Chapter 1

A Different Way to Approach Disinformation: Collective Impact

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> "He will win whose army is animated by the same spirit throughout all its ranks."
>
> Sun Tzu

Abstract

How can North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members combat disinformation campaigns more effectively using strategic communication and control their strategic narrative? This article aims to answer this question by proposing a framework for NATO members to fight disinformation campaigns using the principles of collective impact and strategic narrative. This article will first present a literature review of the current thoughts on hybrid warfare, specifically as it relates to disinformation and will then explain the definition of strategic communication and strategic narratives. It will then give examples of common solutions that different governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are pursuing to combat disinformation campaigns and how they are inadequate attempts to control the narrative because of their isolated effort. Third, this article will explain the concept of collective impact and show successful examples. Collective impact is successful only if these five conditions are met: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a backbone organization. Fourth, this article will lay out a way for NATO countries and possibly NGOs to potentially cooperate to combat disinformation campaigns using StratCom as a backbone organization to coordinate strategic communications and regain control of a desired strategic narrative. Finally, this article will discuss possible shortcomings of this approach, pitfalls to be avoided, and address the importance of this solution.

Warfare and Disinformation

A primary goal in warfare is to obstruct the decision making and command of an enemy leader. This principle is an old one. This same thinking about warfare in the 21st century must be applied to NATO about hybrid warfare. According to this definition, hybrid warfare is to accomplish strategic goals that undermine the norms of conventional warfighting (Johnson, 2018). Conventional warfighting has always included unconventional or asymmetrical attempts to achieve strategic objectives. Sun Tzu recognized the power of using spies to gather information because that would maximize potential to achieve a strategic objective without engaging in conventional conflict. Even though there was no concept like hybrid warfare back then, classical theories of war provide insights into how to achieve strategic objectives. What is new to NATO powers is the ability to achieve strategic objectives without crossing a threshold that would justify a conventional war being launched (Johnson, 2018). But this does not just include Russia using special operations forces to support pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine or China creating artificial islands to expand its territory. What is new to the concept of warfare is the use of disinformation campaigns to accomplish strategic goals without crossing a threshold that could provoke a conventional response. The most difficult of which to deal with and the most important to address is how Russia uses disinformation to influence citizens in other countries through social media and controls the strategic narrative.

Disinformation is "a carefully constructed false message leaked to an opponent's communication system in order to deceive the decision-making elite or the public" (Arenstein, 1986). Disinformation campaigns use this principle on a larger scale and for a long period of time to achieve their intended result. This principle of disinformation was originally developed by Russia and is called reflexive control. Reflexive control is defined as "… a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action" (Thomas, 2004). Reflexive control's main principles are to divide, distract, distort and to dismay an intended target with disinformation. This affects the decision-making cycle often referred to as the Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act (OODA) loop of the intended target. The main target of reflexive control is the orientation stage of the OODA loop because the disinformation has a chance to influence the decision of a target towards one that is favorable to Russia. The guiding principles behind reflexive control pair well with disinformation campaigns waged by Russian media like Russia

Today (RT), ideological posters on social media, and social media bots which disseminate ideological content on a large scale. Reflexive control is far more useful as a principle today than it ever was during the cold war. By targeting the voting population of a country, Russia can affect the largest decision-making actors in a state and potentially influence the outcome of elections to produce a favorable outcome for Russia. This is not to say, however, that there is a central coordinating node for all the activity on social and traditional media. The Kremlin does seek to influence non-state level actors to seize initiative and take opportunities to promote Russia's narrative despite not being able to coordinate content creation and distribution (Galeotti, 2017).

Examples of disinformation distribution networks include the pro-Russian ideological postings on social media by users in the Baltic States to influence dialogue and divide populations based on opinion. There are large networks of users there who are not part of troll factories or bots who write, share and spread ideological content related to World War II, communism, the West and other areas of debate with stark divisions of opinion all on social media platforms (Teperik et al., 2018). In the United States, bots and trolls are the primary disseminators of content and discussion. The height of the Russian disinformation campaign against the U.S. was predominantly during the 2016 presidential election. Facebook reported having taken down hundreds of accounts that spread disinformation about both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, as well as posted content intended to promote harmful discussion. Facebook also recently removed 270 accounts controlled by the Internet Research Agency which posted content aimed at Russian-speakers in nearby countries (Shane, 2018). These ideological users, trolls, and bots all end up with the same goal: to change voters' perception about what is true. That is how they change the strategic narrative and try to change how people vote.

