Engaging Narratives for Peace & Security: Reflections on the Case of Human Migration

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PartnersGlobal and Alliance for Peacebuilding
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On September 28, 2017, experts from an array of sectors convened at PartnersGlobal and the Alliance for Peacebuilding offices for a follow-up meeting to “Engaging Narratives: The New (Old) Battlefield.” The original conference took place at the Elliott School in May of 2017, and this gathering represented a continued commitment to building bridges across sectors to explore the importance and power of narratives. Leaders and experts from the Department of Defense, other U.S. Government agencies, non-governmental organizations, industry, and academia attended.

After sharing our stories, research and experience, and after engaging each other in active discussions over two days at the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, we agree upon these guiding principles:

- That we each have critical perspectives to offer, based on our unique experiences, outlooks, and fields of interest.
- That improving the way we tell stories requires a purposeful, dedicated effort informed by the best research, applied science, and lessons from practitioners in the field.
- That our shared stories become stronger through exchange among diverse individuals, functions, sectors, and communities.
- That we must all be advocates at our organizations and in our fields for a sustained commitment to bringing an understanding of narrative to everything we do.
- That communication at and across all levels is key to working together effectively on shared narratives.

Finally, we believe that the continued collaboration of a diverse and engaged Narratives community is essential, and we will strive to nurture this community and the sharing of information and practice as we prepare for the future.

This document was created to serve as a record of what was discussed for future reference and to help maintain focus as we work toward common goals within our respective sectors.

We have included participants’ contact information as available, and encourage continued discussion and collaboration.
Welcome & Update on Narratives for Peace

The workshop began with an update and introduction from Alliance for Peacebuilding CEO Melanie Greenberg and PartnersGlobal President Julia Roig.

Melanie expressed that the peacebuilding community masterfully tells stories about their own sector, and knows how to use stories to affect policy makers. However, a gap persists in civil-military dialogue regarding conflict narratives.

We often use phrases that dehumanize refugees. Commonly utilized expressions refer to “waves of human migration,” “storming borders,” and “floods of refugees.” How do we re-center human experiences and stories in this discussion?

Melanie stressed that society discusses the cost of accepting refugees into our communities, but never addresses the cost of restricting the flow of people. What do we lose in terms of ideas, capacity, and capability when we don’t allow for immigration or refugee resettlement?

Additionally, it is time to re-center this conversation to the root causes of human migration, and to humanize those who have been forced to flee from their homes.
Update on Department of Defense Efforts to Understand and Engage Narratives

Andrew Kostrub

Andrew Kostrub, of the Collaborative and Adaptive Security Initiative, presented on the rediscovery of the importance of narrative within the Department of Defense (DoD). Andrew reported that many at DoD took a renewed interest in narrative while struggling to combat ISIS recruiting methods. The U.S. Government explicitly examined narrative strategy in April 2015 at the White House Summit to Counter Violent Extremism (CVE), which led to the publication of a joint strategy on CVE by the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

DoD has struggled to combat enemy narratives, exposing a tension between the view that DoD’s interest in narratives is limited to supporting military operations, and the view that everything DoD does is in service of a greater narrative. Some have called for a revamped United States Information Agency (USIA). USIA played a critical role in information operations throughout the Cold War, defending against propaganda efforts. This has become increasingly relevant in current times.

The military does not utilize the same terminology as the NGO sector. DoD does not use the term “narrative” per se. They refer to the same concept as the “information environment.”

Andrew clarified that DoD does not seek to weaponize narratives. They are attempting to understand the narratives that conflict creates. War begets a narrative or cognitive outcome, and the military must have a holistic understanding of it to attain a greater understanding of its impact.

The importance of narrative has become increasingly apparent within the military. Andrew explained that this has been reflected in formal strategy. The military has joint concepts that must be adopted across all branches. In October 2016, DoD published a Joint Concept establishing war as a human activity. The following year, the military added the Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning, and this year, the Joint Concept for Operations in the Information Environment. This reflects an explicit focus on the effect of narrative across all DoD functions.

Andrew concluded by discussing an update made to military doctrine in September 2017, describing “information” as a seventh joint function. Joint Functions characterize the most integral moves and
actions of the military, such as maneuver, intelligence, and sustainment. The addition of information reinforces the importance of narrative to all military operations. Both defeat of the adversary and prevention of conflict, by whatever mechanism, are cognitive outcomes. Thus, narrative is critical to achieving a positive outcome in war.

However, there have been challenges integrating this initiative across DoD. Current operations typically regard narrative as an afterthought. The recent addition of “information” to the joint functions will drive DoD to integrate this concept into all operations.

Andrew further clarified that the military seeks to attain “enduring strategic outcomes” in all actions, essentially referring to conditions that the United States would consider generally favorable post conflict. DoD does not refer to “wins.” The military cannot achieve “enduring strategic outcomes” without an explicit focus on narratives.
Chris Boian

Senior Communications Officer, UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)

Chris began by screening two videos created by UNHCR in an attempt to alter the narrative of refugees. The video series, title “The Land is Your Land,” profiles archetypal Americans who have developed personal relationships with refugees or work closely on the issue.

