"[79] or Kaplan and Haenlin's[80] description of "web-based and mobile-based Internet

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[79]Department of Work and Pensions, *The Use of Social Media for Research and Analysis: A Feasibility Study,* ad hoc research report No. 13 (December 2014), accessed November 22, 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/387591/use-of-social-media-for-research-and-analysis.pdf.

[80] Anrdeas M Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, "Users of the World Unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media", *Business Horizons* Vol. 53, Issue 1, (January–February 2010), quoted in: Bogdan Batrinca and

applications that allow the creation, access and exchange of user-generated content that is ubiquitously accessible."

Similar terminology can be found in military circles. For example, the US Department of Defense describes social media as "the different means by which people, enabled by digital communication technologies, connect with one another to share information and engage in conversations on topics of mutual interest. Social media is an umbrella term describing a variety of communication mediums and platforms including social networks, blogs, mobile applications, and others."[81] In his recent work 'The Weaponization of Social Media'[82], Nissen concludes that "social network media" are "internet connected platforms and software used to collect, store, aggregate, share, process, discuss or deliver user-generated and general media content, that can influence knowledge, perception and thereby directly or indirectly prompt behaviour as a result of interaction."

Each of these definitions has a technological dimension. But they all recognise that the critical element of social media is not the technology itself but its potential for use by individuals. When it comes to narratives in conflict, the most important feature of social media is its potential for narrative dissemination by anyone with access to the internet or even just a mobile phone.

Social Media as a Narrative Communications Tool

Philip C. Treleaven, "Social media analytics: a survey of techniques, tools and platforms", *AI and Society* Vol. 30, Issue 1 (February 2015): 89.

[81] United States, Department of the Navy, *US Navy Command Leadership Social Media Handbook*, (February 2012), accessed November 22, 2015, http://imagery.navy.mil/documents/Navy%20Social%20Media%20Handbook%20Fall%202012.pdf.

[82] Thomas Nissen, *The Weaponization of Social Media: Characteristics of Contemporary Conflicts*, (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Defence College, 2015), 40.

Collings and Rohozinski[83] identify six key characteristics that have an impact on social media's potential to support narrative competition:

> **Pervasiveness**: there are over 1.5 billion internet users world-wide. Even in underdeveloped regions suffering from conflicts, large numbers of people have mobile phones and can thus use forms of social media.
>
> **Ubiquity**: social media is now available on a wide variety of devices. Central to the evolution of social media's ability to impact on conflict is the development of mobile devices over which content can be communicated.
>
> **Instantaneity**: While there are daily peaks in activity (for example a significant proportion of postings take place after the working day), social media does not rely on the daily news cycle that impacts on traditional channels. Instead, users can post comments about events as they happen.
>
> **Interactivity**: The interactive nature of social media enables users to form communities and relationships with one another. Traditional structures can be bypassed.
>
> **Social and Specific**: While social media has the potential to create new interest groups, much of its power comes from harnessing pre-existing networks. Members of a diaspora for example, are now able to remain in regular, frequent contact with one another even if separated by oceans.
>
> **Stickiness**: Stickiness is the ability of social media to dominate an individual's personal information environment, for instance due to the speed, quantity and trusted

[83] Deirdre Collings and Rafal Rohozinski, *Bullets and Blogs New media and the Warfighter (*Pennsylvani*:* US Army War College, 2008), 9.

nature of messages emanating from social contacts. As a result, social media content has the potential to be more powerful and of longer lasting impact to individuals than messages conveyed over traditional means.

Nissen[84] however points out two other important characteristics when it comes to analysing the role of social media; ie its unpredictability and uncontrollability. All eight of these characteristics have to be built into any attempts to understand how social media is affecting populations engaged in conflict. For example, while a narrative element may first appear in circulation after careful construction by an actor, the ability of users to generate their own content means that subsequent versions of the story have the potential to be modified in an unpredictable way as they are passed on to other users. Those developing narratives therefore need to aim to develop ones which can withstand such re-telling in social media.

Types of social media

There is now a range of platforms, including social network media such as Twitter and Facebook, but also other tools such as blogs, wikis and Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds can be considered social media. Each type has particular characteristics which affect their utility as a means for disseminating narratives in conflicts. Analysts need to have an understanding of these characteristics in order to assess how actors might use social media for this purpose.

Fuchs provides a useful insight by classifying types of social media according to the extent to which they support four main forms of sociality: information, communication, collaboration and community.[85] He proposes that all the main social media applications support cognition "the necessary pre-requisite for communication and the precondition for the emergence of

[84] Nissen, *Weaponization of Social Media*, 12.
[85] Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (London: Sage, 2014), 35–37.

cooperation,"[86] while video content sharing and microblogging sites also support communication. Fuchs concludes however, that only social network sites and wikis support the full range of social functions.

Fuchs' approach helps analysts to understand the purposes for which social media might be used but suffers from being very broad. Table 1 below sets out two alternative options for classifying social media. In his work on weaponising social media, [87] Nissen uses Kaplan and Heanlein's classification; which emphasises the type of technology involved. In contrast, Li and Bernoff[88] focus on the activity being undertaken by the user. This approach provides a useful framework for considering how social media might be used by those participating in conflict to develop and spread their narratives.

<table>
<tr><th>Kaplan and Heanlein[89]</th><th>Li and Bernoff[90]</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Collaborative projects: Wikis and Social Bookmarking Applications</td><td>People collaborating: Wikis and Open Source</td></tr>
<tr><td>People reacting to each other: Forums, Ratings and Reviews.</td></tr>
<tr><td>People organising content: Tags</td></tr>
<tr><td>Blogs and micro blogs</td><td rowspan="2">People creating: blogs, user-generated content and podcasts</td></tr>
<tr><td>Content communities</td></tr>
</table>

[86] Ibid, 42.
[87] Nissen, *Weaponization of Social Media,* 38.
[88] Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff, *Groundswell, Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*, (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2011), 21-33.
[89] Kaplan and Haenlein, *Users of the World Unite*, 62-64.
[90] Li and Bernoff, *Groundswell*, 21-33.