The Importance of Narrative and Communication

Strategic narratives are critical to control because they order the world so that citizens see their position in relation to an 'other' (Roselle et al., 2014). Strategic narratives are also important because they are like a company's brand: they try to explain what the company is, its history, desired future and its values (Bonchek, 2016). Controlling the strategic narrative is a way to create an order out of chaos (Roselle et al., 2014). Applying those concepts to NATO and other countries is quite simple. NATO must address the concerns of its member states and try to convince them to allocate more financial resources

to the defense budgets. NATO also has the difficult task of trying to increase cooperation among member states. Like all states, NATO members try to improve their own security before the safety of others and hold information they perceive as sensitive close to their chests. Each state has their own strategic narrative of the security situation in Europe. NATO as an institution, however, has its own strategic narrative for how it would like to be seen in the world after the invasion of Crimea. In essence, NATO wants to show its member states that it is re-committed to ensuring security and is prepared to help states defend themselves from a wider variety of security threats, be they cyber or physical (Lindley-French, 2014). This strategic narrative requires cooperation on a large scale, which will be addressed later. Russia's general strategic narrative is that the West and NATO are corrupt and decadent. Russia also has the advantage of not having to cooperate with other states to cultivate a larger strategic narrative. Russia would also like to position itself as the only country capable of ensuring defense for its allies. If countries thought that NATO was not able to ensure their defense, Russia would benefit if it is seen as the only country capable of doing this. So far, Russia has a better understanding of how to actively tailor the narrative to a population because "It is vital that those seeking to use narrative strategically pay as much attention to the reception and interpretation of narratives as to their formation and projection since it is here that meaning is made and any attractiveness, engagement and scope for persuasion are located and experienced" (Roselle et al., 2014; Skuse et al., 2011). Russia controls the strategic narrative through disinformation on both social media and traditional media to reach their target audiences with tailored messages and affect their decision making processes. They are especially effective at reaching their Russian-speaking audiences in the Baltic states (Teperik et al., 2018). NATO, however, cannot communicate one message that reaches all audiences equally effectively. To address this issue, NATO must try and create a sense of confidence in its strategic narrative. Strategic communication is "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission" (Hallahan et al., 2007). In this case, 'mission' can be replaced with NATO's desired strategic narrative. NATO must use communication to cooperate and coordinate with member states to create more individualized narratives on a country-by-country basis. NATO needs to regain control of the strategic narrative on social media to reduce Russian ideological influence and reaffirm faith that democratic systems and the Western alliance can provide for security and stability in a chaotic age.

Current Solutions to Disinformation

Let us now focus on the question of how NATO members can use strategic communication to combat disinformation campaigns and promote their own strategic narrative. NATO member states, especially those in the European Union, are constantly threatened with disinformation campaigns that seek to divide, distract and deceive their citizens as well as potentially influence the outcome of elections through traditional or social media (Szafranski, 1995; Thomas, 2004). The concept of targeting civilians with disinformation was present in U.S. military circles of thought as a potential vulnerability of the U.S. in cyber war before it was implemented in these disinformation campaigns (Szafranski, 1995). There has not been any large-scale attempt to mitigate disinformation campaigns by educating citizens, which makes little sense in the age of disinformation and fake news.

Currently, there are many proposed solutions for addressing disinformation campaigns. Suggested proposals include improving cybersecurity defenses for political parties and newspapers because they have become targets for hackers. This is a necessary change that should be made to increase the security of democratic institutions and prevent meddling in elections. However, it does not seek to change the strategic narrative. Other proposals are more offensive in nature. Sanctions to freeze Russia's financial assets in response to disinformation campaigns are another suggestion but may inflame relations because it is difficult to prove if the Kremlin organized or financed the campaign. One suggestion is for the U.S. to sign the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) financial reporting agreement to make states disclose whether Russian companies spent money in U.S. territory (Galeotti, 2018). That may improve knowledge of Russian efforts to spread disinformation in the United States, but it does not improve the security situation of those who are geographically closest to Russia.

