



U.S. Department of Defense photo

Everybody Loves a Story Possibly a better way to influence?

Military doctrine defines information operations as: efforts to influence, disrupt, corrupt or usurp the decision-making cycle of the enemy.

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In the fictional African nation of Mubunda, AQIM fighters have terrorized the population for years in order to gain a foothold in the region. The local population, frightened for their safety and livelihood, provide support to the fighters through helpless compliance. U.S. military forces are ordered in to provide security and stabilize the situation. How do they build trust with the locals after years of AQIM brutality? How about a story about patriotism and freedom?

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One of the most primitive forms of communication and influence is the art of storytelling. In fact, film producer Peter Guber says storytelling is the “most effective form of human communication.” The use of storytelling is recognizable to almost all civilizations, mostly through culture and religion. In fact, stories are a dominant part of religious indoctrination, education and practice, and can be quite powerful as a means of ideological influence.

Stories have an enduring richness in culture and permeate societies around the globe. They bridge cultural boundaries and offer a non-threatening conduit for communication and commonality. Stories can also be told through informative and powerful images. Images can relate both positive and negative stories and have the potential, at least temporarily, to define a national narrative. Take for example the images of U.S. Marines urinating on deceased Taliban fighters. This visual storyline caused significant damage to the credibility of the U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. military, delegitimizing the sincerity of ongoing U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and calling into question the professionalism of the Marine Corps and U.S. military in general.

The intended counter message to this were the images of U.S. Special Forces rescuing international aid workers, but these positive images were not portrayed in mainstream media in the U.S. and abroad. In fact, positive stories about U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and the numerous other global military missions that have a positive impact are quite rare.

The Information Operations (IO) community should consider developing storytelling as a messaging tool for future military operations and IO campaigns. There are numerous potential applications already available, and given existing research, only modest technique development would be required. The extensive reach of technology based methods and the simplicity and low cost of more rudimentary methods provide fertile ground for efficient and effective influence operations. They also provide a reasonable means of measurement through reader response incentives and other forms of feedback.

Does Storytelling Really Work?

Interestingly, there is actually hard science behind storytelling. Researchers at Princeton University have found neuro-scientific aspects of stories that correlate to various properties of cognitive behavior. In their study published in 2011, they found that through storytelling, the storyteller and listeners’ brains actually “synchronize” for a more dynamic level of understanding and comprehension. From a practical standpoint the reasoning is fairly straightforward. After all, words only make sense if they are used in a sentence and those sentences are useful when used in a conversation between two or more people. The Princeton researchers believe there is more to be learned, but their findings are persuasive.

This is where an important question arises for the application of storytelling in information operations. Is language a barrier to storytelling? Actually, no! In what scientists call neural coupling, language forms the interactive connection during storytelling, but the language spoken doesn’t limit the connection. This proves that despite language and cultural differences, stories can be an effective method of communication. Obviously, the methodology and interpretation is important to gain the richness of the story through proper inflection, emphasis, and to avoid misrepresentation of context. The important point here is that storytelling is a proven tool available to political leaders and military information operation practitioners.

Consider for a moment a corollary aspect of storytelling. Stories permeate our daily lives through media and news outlets. Media has become an intrusive part of our lives through the immediacy and pervasiveness of reporting, not to mention the impact of social media.

Part of the media appeal is the characteristic of storytelling. News outlets are adept at defining a narrative and drawing the audience in through the intrigue of the story. The *Center for Media Justice* calls this, the “Big Idea Frame.” This concept is designed to relate key ideas, messaging, involve the characters, the plot, developments, lessons, and solutions. The challenge, of course, is in the translation across cultural and societal boundaries. Whether in business, office politics, or military operations, storytelling can serve a purpose in bridging gaps in understanding and communication, which in turn suggests there are numerous potential applications for storytelling in contemporary political and military communications.

This is persuasive evidence. The use of stories can actually influence a target audience to feel or think as the storyteller does. During military operations, incomplete or misunderstood information about attitudes, cultural posture and basic beliefs can put U.S. military personnel at a disadvantage. Traditional influence methods, those not rich in depth and breadth, could be made more effective if incorporated into stories the audience can relate to and associate outcomes. The military and other U.S. government agencies should explore innovative methods of incorporating storytelling into existing information operations. Storytelling presents an opportunity to influence an adversary or neutral audience to assert the political will of the United States. Relating common values and beliefs through stories fosters a communication and cultural bridge. In the end, the U.S. must adapt our methods to align with and complement existing cultural norms of those we intend to influence.