Social Networking Sites	People Connecting: Social Networks and Virtual Worlds
Virtual Game Worlds	
Virtual Social Worlds	

Table 1: Social Media Typologies

Using Lee and Bernoff's typology as a basis, we can see how people can use social media for the following functions in conflicts:

> **People Collaborating.** Collaborative social media applications enable the "joint and simultaneous creation of content."[91] The main types of collaborative applications are Wikis where users share the responsibility for creating and editing a site. Although not set up with the specific purpose of creating social networks, wikis include "talk pages" where contributors can post personal profiles and discuss developing content.
>
> Collaborative platforms therefore provide actors with an environment to develop and refine a narrative. This can be done overtly through a public wiki, or discretely by setting up a private network. However, material developed through the use of a collaborative platform will need to be transferred onto other means for distribution. This is because users have to seek out material of interest; wikis themselves do not provide actors with the means to push narratives out to target audiences. Analysts seeking to understand an actor should track down its collaborative workspaces as activity in these areas will provide information on how an actor develops a narrative. But it will be necessary to scrutinise other platforms to see how that narrative is then played out to target audiences.

[91] Kaplan and Haenlein, *Users of the World Unite,* 63.

People Reacting. Forums, where users post messages that can be viewed by other members of the group, are a mature form of technology and widely used to facilitate discussion between individuals with a common interest. This can include a discussion between individuals with an interest in a particular narrative. To a degree, forums can provide actors with a collaborative space in that they can direct participants to documents and other material eg through web links. They do not however, enable users to work collaboratively on a single piece of content in the way that is possible using wiki technology.

Private forums and chat rooms are a well-established means of communication between members of insurgencies and terrorist organisations.[92] These forums are primarily a means for enabling committed activists and fighters to communicate with one another.[93] None-the-less, if they can be penetrated, forums such as those operated by the Global Islamic Media Front on behalf of al Qaeda can provide additional insight into a movement's narrative as it is conveyed to and between its grass roots supporters. [94]

People Organising. Social bookmarking or "tagging" sites are platforms where users can categorise, collect and rate material drawn from across the internet. Propagandists can use this facility to draw the attention of potential targets to mutually supporting narrative content. There have been suggestions that insurgent

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[92]Mohammed Ali Musawi, *Cheering for Osama: How Jihadists use Internet Discussion Forum, (* Quilliam Foundation, 2010), accessed November 5, 2015. http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/cheering-for-osama-how-jihadists-use-the-internet-forums.pdf.
[93] Angel Rabasa et al, *Beyond Al Queda: Part 1, The Global Jihadist Movement* (Santa Monica, Rand, 2006), 17.
[94]Aaron Y Zelin and Richard Borrow, *The State of Global Jihad Online: A Qualitative, Quantitative, and Cross-Lingual Analysis*, (New America Foundation, January 2013), accessed August 21, 2015, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/opeds/Zelin20130201-NewAmericaFoundation.pdf .

groups are using such sites to send messages[95] but such use is thought to concern coded messages providing tactical information for operatives and thus of limited use to the narrative analyst. Analysts too will find tagging sites useful as they provide signposts to material and give insights into how opposing propagandists organise their narrative material. A judicious use of these sites may well help analysts to place single narrative elements into the context of a wider framework developed by members of the target audience.

People Creating. Platforms which support content creation enable users to express their personalities and opinions. Blogging is perhaps the simplest way that individuals can express themselves in public. Blogging began with the publication of text-based personal journals in the late 1990s. This form of social media has evolved into a more interactive medium due to the ability of readers to post comments on a blog. In addition, contemporary bloggers might include audio and video material as well as text.

Blogs contain both fact and opinion and are commonly encountered in conflict situations; often produced by participants with a personal stake in the outcome.[96] In a conflict situation, there is considerable scope for bloggers to create narrative material in order to influence target audiences. A subtle mix of opinion and fact has the scope to be very persuasive. For example, a blog can include "factual" video footage which appears to report on the facts in the video but which is in fact propaganda.

[95] Mary-Ann Russon. "Isis and Al-Qaeda terrorists using eBay, Reddit and porn to send coded messages says Mossad," *International Business Times,* March 2, 2015, accessed August 29, 2015. http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-al-qaeda-terrorists-using-ebay-reddit-porn-send-coded-messages-says-mossad-1490130.

[96] For example, Peace Direct collates blogs about conflicts: Peace Direct, "Insight on Conflict", accessed September 12, 2015, http://www.insightonconflict.org/blog/.

The scope to use blogging to influence is further enhanced by the option to comment on and create links to other blogs, in order to create a "blogosphere." Some users will source all their information from the content contained within the blogosphere. They can find themselves presented with a wide range of material, all of which takes a consistent approach to issues of interest to the user, thus providing a narrative to influence that user's views.

Micro-blogs form a specific subset of this category. Technology now enables micro-bloggers to convey significant amounts of information in these short statements due for instance, to the ability to link posts to longer articles, audio or video material elsewhere. The most well-known micro-blog application is Twitter which enables users to post an entry of up to 140 characters in length. In Li and Bernoff's typology, Twitter and some other micro-blogging platforms are classified as social networks sites due to their inclusion of functions such as the ability to build personal profiles that are commonly found on social networks.

Software enabling users to produce audio and video material is now cheap and widely accessible,[97] to the extent that it is possible to make a video of reasonable quality using a smart phone. Sites such as Flickr, Slideshare and YouTube now enable people to share their creations publicly or within a specific community. They also enable people to categorise and comment on the material that others publish, and create links to other material. This ability to link and push content into spaces where casual users might come across it helps content creators to reach out to target audiences.

[97] Britt Michaelian, "How to Create Professional Videos With Your Smart Phone," *Huffington Post* December 4, 2013, accessed November 7, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/britt-michaelian/how-to-create-professiona_b_3062287.html.

People Connecting. The most common platforms with a primary aim of connecting people are social network sites. As the name suggests, their primary purpose is to enable users to develop and maintain relationships with one another. For example, users are able to post comments on one another's profiles, share photographs and links to material elsewhere on the internet and receive automated updates from "friends" as they edit their profiles. They also enable the development of communities with shared interests.[98] Notably they can support the rapid transmission of information. Updates posted by individuals can quickly spread across a network as users share it with their friends. This provides public authorities with opportunities to convey information rapidly in an emergency. Likewise it provides those that seek to undermine governments with a mechanism for distributing ideas without having to go through traditional media or through one-to-one contacts.

Social network sites continue to evolve in ways which affect their utility as tools for developing and distributing narratives. Because users are now able to take photographs, create videos and upload them direct onto Facebook for example, it is possible that in addition to connecting people, social network sites can be about content creation. Video and image upload sites remain important for narrative development and circulation however. This is because they provide users with an alternative means for following specific topics through the option of "subscribing" to particular channels.