What could improve NATO's security in the face of Russian disinformation and information warfare is a promise to support NATO allies when they can confirm that they have been victims of a cyber-attack or disinformation. This would involve promoting the strategic narrative that agrees with NATO's objectives to increase security in Europe in new areas. NATO countries have several options to defend their strategic narrative and try to stop Russia's from becoming more believable, even though it is based on disinformation. One way to approach this challenge is to actively engage the enemies' strategic narrative. In Russia's case, the general narrative is to paint NATO as corrupt and decadent

through disinformation. NATO countries can approach this by confronting and countering that narrative through fact-checking and refuting the official accounts of events in Russian state media and claims by government officials (Hellman and Wagnsson, 2017). One example of using this method is the Ukrainian-run organization StopFake. StopFake takes time to debunk Russian state media's attempts to spread disinformation and tries to disseminate it to the largest amount of people who are targeted by these attempts. Recently, StopFake debunked an article written by RT and RIA Novosty claiming that the javelin missiles the U.S. sold Ukraine were defective. The article was based on a fabricated military document stating that the missiles failed to fire due to being 'expired' ("Fake," 2018). This method applies well to traditional media but not to social media. There are far too many posts to effectively counter at once. Another method is to block the information flow of Russia's strategic narrative (Hellman and Wagnsson, 2017). An example of that is Latvia blocking the broadcast of Rossiya RTR during the months following the invasion of Crimea[1]. However, blocking will not be acceptable for most democratic countries because it threatens free access to information which is an essential part of democracy. The method that will now be proposed is confrontational, defends NATO's general new strategic narrative, and relies upon cooperation.

Using Collective Impact

NATO members can combat disinformation campaigns using the principles of collective impact and strategic communication. Collective impact is built upon five key conditions that must be met for the project to succeed. From the Stanford Social Innovation Review, collective impact is "the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem" (Kania and Kramer, 2011). Collective impact is different from collaboration between NGOs, governments or other organizations because there is a backbone structure that "leads to a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication and mutually reinforcing activities" among actors (Kania and Kramer, 2011). This principle was tested in the U.S. education system. 300 community leaders were brought together by Strive, an education nonprofit, to work together to improve the education of children in Cincinnati, Ohio.

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[1] See for example message o Latvia's public broadcaster's site: *Latvia suspends Rossiya RTR channel*, available at: https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/latvia-suspends-rossiya-rtr-channel. a177088/ [12 November 2018]

What matters here is not that there were 300 people, but that they were all part of organizations with different agendas but the same goal, same shared standards to measure, and the same definitions of the problem. At the conclusion of the initiative, 34/53 success indicators had positive growth (Kania and Kramer, 2011). What made this initiative successful is the adherence to the five things quoted above that make collective impact different from independent efforts to improve education. This is a prime example of how collective impact can work to achieve a goal that organizations were addressing individually. The individual efforts of states and NGOs listed above are a step in the right direction, but they need more coordination to achieve an impact on a greater scale.

The first principle of a collective impact initiative to address disinformation campaigns is a common agenda. A common agenda means that all participants who want to work together to mitigate disinformation campaigns must have a shared definition of the problem and agreed-upon goals for the project. In this case, participants must agree which method they want to use for fighting disinformation. Since social media and traditional news media is so prevalent and an easy place for disinformation to spread it should be the focus of a NATO collective impact initiative. NATO members need to agree on whether they are going to address bots, trolls, and ideological posters. They also must agree on how to respond to the Russian media that spreads fabricated articles. Member states could conduct an education campaign for citizens to be more aware of the content on social media. The core of the initiative should focus on education about Russian disinformation first because it most closely aligns with democratic values on speech and freedom of information. There can be different initiatives for research into the cybersecurity or sanctions areas of combating disinformation conducted by separate parts of government and other NGOs.