Chris asserted that there has been a conflation between refugees and security threats. UNHCR has focused on attempting to disentangle the two and refocus on humanitarian concerns. The core message of the video campaign communicates the following: “I am American. I care about the safety of my family, and I want to help refugees. The two are not incompatible. Welcoming others is a central tenant of American identity.”
Abdallah Hendawy

Egyptian Activist

Abdallah has a background in both sociology and activism. He grew up in Egypt and recounted his experience throughout the Egyptian revolution. Two of his close friends lost family in the revolution. One turned to ISIL and violent extremism; the other did not. Both had similar goals -- they wanted to make their country a better place. Yet, different narratives focused on the same set of events caused each person to take a divergent path in life.

Abdallah asserted that narratives are not a static set of ideas. They are living, transferrable, reproducible, and flexible. Like a living organism, they penetrate our minds and move from one brain to another rather easily.

As a result, we must adopt an individualized approach to deradicalization. Abdullah’s friends lived very similar lives early-on, but different narratives managed to become dominant in their minds. No one generalized approach could have addressed both people.

Bryan Pelley

EVP of Customer Solutions, Protagonist

Bryan started his talk by discussing the divisive US Presidential election in 2016. The election brought different narratives to the forefront of the American dialogue. Challenging issues have become increasingly polarized, and difficult to discuss.

Bryan stressed the need to be aware of the unintended consequences of our actions and messaging. You cannot control a message once it has been released. Singular narratives do not exist, everything occurs in a narrative landscape where different stories and messages interact with one another.

Protagonist believes data analytics can help us understand narratives in a more concrete way. Quantifiable factors allow us to objectively determine why one message may be stronger than another. Protagonist conducts this research and then helps advise clients as to which messages will “stick.”
Roger Schank

Chairman and CEO of Socratic Arts

Roger first explained the technological platform that he has been developing. Roger has conceptualized a video library in which people can search for information on an issue and automatically gain access to content from experts on the topic. Roger believes that when utilizing narratives and stories, timing is critical. The narrative must address a pressing issue at hand in order to be salient. The technical issue is to match stories to situations, something that can be done using AI indexing techniques. In this way, relevant stories appear to users who are working on a problem, automatically and just in time.

Roger further asserted that a narrative must be distinguished from an attempt to “sell” a particular product or viewpoint. Authenticity is critical because human beings inherently enjoy connecting with one another through stories. Artificial manipulations of stories fail to effectively penetrate people’s minds or opinions.
Break Out Discussions

Following the Ignite talks, participants determined which topics they wanted to discuss in greater detail. This led to the establishment of three smaller discussion groups, each of which are summarized below.

Radical Narratives, Values, and Civic Action

Some narratives can be lethal. How do we balance narratives that could be potentially dangerous with narratives that we simply disagree with? Where is that line?

Although not all narratives may be valid, all people are. Harmful narratives exist, but we cannot criminalize thought. The group determined that ultimately the dominant narrative does not matter. Rather, the harmful actions that one may take based on the narrative should be regulated or prevented.

Lastly, the group discussed the value of engaging with other narratives. No person will have a complete change of opinion, but engaging may help slightly shift their perception. This has become increasingly important given the siloed nature of online activity. We must seek out alternative narratives and engage in dialogue with those different from us.

- Adversaries may believe that they are in complete disagreement with one another, and totally dissimilar. A story may help us find some points of connection that can slightly shift perceptions.
- The internet allows for validation of (sometimes deranged) beliefs. The platforms where this occurs have not taken responsibility for the perpetuation of propaganda and false information.
Use of Narrative in Countering Violent Extremism

This group first established that narratives must be localized and contextualized. The landscape of violent extremism must be understood before deploying a narrative to effectively combat it. For example, in the Middle East and North Africa, many people believe that the conditions they live with exist because of United States policy and intervention. Every action that the United States takes in the region is seen through the lens of that existing narrative.

Nevertheless, there are universal themes that should inform strategy in a variety of contexts. These include lack of community cohesion, unmet expectations, and the feeling that violence is the only alternative. The group agreed that advocates should move away from simplistic appeals to economic gain. People crave a sense of purpose - how do we fulfill that?

- The framing of a narrative is important. Is it religious? Is it an appeal to economic despair? What kind of effect does that have on the relationship between civilians and governments? We need to find the optimal form of framing.
- Both digital and people-to-people methods can and should be utilized to create dialogue. We mustn’t rely on the internet.

Uncovering Narratives and the Experience of Protagonist

Protagonist aims to extract narratives from a given issue area, and convert them into easily understandable talking points for leaders. It operates in both the private and public sectors, assisting government officials and leaders of Fortune 500 companies. Protagonist uses hard data to track changes in this space and research effective strategies.

This group then discussed rising tribalism and cultural differences in the United States. The group agreed that in these increasingly polarized times, we need to find people or industries that can help build bridges and make connections. The group acknowledged that many of these differences are not superficial - we are disagreeing about sacred values and morals. Attempting to reconcile these issues will not be easy.

Lastly, they explored the concept of a “battlefield of ideas” in which many narratives compete for dominance. No one storyline has become dominant, so we must advocate for more narratives of peace.

- Now that some ideas and concepts on the fringes have become mainstream, how do we address them? We can work within the existing narratives to reframe it or push the narrative landscape to redirect it in some way.
- Leaders in different sectors need to be at the table when addressing these issues. Government, the private sector, and NGOs all need to be involved.
- We need to consider that we do not share a common lexicon, and make an effort to confirm understanding across contested phrases. Images can also be a powerful tool for narrative. Although we must be cautious, as interpretations of images can be verbalized and interpreted in drastically different ways.
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