Less common are virtual worlds which enable users to go beyond the constraints of social networking sites in order to create a virtual second life for themselves where they can adopt a new identity. Users develop an avatar to represent themselves,

[98] Jan H. Kietzmann et al, "Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media", *Business Horizons*, Vol. 54, Issue 3, (May-June 2011): 247.

acting either in the virtual environment of a computer game or and a virtual social world where the environment is designed to resemble real life.

Text Messaging. Not all forms of social media require access to the internet. Text messaging originated began in the early 1980s as a means of communicating between individuals through short messages. Technology now permits agencies to send messages to pre-identified subscribers or to all those within range of a particular cell phone mast. Services such as 'Call Twitter' also exist to enable individuals to make use a traditional voice call to generate text messages or even internet-based material such as tweets. Bearing in mind that in some conflict scenarios, access to the internet might be limited, it is important not to lose sight of text and voice technology as both continue to enable individuals to generate, comment on and share content.

ANALYSING NARRATIVES IN SOCIAL MEDIA

The previous sections of this paper have reviewed the role of narratives in conflicts and considered the potential for using social media platforms to develop and disseminate them. The remainder considers whether social media analysis can be used to identify, follow and assess the influence of narratives on conflicts.

Identifying Narratives

In order to track the spread of narratives across an audience, it is first necessary to identify them. Social media however, is making this task increasingly complex. The Aristotelian narrative structure with a clear plot line which has stood the test of time for centuries is now evolving. In the past, even when narratives were repeated and retold "the general spirit or main idea remained intact."[99] But social media makes it possible to rapidly transform a narrative's structure as it is shared across cyberspace at high speed. The result, according to Levine and Alexander is that "stories now are open-ended, branching, hyperlinked, cross-media, participatory, exploratory, and unpredictable."[100]

This is because rather than setting out complete narratives, organisations can use social media to circulate individual narrative elements rather than the whole story. Individuals also post their own original material, or comment on others'. In the age of social media, narratives must therefore, be extremely resilient if their structures are to survive reinterpretation in social media.

Despite this general trend towards the fragmentation of some narratives in social media, identifying those of the liberal powers remains relatively straightforward. This is due to their

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[99] Dailey and Browning, *Retelling Stories in Organizations*, 24.
[100] Bryan Alexander and Alan Levine, "Web 2.0 Storytelling: Emergence of a New Genre", *Educase Review*, (November – December 2008): 40.

emphasis on transparency and accountability. The UK Government is a typical example. It uses the www.gov.uk brand to set out its strategic narrative; putting forward for example, its rationale for involvement in Afghanistan: https://www.gov.uk/government/world/afghanistan (accessed 15 August 2015).

Social media is then used to support this narrative. In the Afghanistan case, the Government-sponsored UKForcesAfghanistan pages on Facebook and a linked YouTube channel were used to reinforce elements of the strategic narrative. Content included coverage of British efforts to provide security in Helmand Province and build the capacity of the Afghan security forces, both of which the UK Government saw as narrative elements that helped justify its participation in that conflict.[101]

Since their governments aim to ensure definitive statements are widely available, it's not necessary to trawl social media in order to identify the strategic narratives of liberal powers. Moreover, official use of social media makes it possible to see how governments break down their narratives into themes. Having this information to hand means it's relatively simple to know what to look for when seeking to track these across a target audience.

When considering the narratives of other actors, the situation is not always so straightforward. Not all nation states set out their strategic narrative in a transparent fashion. This might be a result of a deliberate attempt to confuse, or simply a case of narratives being set out using symbolism that is only familiar to specific cultures.

[101] For example, an end-of tour video presented by Brigadier Douglas Chalmers, Commander 20 Mechanised Brigade marking the end of his Brigade's tour in Afghanistan in 2012 comments on improvements to the security situation, capacity building with the Afghan National Security Forces and other activities central to the then UK mission as part of the International Security Assistance Force: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqXTn0wraIg accessed August 16, 2015.

China provides a case in point. Western commentators have yet to reach a consensus on China's strategic narrative which has been described as "intentionally deceptive."[102] Rosman contends that the contemporary Chinese national strategic narrative is assertive with increasingly strident criticisms of Japan and the USA in particular. His view is that China has long had a sense of injustice over what it sees as interference in its natural sphere of influence and that, as the nation builds its political, economic and military power, it is increasingly willing to publicly challenge the West, with the result its narrative is becoming more confrontational.[103] In contrast Jerden[104] asserts that China's current narrative is in accordance with historic norms, commenting that China and Japan have confronted one another over disputed island groups on a regular basis since the late 1970s.

Faced with such a divergence of views, the social media analyst could take an inductive approach, building up data sets in order to try to identify a narrative from scratch. Bearing in mind that there is significant commentary on China's narratives, a deductive approach is more likely to yield results. It would for instance, be possible to test the hypothesis that China's foreign policy narrative has remained unchanged even though its power has increased.

The transient nature of social media makes historical analysis difficult however. For example, the SINA Corporation did not launch its Weibo (micro-blogging) service in China until August 2009,[105] so any historical studies will have to involve sources other than just

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[102] Gilbert Rozman, "Testimony before the U.S.-China Economy and Security Review Commission: China's Narratives Regarding National Security Policy" March 10, 2011.
[103] David Millar, "What's in a Story?: Chinese Narratives on Territorial Conflict in the Pacific,"*China Brief* Vol. 15 Issue: 7 (April 2015), accessed November 27, 2015, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43749&cHash=33cd8a74abaeef150731e724898bf549#.VldQVuN3Cro.
104 Bj rn Jérden, "The Assertive China Narrative: Why It Is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought into It," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* Vol. 7, Issue 1 (2014): 85.
[105]Runfeng He, "How does the Chinese government manage social media? The case of Weibo", *Reuters Institute, University of Oxford,* accessed August 18, 2015, http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/publication/how-does-chinese-government-manage-social-media,.

social media. Even research of contemporary issues can be difficult unless research is well-resourced. In 2013 there were 60,000 Chinese government Weibo accounts, albeit the Foreign Ministry had only 11 core channels.[106] This means it can take time to identify narrative themes for tracking.

While non-state actors involved in conflict may be keen to spread a narrative amongst supporters, many insurgent groups hide their activities from their opponents. For example, the al Qaeda mouthpiece 'Global Islamic Media Front' has produced a detailed guide aimed at teaching supporters how to protect their on-line activities from surveillance.[107] Analysts seeking to investigate the narratives of groups like this will therefore have to consider how best to find insurgents' narratives before they can start to analyse them.