Another critical area of collective impact is creating a shared measurement system to collect data on progress among all organizations. This aligns the efforts of the participants and holds them accountable to one another (Kania and Kramer, 2011). Member states need to develop a plan to measure citizen media literacy and ability to verify information accuracy. Citizens should also be able to recognize when discussion has been deliberately inflamed or steered towards a certain divisive topic on social media. Collective impact also hinges on mutually reinforcing activities. It is not that collective impact hinges on the number of participating organizations, but their ability to coordinate their different areas of effort to contribute to the shared measurement system (Kania and Kramer, 2011). For example, NGOs with a larger social media presence should direct their efforts on social media to reach the largest amount of the intended audience. Governments should occupy more of a research role or outsource it to other

NGOs. This part of the solution operates like an octopus' tentacles: each part of the solution has its own intelligence, exactly like a tentacle. Tentacles learn for themselves and share the information in a manner that the octopus understands, just like member organizations in collective impact initiatives must communicate their findings and progress with other organizations. Continuous communication is also required for success. Regular meetings with participating NGO and government leaders must happen often to build up trust, shared understanding of goals and a common vocabulary that can be used to clearly communicate progress and intentions (Kania and Kramer, 2011).

StratCom as a Backbone Organization

Backbone organizations are the most vital component of collective impact initiatives. Without a backbone organization, a collective impact initiative is doomed to an early failure. They guide organizations, facilitate their communication, help them develop shared standards and measurements, common languages, and ultimately indicate long term progress (Turner et al., 2012). Therefore, NATO's StratCom is uniquely suited to transform into a backbone organization.

StratCom states that part of its objective is to: "use various channels, including the traditional media, internet-based media and public engagement, to build awareness, understanding and support for its decisions and operations. This requires a coherent institutional approach, coordination of effort with NATO nations and between all relevant actors, and consistency with agreed NATO policies, procedures and principles." This mission statement directly coincides with the principles of having a backbone organization to coordinate the relevant actors in a collective impact initiative. StratCom is based on the principle of strategic communication, which within the context of facilitating communication between organizations can mean "purposeful communication activities by organizational leaders and members to advance the organizations' mission" (Hallahan et al., 2007). This definition aligns with StratCom's mission of promoting understanding of their policies and building awareness for their decisions and operations. NATO's fundamental mission is "to safeguard the freedom and security of all its members by political and military means" A collective impact initiative with StratCom as a backbone organization is one way to prevent the effects of Russian disinformation.

Why is this initiative so important? If StratCom can become a backbone organization for a collective impact initiative to fight disinformation, NATO can effectively aid people in discerning what is real from what is fake. The ideal

situation for NATO is for the majority of citizens in member states to be aware of Russian influence on social media and for them to fact check their traditional media to see if the information has been manipulated or outright fabricated. That means citizens believe the strategic narrative that Russia is trying to influence elections and is interfering in government and national security. Citizens will then believe NATO's narrative that they are doing everything possible to work together and increase information security in Europe as well as physical security. That is a great success for NATO's post-2014 strategic narrative.

Things to Consider

It is no secret that NATO member states have different goals for their own security, their own definitions of common security issues in member states and different language to describe common problems. A problem that could be faced by this proposed solution is that states like to keep information for themselves and try to advance their own security agendas before NATO's. Even though there is a desire among member states to advance their own agendas first, which hinders communication and cooperation, there needs to be a baseline level of cooperation and information sharing. There are security issues which affect every single NATO member state and disinformation is one of those critical issues. Even though the effects of disinformation may be quite different depending on the country, it is indisputable that the member states should work together to address it. At the minimum there should be an agreed upon definition of what disinformation is, and some shared baseline goals for outcomes. Disinformation directly affects how NATO is perceived. If NATO member states cannot cooperate, public opinion of the treaty becomes worse. If NATO can achieve more cooperation, they are perceived much more positively. NATO must convince citizens that their desired strategic narrative is in place and implement this solution to create effective change in addressing disinformation.

Sun Tzu's lesson "He will win whose army is animated by the same spirit throughout all its ranks" rings true. Collective impact is the spirit.