



Strategic Narratives: Their Uses and Limitations

Presentation to the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy

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Bottom Line Up Front

- **Focus on strategic narratives provides a reasonable starting-point for understanding, informing and influencing foreign publics and countering adversaries, and may help to improve effectiveness of USG communication efforts.**
- **Understanding strategic narratives a necessary but insufficient condition for effective USG communication efforts—**
 - **Need to understand inherently social, dynamic, and competitive nature of efforts to inform/influence audiences**
 - **Still need to understand “who is saying what to whom through what channel with what effect?”**
 - **Need to buttress communication efforts with policy initiatives and other meaningful actions that can unfreeze preexisting belief systems**
- **Sophisticated program of analysis needed to monitor sources, channels, audiences, messages, and assess effects, and to ensure a strategic, adaptive perspective in USG communication efforts**

Some Guiding Questions

- **What is a narrative?**
- **What are the key elements/characteristics of narratives?**
- **Who “owns” a narrative?**
- **Is a narrative a reflection of what is – or what we hope to create?**
- **What schools of thought, theory and research might we look to in order to improve both understanding and practice?**
- **How do our words and actions, and how they are perceived by others influence the evolution of a narrative?**
- **Can a narrative be controlled, shaped, or guided? If so, how?**
- **Based on recent headline events, what happens when narratives collide?**

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Outline

- **On narratives**
- **On discourse, frames, framing, and framing contests**
- **Adversary narratives: the case of al-Qa’ida**
- **Adversary narratives: a social movement theory view**
- **USG narratives: a policy sciences view**
- **Some issues for the Advisory Commission**

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What Is A Narrative?

- ***Narratives*** are “the stories people tell” (Patterson and Monroe, 1998), i.e., the historically grounded stories that reflect a community’s identity and experiences, or explain its hopes.
 - A simplified representation of a group’s worldview
 - A set of shared assumptions about the group, world
 - A backdrop to *discourse*
 - One source of material for use in *framing* and other meaning-making activities
 - Whose narrative matters most? The target audience

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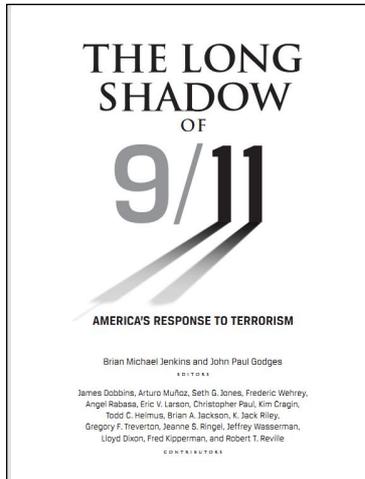
Toward A More Dynamic Perspective: Discourse, Frames, and Framing Contests

- ***Discourse*** is “the interactive process of conveying ideas [including] the coordinative discourse among policy actors and the communicative discourse between political actors and the public.” (Schmidt, 2008)
- ***Frames*** are “[s]chemata of interpretation” that enable individuals “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” occurrences within their life space and the world at large. (Goffman, 1974)
- “***Frames*** help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action. (Benford & Snow, 2000)
- “***Collective action frames*** are action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization.” (Benford & Snow, 2000)
- ***Framing contests*** are contests in which antagonists employ competing collective action frames to inform, influence, and/or win adherents

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Adversary Narratives: What We Found In Our Research on al-Qa'ida



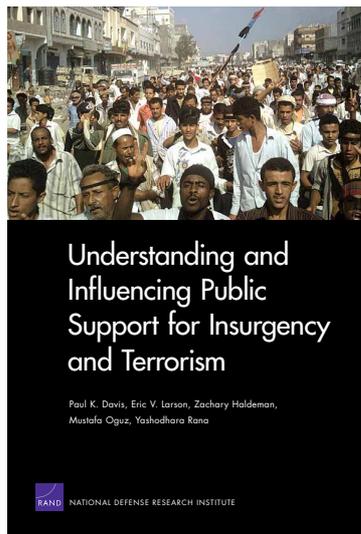
- Al-Qa'ida riven by internal contention and external criticism, losing Muslim hearts & minds
- Understanding AQ's narrative a starting-point only
- Also need to understand—
 - Events and conditions shaping decisions, behavior, messaging
 - Propaganda figures, public intellectuals, critics
 - AQ rhetoric, apologetics, discourse, framing efforts
 - Intra-movement contention and external criticism
 - Structure and performance of propaganda

“When it comes to matters related to politics and war, al Qaeda maneuvers around its dogmas with alacrity.” (Doran, 2002, p. 178).