The Pakistani insurgent group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) illustrates this point well. This group has its origins in the resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. After the Soviet withdrawal, LeT switched its attention to Kashmir, using violence to oppose Indian rule. During the presidency of Zia al Haq, the Group sought to establish itself as a legitimate political and social movement, campaigning to unite all of Kashmir with Pakistan.

An uninformed search for LeT material on social networks might cause analysts to draw inaccurate conclusions if their search was for Kashmiri themes. This is because LeT's Kashmiri ambitions are Islamist as well as territorial[108]. Its goals are not only to unite Kashmir but also to bring radical Islamist governance to Pakistan, an aim which has become of increasing importance since the end of the Zia Presidency. As a result LeT has become

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[106] Barry van Wyk, "The Chinese government and social media", accessed August 18, 2105 http://www.danwei.com/the-chinese-government-and-social-media/.
[107] Rabasa et al, 17.
[108] Dr. Stephen Tankel, "Mumbai-Style Attacks and the Threat from Lashkar-e-Taiba", Testimony to the House Homeland Security Committee on June 12, 2013, accessed August 19, 2015, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Stephen_Tankel_Testimony_06122013.pdf.

aligned to other global Jihadi movements and become a challenge for the Pakistani as well as Indian government.

While the movement believes in the use of *dawa* (proselytizing) in order to mobilise support within Pakistan[109], its narrative is frequently obscured. For example, rather than communicate itself, LeT makes use of its linked political movement the Jamat-ud-Dawa (JuD)[110] in an attempt to continue to define itself to some audiences as a legitimate organisation rather than as an armed militant group.

This is not to say that LeT's extremist tendencies are completely hidden. JuD has made extensive use of Twitter and Facebook and has published videos on YouTube featuring LeT attacks in India and Pakistan.[111] In some cases, it has hijacked the social media accounts of others in order to post its material.[112] But much of its Facebook and Twitter output has been in English, indicating an interest in radicalising members of the Pakistani diaspora, whilst using the channel to maintain a legitimising narrative for its home audience. Social media analysts with and interest in LeT will therefore need to be able to monitor accounts used by the group itself as well as its political front. They will need to bear in mind the fact that some themes may originate from sites belonging to other agencies which have been hacked by the movement and that the narrative may vary according to target audience.

Where an actor's narrative is not already well known, literature searches and reviews of traditional media and an actor's internet sites will often indicate what to look for in social media. For example, an analyst looking to identify al Qaeda's narrative will find an extensive array of research material on the group's origins, ideology, behaviours, etc.

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[109] Geoffrey Kambere, et al, "The Financing of Lashkar-e-Taiba", accessed August 19, 2015, https://globalecco.org/en_GB/ctx-v1n1/lashkar-e-taiba.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Tankel, *Mumba-Style Attacks*
[112] Christopher Heffelfinger, "The Risks Posed by Jihadist Hackers", *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 6 Issue 7 (July 2013), accessed November 27, 2015, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-risks-posed-by-jihadist-hackers.

Original source material is also relatively easily available, through publications such as 'Inspire' magazine and material issued by Azzam publications.

If it has been possible to develop an understanding of an actor's narrative prior to investigating social media then the next step will be to identify supporting themes in the social media being used by the actors themselves or those sufficiently close to them as to represent the actor's views. Using Lee and Bernoff's "people creating" category, this means monitoring blogs, microblogs, video and image sharing sites.

Although some actors may set out a complete narrative in social media, an assessment of social media channels is more likely to provide the analyst with partial snapshots rather than an overview of the whole. These snapshots or "memes" (an idea, concept or belief present in a message)[113] are the items to be followed-up across the target audience. Each one is a "micro-content story, able to project a core piece of the overall narrative either directly or indirectly."[114] They go beyond ideology and cover the whole range of ideas that express the essence of a particular actor. For example an insurgent group is just as likely to seek to tell an attractive story designed to encourage potential fighters emphasising "the pleasure of agency, the thrill of adventurism, the joy of camaraderie, and the sense of living an 'authentic Islamic life"[115] as it is to take about its ideology. Both aspects of that narrative will prove important when it comes to making an assessment of its impact on an audience.

There will be cases where research of non-social media sources provides scant information on what an actor's strategic narrative is. In that case, adopting an inductive approach to an initial social media analysis is likely to the way forward. In that case, the analyst will need to

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[113] Ravi Gupta and Hugh Brooks, *Using Social Media for Global Security* (Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), 110.
[114] Nissen, *Weaponization of Social Media,* 48.
[115] Alberto M Fernandez, "Confronting the Changing Face of Al Qaeda Propaganda" (Paper presented for the Washington Institute Counter Terrorism Lecture Series, February 25, 2014, accessed 28 November 2015. http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/confronting-the-changing-face-of-al-qaeda-propaganda.

identify channels used by the actor and then gather data on the messages borne on them. Bearing in mind the way social media is affecting traditional narrative structure, this search for data may simply be a trawl for content about a specific actor, repeated elements of plot, or particular actions. In so doing, the sentiment expressed in these fragments, and the links between them can be traced in order that a narrative can emerge.

Where texts are being analysed word clouds can be used to identify major themes. Where video or audio material is being analysed, the sound track can be dissected to identify key words, though the process of doing so can be laborious. Alternatively videos or audio content can merely be watched and categorised according to themes the analyst assesses to be contained within them. For example, an observer of jihadi videos might watch a video of a successful attack on government forces and identify narrative elements such as "sanctity of martyrdom operations" (suicide bombing), "apostate enemies" or "increasing capability of the movement".

While the types of social media classified by Lee and Bernoff as creational platforms are likely to be the best sources of material for narrative identification, "collaborative" platforms should also be searched. As Bilic and Bulian's paper on Kosovo demonstrates,[116] Wikipedia can provide an insight into an actor's narrative. Unlike Wikipedia, most wikis are set up for specific groups. As collaborative spaces, they have the potential to host the narrative of an entire movement, in contrast to blogs which provide a platform for a single individual.[117]

[116] Pasko Bilic and Luka Bulian, "Lost in Translation: Contexts, Computing, Disputing on Wikipedia" iConference, Proceedings (2014), accessed August 29, 2015: https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/47309/027_ready.pdf?sequence=2.
[117] "New Information and Communication Technologies: A Survey of User-Generated Content Applications," *Defence Concepts* Vol 1, Edition 3 (Fall 2006), accessed August 30, 2015, http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?id=26997&lng=en.

Understanding the audience

In addition to identifying their narratives, it is also essential to understand the target audiences that actors seek to influence. To a degree, the required level of understanding can be achieved through conducting a standard target audience analysis, the details of which are beyond the scope of this paper. But additional factors have to be considered. Notably, it is necessary to understand how the audience concerned makes sense of the world. Do members of the group use symbols or convey identity through sagas for example. Or as Rolington observes[118]

> *"the cultural concept of reality and the understanding of different languages have an important effect for intelligence. When analysing the opposition it is required to understand the interpretation of different languages and the way individuals act when using language, and it is especially necessary to translate cultural use and slang."*

While Rolington is commenting on "the enemy", his assessment applies to any group. Moreover, as he points out, the ability to "interpret" is not just a matter of being able to translate words written in a foreign language. Rather it is one of knowing how words on a page, electronic or otherwise, resonate with the readers steeped in the relevant culture.

As well as needing to understand how audiences make sense of the off-line world, analysts have to understand how an audience makes use of social media. A key question is the extent to which views and behaviours expressed on-line are representative of the target audience as a whole. This means finding out who uses social media and how they use it. The analyst dealing with an audience amongst which social media use is common place will face a different set of issues to one where only a few use it.

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[118] Alfred Rollington, *Strategic Intelligence for the 21st Century: the Mosaic Method,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 35.

If the target audience is geographically concentrated, it is possible to estimate the extent to which the internet and mobile phones are used in an area. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) publishes an annual estimate of internet use across the world.[119] This information can give an indication of the extent to which a population is using technology and by inference, social media.

As the Arab Spring has shown, technology penetration levels do not tell the whole story. Media commentary of recent political changes in the Middle East has referred to tag lines such as "the Twitter Revolution".[120] At that time however, access to social media was relatively limited. For example only 5% of Egyptians had a Facebook account while in Bahrain, where there was an unsuccessful uprising, 34% of the population used Facebook.[121] Such variable impacts can perhaps be explained through an understanding of the social networks involved.

Social network analysis

Social network analysis is "the study of social structure known as social networks and comprised of individuals and their relationships."[122] Its use will assist in developing an understanding of a target audience. It can help to put an individual network into context, identifying for example the interests of those in it and their approach to governments and corporations.[123] It can also be used to break down the audience into groups based for instance, on political views or economic status.

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[119] ICT Facts and Figures 2015, accessed November 28, 2015, http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/default.aspx.
[120] Kevin H Govern, "The Twitter Revolutions: Social Media in the Arab Spring," *JURIST Forum,* October 24, 2011, accessed November 7, 2015, http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2093434.
[121] J Price "Choosing the Right Social Media Strategy for An Asymmetric Conflict" (MDS Diss. Royal Military College Canada, 2013).
[122] Gupta and Brooks, *Using Social Media for Global Security,* 63.
[123] Lutz Finger and Soumitra Dutta , *Ask Measure, Learn: Using social media analytics to understand and influence customer behaviour* (Sebastopol, California: O'Reilly, 2014) 73.

The purpose of social network analysis is to "reveal the identity of key people and relationships, and track the spread of ideas."[124] Before looking for people and relationships however, it is necessary to put the network into context. At this point it is important to recognise that a target audience will have a number of networks within it. Some will be niche and largely irrelevant to narrative tracking. A network geared around sporting interests for example, is unlikely to prove fertile ground for analysing narrative penetration; though as May observes, there will be times when even networks which appear of little interest are in fact worthy of analysis.[125]

An essential task is to identify those people with the greatest influence ie those people who affect the thinking and behaviours of others on the network. Such individuals are defined as having "reach." Those with reach have a large social network and the potential to spread their ideas widely.[126] Reach alone cannot be used to predict influence however. For instance, celebrities have significant numbers of social media followers. But they may have very limited impact on followers' thoughts and behaviours. So it is important to understand the extent to people with reach are active communicators, on what topics, and whether they have authority on a topic, causing for example, others to quote their ideas in subsequent communications.[127]

Relationships

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[124] Gupta and Brooks, *Using Social Media for Global Security,* 105.
[125] Anthony May, "The 2010-11 Scottish Football Season and its effect on political attitudes towards sectarianism in Scotland" (Paper presented at the "Politics of the UK, EU and the World" Conference, hosted by the Helen Bamber Centre, University of Kingston, November 3, 2011). This paper looks at the extent to which sectarianism is present in elements of the Scottish football scene – and the extent to which these trends are reflected more widely in society. Analysis of some clubs' social networks and tracking of relevant social media channels can be used to assess whether supporters adhere to a sectarian narrative and whether legislative changes designed to combat sectarianism are having an impact.
[126] Finger & Dutta *Ask, Measure, Learn,* 69.
[127] When it comes to social media analysis, this question can be answered by analysing the text of peoples' posts. Wendy Moe and David A Schweidel, *Social Media Intelligence*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 38.

In addition to identifying key influencers in a network, it is also important to understand the relationships with exist within it. For example, when examining the extent to which an insurgent's narrative is spreading, it will be helpful to identify those links that enable information to be shared between key influencers. Disrupting such links will have more impact on malign elements than disrupting relationships between potential sympathisers who are peripheral to the network.

Tracking the Spread

Once narratives have been identified and target audiences understood, it is possible to start to track narratives as they spread out from their originators. A range of analytical techniques can be employed to do so, including content studies, textual analyses, and big data analyses."[128] Each of these techniques is still evolving and could be the subject of a paper in their own right. It is likely that analysts will require to blend expertise from defence and security world with the social and computing sciences if they are to understand the full spectrum of relevant social media activity.

Volume Analysis

Social network sites provide easily accessible data on the number of users "liking" or "following" particular pages. Volume analysis, while apparently simple, can in fact be the source of insights into events and behaviours.

At its most basic level, "text mining" ie counting the number of times specific words appear in the media being monitored makes it possible to measure the level of interest in a particular topic. This is essential information for analysts. Traditional surveys for example, may indicate that target audiences have a strong view on a particular topic *when asked*. But

[128] Roselle et al, *Strategic* Narrative,79.

volume metrics gathered from social media can show whether or not people are sharing elements of narrative un-prompted.

It is possible to count the number of times narrative elements are posted, as well as the numbers who comment on an individual post. In both approaches are likely to over represent extreme views as those with strong opinions are more likely to register them.[129] In contrast, an ability to count the numbers of people who click on, recommend, save or copy part of a post might be a more accurate reflection of a narrative element that is resonating across the silent majority. Large numbers of people looking for information on Wikipedia for example, might provide a better indicator of what is on people's minds, than the number of posts about the same issue on Facebook.