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Adversary Narratives: Al-Qa'ida Through the Lens of Social Movement Theory



- Strategic objectives and decisionmaking
- **Ideology/Narrative**
- **Frames and framing processes**
- Resource mobilization
- Political opportunities & constraints

Source: Davis et al., *Understanding Public Support for Insurgency and Terrorism*, RAND, forthcoming

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Adversary Narratives: Al-Qa'ida Through the Lens of Social Movement Theory

- Strategic objectives and decisionmaking—
 - Objective: restoration of Caliphate as it existed under first Caliphs
 - Grand strategy of expelling “far enemy” protectors from Arab and Muslim lands to clear the way for removing “near enemy”
- Ideology largely based on salafi-jihadi reading of Muslim sacred texts, coupled with narrative of Muslim humiliation and oppression
- Framing, rhetoric, apologetics, discourse reinterpret developments through salafi-jihadi theological lens, symbols, “sacred values,” etc. drawn from available materials (e.g., religion, culture, history, narratives)
- Mobilization resources include social networks, perceptions of religiosity, web-based propaganda production/distribution system
- Political opportunities/constraints: Al-Qa'ida attempts to both shape and respond to events and conditions, but faces crippling constraints from adversary intelligence, law enforcement, military efforts

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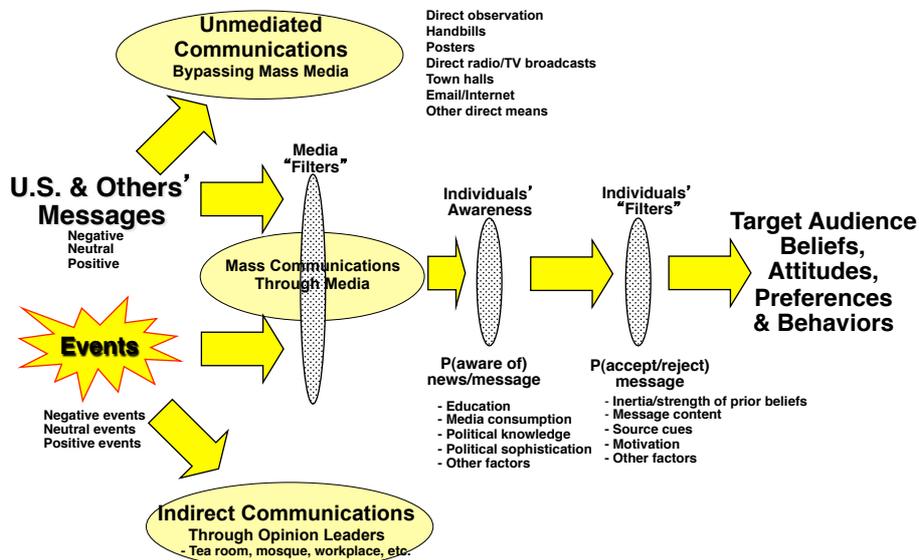
The Role of Narratives: Policy Sciences View of Communication

- “Who **says what to whom** through what channel and with what effect”
- SCAME: Source, Channel, **Audience, Message**, Effect

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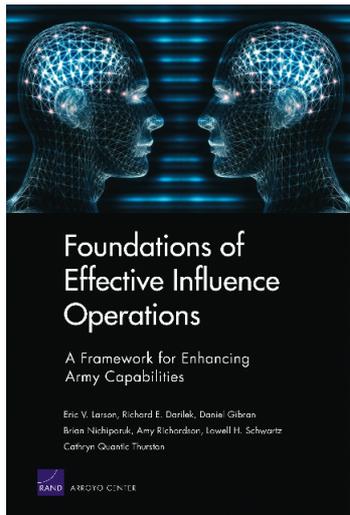
An Influence Model For Mass Publics



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Effective Influence Operations Require a Sustained Effort



- Directed toward key target audiences to achieve specific desired effects
- Make use of messengers with compelling source characteristics
- **Rely upon messages with compelling content characteristics**
- Make use of most effective combination of information channels
- **Mindful of audience characteristics**
- Synchronized with other actions
- Timed to influence actors before they decide or act, or attitudes crystallize
- Facilitate adaptation by providing timely feedback on effects

- Larson et al., *Foundations of Effective Influence Operations* (RAND, 2009)

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Issues for Advisory Commission Attention

- **Does the USG have the necessary programs to baseline and track, with enough fidelity to inform strategy, policy, and communications—**
 - The key attitudes and beliefs of its intended audiences?
 - The dynamics of contention? and
 - “who says what to whom through what channel with what effect?”
- **Is the USG embracing an approach that is sufficiently attentive to the various requirements of effective influence operations described here?**
- **Is the USG integrating messaging and policy actions in ways that enhance the likelihood of disrupting prior beliefs and enhancing the prospects for message acceptance and changes in attitudes, beliefs, or behavior?**
- **How much focus to put on narratives vis-à-vis other lines of analysis?**

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