Even if narrative elements cannot be traced to specific users, volume analysis can provide some insights into their spread. Analysts with the capacity to monitor social networks will be able to monitor spikes of activity.[130] This can include spikes in references to narrative elements. Sometimes it can be helpful to know for instance, if a video with a particular message has "gone viral" even if it's not possible to track which users are watching it. If the network concerned has users concentrated in a particular nation or region, such as VKontakte or Facebook.ru, then it is also possible to identify in very broad terms, the audiences which are involved.

Playing the numbers game can be particularly useful when trying to link on and off-line worlds. Analysts aware of events in the real world, especially of those events with story-telling potential will be able to track on-line responses to the off-line event.

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[129] Moe and Schweidel, *Social Media Intelligence*, 38.
[130] Gupta and Brooks, *Using Social Media for Global Security*, 67.

For example on 7 August 2015, terrorist attacks in Kabul caused the death of 65 citizens[131]. These attacks followed on from announcements of the death of both Mullah Omar and also of Jalaluddin Haqqani whose terrorist network has a history of attacks against the Afghan capital. As the New York Times suggests, it is possible that these attacks were designed to imply the Taliban and Haqqani networks were continuing to grow in power and were not dependent on individual leaders for advancement. Social media analysts would be able to track such a narrative element by looking for comments about the power of these movements and their ability to attack Kabulis in the hours and days after the attack. Even if opinion could not be monitored, simple monitoring of relevant traffic, perhaps in comparison with previous attacks, could provide a degree of insight on narrative penetration.

Assessing Influence

While elements may spread across an audience, it cannot be assumed that the narrative concerned is influencing it. It is theoretically possible for example, for a narrative to be spread amongst social network users to discuss how best to oppose it. So if the consequences or narrative spread are to be understood, it's necessary to see how a narrative has affected an audience's thinking and actions.

Influence is "the ability to cause or contribute to a change in opinion or behaviour."[132] To assess influence therefore, it's necessary to monitor an audience's thinking over time, starting ideally with the situation before it comes into contact with the narrative. As only a limited amount of social media archive information is likely to be available, establishing a baseline is likely to require recourse to other material. This can include the likes of research work commenting on public opinion, social attitude surveys and so on.

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[131] Ahmad Shakib and Rod Nordland, "Waves of Suicide Attacks Shake Kabul on Its Deadliest Day of 2015," *New York Times*, August 8, 2015, accessed August 30, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/08/world/asia/suicide-truck-bombing-in-kabul-afghanistan.html?_r=0.
[132] Regina Luttrell, *How to Engage, Share and Connect* , (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 205.

Having attempted to establish a baseline, social media users' attitudes towards a narrative can then be explored using sentiment analysis. Sentiment, also known as valence analysis can assess "what groups are saying, when they are saying it, who is saying it, what they mean exactly by what they say, and how they feel about what they are talking about."[133] This form of analysis has particular relevance when it comes to tracking narratives as it enables analysts to assess users' views of a narrative. In particular, sentiment analysis enables researchers to[134]:

> differentiate factual comments from those expressing an opinion (which can show if people are really engaging with the narrative or just passively passing it on);
>
> determine whether views expressed are positive or negative; and
>
> establish the strength of users' views on a topic.

Tools are now widely available to track the sentiment contained in social media posts, although there are still challenges in terms of dealing with foreign languages, and colloquialisms. For example only an analyst familiar with Scottish idioms might recognise that someone commenting on a post saying "the Glasgow 2014 Games were great" with the response "aye – right" was not in fact paying the Games a compliment! With a reasonable degree of technological support however, it is now possible to identify positive, negative and neutral comments. Changes in sentiment can therefore be monitored as the same time as monitoring of narrative spread takes place.

For example, analysts following opinion using Twitter in the aftermath of Drummer Rigby's murder in London in May 2013 were to track changes to the public's mood on this key event.

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[133] Gupta and Brooks, *Using Social Media for Global Security,* 65.
[134] Bogdan Batrinca and Philip C Trevelyan, "Social media analytics: a survey of techniques, tools and platforms," *AI and Society, Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Communication* , (July 2014), 104.

This research rapidly picked up on public outrage, and also soon after, a reduction in tension after the murdered soldier's family appealed for calm.[135]

With the steady increase in technology which tracks social media users to locations, it is possible to map as well as record sentiment. This makes it possible to track narrative spread and sentiment changes in space as well as over time in an attempt to establish correlations. Further analysis will however be required before causality can be established.

Assessing narrative impact

The final stage of the analytical journey is to assess the extent to which the on-line spread of narrative impacts on off-line behaviour. For analysis to be of real value to decision makers, it is essential that information gathered on-line, can be used to understand and ideally forecast what happens in the physical world.

Research, for instance on the use of social media in the Arab Spring[136] has demonstrated links between on-line activity and off-line behaviour. In such cases however, the analysis has not involved actors' narratives, the spread of which can take considerable time but potentially with wide-ranging consequences.

There are examples of narratives having an impact on behaviour, a well-known example being the reduction in the proportion of British children being immunised against Measles Mumps and Rubella after the vaccine became associated with links to autism.[137] But such

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[135] Matthew L. Williams[*] and Pete Burnap, "Cyberhate on Social Media in the aftermath of Woolwich: A Case Study in Computational Criminology and Big Data," *British Journal of Criminology*, (June 2015), accessed November 29, 2015, doi:10.1093/bjc/azv059.

[136]For example: Philip N Howardet al, "Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring?" (2011), accessed September 12, 2015, http://ssrn.com/abstract=2595096 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2595096 .

137 Rachel Elizabeth Casiday, "Children's health and the social theory of risk: Insights from the British measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) controversy," *Social Science & Medicine,* Vol. 65, Issue 5, (September 2007).

cases are relatively rare and effective measurement of narrative impact on the behaviour of target audiences continues to be elusive.[138]

There is some scope to use social media to support the assessment of behaviour change. Most notably, it is possible to track comments that give an indication of activity on the ground, such as participation in demonstrations; especially where a narrative includes some kind of call to action. But when it comes to the potential for narratives to have wide-ranging, long-term impact, social media is not well-placed to provide evidence of change across a target audience.

Correlation and Regression Analysis

Correlation and regression analysis (the details of which are beyond the scope of this paper) can provide a degree of rigour to the assessment of relationships between on-line activity and off-line behaviour. Correlation analysis can be used to merely search for these relationships. For example, it would be possible to record the use of terms associated with an actor's narrative amongst a target audience with reports on social media of particular behaviours amongst the same group. Regression analysis will be necessary if the intent is to establish whether the link is causal, ie to establish whether a change in opinion or behaviour is a result of narrative penetration or another factor.

Regression analysis in particular should be treated with a degree of caution, especially where long-term changes are concerned.[139] They are perhaps best used to follow up hypotheses developed on that back of evidence gathered from other sources such as media reports and real-world observations of behaviour. For example in some societies, the adoption of a particular narrative by a small number of key leaders able to dominate traditional media

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[138] Alister Miskimmon , Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle. "Forging the world: Strategic narratives and international relations." *London: Centre for European Politics/New Political Communications Unit* (2012).
[139] Gupta and Brooks, *Using Social Media for Global Security,* 66.

might have a more significant impact on a population, than the use of the same narrative by social media users.

In other words, the use of social media content for correlation and regression analyses has the potential to provide insights. But where possible, such techniques should be used alongside other sources of evidence.

Analytical Constraints

Although there is scope to use social media to track the spread of narratives and assess their impact on target audiences, it is important to recognise the constraints to be addressed when conducting such analysis. These can be broken down into legal and ethical, technical and most importantly behavioural requirements.

Legal/ethical

Some commentators argue that legal and ethical frameworks for analysis are lagging behind the evolution of social media technology.[140] Meantime in a post Snowden era, public concern about governments' use of information derived from social media, is relatively widespread.[141] A rigorous approach to both the law and ethics is therefore required when researching narratives in social media.

The Law

Despite Zuckerberg's assertion that "the age of privacy is over",[142] analysts are required to respect legislation governing the privacy of social media users. For example, those based in

[140] Jeremy H Lipschultz, "Social Media Research Ethics Clarity Needed," *Huffington Post*, August 10, 2014, accessed November 12, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jeremy-harris-lipschultz/social-media-research-eth_b_5933052.html.
[141] Mary Madden, "Public Perceptions of Privacy and Security in the Post-Snowden Era," *Pew Research Center, a*ccessed November 12, 2015, http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/11/12/public-privacy-perceptions/.
[142] Gupta and Brooks, *Using Social Media for Global Security, 3*73.

the UK must comply with Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights which states that "everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence."[143] The consequence is that British researchers cannot exploit information regarded by users as private unless their consent has been obtained.

There are exceptions to such requirements but these are closely controlled. For example, UK intelligence agencies seeking to identify individuals subscribing to an extremist narrative may be able to do so on grounds of national security; but only if they comply with relevant legislation such as the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000.[144] Many nations have similar legislation and analysts must comply with it.

Ethics

Such laws are intended to give effect to ethical principles which must be met when conducting social media analysis. As Omand et al observe,[145] the main ethical question to be addressed is how to balance the individual's right to privacy; the requirement to protect the security of the nation and its citizens, and the need to maintain the nation's overall economic and social well-being. Not only do analysts have to achieve this balance in the eyes of the courts and legislators. They must also do so in the eyes of the public – on whose consent many depend for their existence.

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[143] Council of Europe, *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms as amended by Protocols No. 11 and No. 14*, accessed November 12, 2015, https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680063765.
[144] United Kingdom Home Office, *Guidance on Surveillance and Counter Terrorism*, March 26, 2013, accessed November 12, 2015, https://www.gov.uk/guidance/surveillance-and-counter-terrorism#ripa-what-it-is-and-how-to-apply.
[145] Sir David Omand, Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, "Introducing Social Media Intelligence (SOCMINT)," *Intelligence and National Security* Vol. 27 No. 6, (December 2012), 807.

Edward Snowden's revelations have led to concerns about the potential for governments to breach individual privacy in the name of protecting national security.[146] The natural assumption is that such concerns put pressure on governments' to make less use of social media analysis. Social networks have however, become "an increasingly public space";[147] with significant numbers posting what would have previously been seen as private thoughts into what is a public domain. It can be argued that in so doing, this information is open to all, even if users have not actively consented to the sharing of their material. But bearing in mind that social network analysis is about using open source information to track sensitive information about individuals,[148] it should not automatically be assumed that information placed into the public domain via social media provides a free-for-all for analysts.

By and large, the simplest way to avoid breaching individuals' privacy is to refrain from using personal data. The evolution of Big Data, with a rapid increase in the number of data sets to interrogate means however, that anonymization is becoming increasingly difficult. Where research might lead to analysts being able to identify individuals, Omand's test of "necessity and legitimacy"[149] must be met. In other words, it must be possible to demonstrate that overriding an individual's privacy is both necessary in order to protect security or well-being; and effective in doing so.

While some research can be conducted without identifying individuals, the need to understand the networks involved means it is frequently necessary to use some personal data, at times gathered from public sources but at others through the penetration of private networks. It is essential therefore that analysts understand the rapidly evolving ethical

[146] Anthony Dworkin, "Surveillance, Privacy and Security: Europe's Confused Response to Snowden," *European Council on Foreign Relations* No. 123 (January 2015).
[147] Omand et al, *Introducing Social Media Intelligence*, 803.
[148] Gupta and Brooks, *Using Social Media for Global Security, 3*73.
[149] Omand et al, *Introducing Social Media Intelligence,* 807.

environment in which they operate and that they also work with their organisation's legal teams to ensure compliance with the law.

Technical Challenges

One of the primary challenges for any organisation wishing to analyse social media is the need to process high volumes of unstructured data (ie those which do not follow predefined rules). The quantities of data available means "the most important part of conducting SMA is adequately and intelligently finding and manipulating relevant data without becoming overwhelmed."[150] It will be necessary to filter out data that are irrelevant and in some cases, deliberately misleading. This necessitates investing in technology and skilled staff.

Even data which is relevant can be hard to analyse. It might be mis-spelt, contain special characters or use foreign languages. Data may have to be "cleaned" and then manipulated to make it subject to structural analysis eg by tagging. An additional challenge is the ephemeral nature of social media. This means resources must be capable of responding to activity as and when it happens; by and large it is not possible to analyse historical material due to an absence of available archived data.

Behavioural Challenges

Social media is essentially about people and their relationships. Just as a psychologist needs a good understanding of the principles of human behaviours when seeking to understand how individuals relate to one another in the physical domain, so analysts need to understand the theory behind how humans make sense of the world when seeking to understand their communications and relationships in cyber-space.

[150] Gupta and Brooks, *Using Social Media for Global Security,* 71.

There is an increasing body of knowledge about how people behave on line. This evidence demonstrates that social media content is inherently biased.[151] For example, in the UK, some segments of the population use social media more than others, with just over 80% of internet users aged 18-34 and less than 20% over 65.[152] Furthermore, within the on-line community, "the majority of content is created by a relatively small number of users"[153] who are confident in putting their views into the public domain.

One potential trend therefore, is for a network to be dominated by confident, opinionated individuals who feel sufficiently strongly on an issue that they express their view on-line. In contrast, those who simply agree with what has gone before or lack a strong opinion remain silent. This can lead to an exaggeration in opinion variety with extremists being more visible than they should be. Or as Finger and Dutta put it, analysts might find that the Twitter stream they are monitoring simply measures "the loudest partisan voices rather than the wisdom of the crowd." [154] This risk is further compounded by the tendency for analysts' attention to be drawn to extreme views – further increasing the likelihood that minority opinions feature to an inappropriate degree.

Not all those who post on line want to stand out from the crowd however. On-line social relationships often form between people "who have similar interests, ideas, ideals and experiences"[155]. In contrast, non-conformists will be driven out of a group, leading to a fragmentation of the network. Moreover, in networks of a genuinely "social" nature where non-experts are in the majority, there is a tendency for posts to be affected by an individual's sub-conscious attitudes and beliefs – which in turn are often moulded by others in their social

[151] Renee B Ferguson, "The Pitfalls of Using Online and Social Data in Big Data Analysis," *MIT Sloan Management Review* (July, 2013), accessed November 20, 2015, http://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-pitfalls-of-using-online-and-social-data-in-big-data-analysis/.
[152] "The Use of Social Media for Research and Analysis: A Feasibility Study," *Department for Work and Pensions Ad Hoc Report No 13*, (2014), 17.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Finger & Dutta *Ask, Measure, Learn,* xvii.
[155] Luttrell, *Social Media*, 22.

environment. Even where posts are anonymous, many users are nervous of contradicting their on-line friends. As a result there is a risk that comments will reflect an individual's social context rather than their true underlying opinions.[156]

For the analyst, this means that careful selection of data will be important. The biases inherent in social media mean that the use of random samples, so effective in off-line research, is problematic in the on-line world. It may be necessary to manually select specific networks to gather a range of opinions or ideally, collect all available data. Even then, it is important to bear in mind that real-world attitudes and behaviours will not always be accurately reflected on-line.

As well as containing bias, the social media environment is also a place where people deliberately seek to deceive. For example, Twitter users have been known to generate "ghost tweets"; finding tweets made in the past and re-tweeting them in a new context which gives them a different meaning.[157] Some organisations will create false accounts or manipulate the number of "likes" attributed to social network pages in order to convey a false impression about their popularity.[158] While social network providers aim to identify and take down such accounts, there will always be a risk that analysts will incorporate some of this false data into their research.

Even where accounts are "real" the identity of the individual behind them might be deceptive. In some cases, perhaps for privacy reasons, users opt not to share information about their location. In others, users deliberately adopt a new persona, giving inaccurate information about their name, location and so on. Analysts seeking to map out a social network, for

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[156] Moe and Schweidel, *Social Media Intelligence*: 28
[157] Alexis C Madrigal, " The 2-Year-Old Zombie Tweet About Libya Now Stalking John McCain," *The Atlantic,* August 22, 2011, accessed November 29, 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/08/the-2-year-old-zombie-tweet-about-libya-now-stalking-john-mccain/243963/.
[158] Tom Simonate, "Fake Persuaders," *MIT Technology Review* March 23, 2015, accessed November 20, 2015 http://www.technologyreview.com/news/535901/fake-persuaders/.

example, must be aware there is a risk that they are mapping out users who have different on and off-line identities.

CONCLUSION

21st century conflicts increasingly resemble political campaigns fought over extended periods. Rather than achieving a decisive success in armed combat, "victory" commonly stems from convincing audiences, on the battlefield and beyond, to accept a protagonist's point of view. This success, which is often temporary, requires a wide range of persuasive techniques from military force to media operations. Many state and non-state actors involved in conflict have realised that to persuade, they need a "story to tell". As a result, they have invested in the development of narratives as a key persuasive device; their aim being to ensure their narrative becomes the lens through which others involved, willingly or otherwise, interpret the conflict.

Social media is increasingly prevalent, even in those regions where the internet is hard to access. Easy to use, it provides actors with innumerable opportunities to put elements of narrative into the public domain. But by providing a place where individual users can generate content and share ideas, stories developed by actors can be told and retold in unpredictable ways.

Social media analysis is a rapidly evolving area. It brings together techniques from a range of disciplines from linguistics to statistics. Such techniques have proven utility in a business environment but have the potential to be applied in other settings. Analysts seeking to use social media to follow narratives in conflict will need to become familiar with narrative theory and understand how people use narratives to make sense of the world. In particular, they must understand how narratives are structured so as to be capable of identifying actors' narratives from the mass of content circulating across social media.

Analysts must also understand the audiences across which they wish to track narratives. They need to understand how audiences use social media in order to be able to assess the

extent to which on-line activity provides an insight into off-line opinions and behaviours. In view of the need to understand how networks structured around social media function, social network analysis is required before it is possible to assess the spread of a narrative across a target audience. In extremis this can be undertaken using social media alone but the quality of information will suffer from an absence of "real world" research.

Social media analysts operating in this area must be mindful of both relevant legislation and ethical requirements so as to ensure for instance, individual privacy is protected. Technical challenges, notably the sheer volume of social media content now circulating, also require to be overcome; as do those stemming from human factors, such as the propensity for extreme views to be prominent.

But given access to information technology, it is possible to identify and then track elements of narrative as they spread across a target audience. Tracking spread is one thing; assessing the impact of narratives is another. Sentiment analysis now provides opportunities to correlate changes in attitudes across an audience against activity in social media. But to date, such techniques have been most effective when dealing with short term issues, for instance a spike in messaging urging direct action by members of the public being linked to incidents of civil disorder. In contrast, attempts to assess whether narratives, spread by social media across target audiences involved in conflicts, are having significant and sustained impact, remain in their infancy.

For liberal powers involved in conflict, the ability to develop a convincing and all-encompassing narrative and to deploy it effectively using social media is likely to be an increasingly critical capability requirement. This can only be met by developing an understanding of how narratives spread and how they impact on the populations involved.

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