

CVE without narrative – “A book without a story”

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Abstract

Having spent nearly two decades in CVE and CT, I have come to several conclusions regarding how to improve effectiveness for the myriad of excellent programs currently employed, often simultaneously and in the same cognitive space. This paper, regarding narrative as a powerful tool of influence, addresses one of those conclusions and one that I find most critical.

My years as a practitioner have lead me to conclude that one of the primary reasons that well developed and executed programs do not achieve better results is that they often operate independently or, to the variety of target audiences, appear to do so. CVE is complex and so requires a complex variety of programs to address the most critical issues. In order to do so more effectively, there must be a story, or *narrative strategy*, that unifies the efforts.

The art and science of narrative, when developed around the science of narrative principles and disseminated artfully provides the requisite unity. Stories, a uniquely human attribute give meaning to identity and *narrative is precisely the type of story that connects the identity of the narrator (s) to the identity of the audience*. Without this bond simple messaging results all too often in failure to touch an audience in a manner that is predictable and beneficial to the narrator.

The intent of this paper is to explain the basics of narrative so that the variety of CVE practitioners can understand its inherent value in unifying their efforts and improving overall results from disparate but critical programs.

Introduction

In the struggle against extremism of all types, the heart and soul of our adversaries' ideological campaign is a core narrative supported by several related narratives. Narrative is a powerful vehicle for effectively communicating violent and corrupting ideology to potential recruits. Ultimately, a certain percentage of the most vulnerable will sadly cross the line from extremist into the ranks of violent extremist. *We, the West in particular, have lost the narrative battle against extremism for one simple reason; we have ceded the narrative battlefield to the extremists without a fight. This can and must be corrected.*

Radicalisation, as is now widely agreed upon, is a complex problem with no single cause or cure. Counter-ideology, community resilience, de-radicalisation, mitigating trauma (both personal and collective), defeating poverty, identifying and mitigating disenfranchisement, gang mitigation theories, mental health interventions are simply some but not nearly all of the types of programs that are popular with and being employed by CVE practitioners around the world. All have value in achieving selective results and some more than others. Every one of these programs though shares common bonds with related programs. What they do not share is a common narrative that gives meaning to the overall story of countering extremism. *What is needed to unify these programs so that they are mutually reinforcing and overall more effective, is a narrative strategy that communicates meaning, speaks to the identity, not the demographics of the uniquely different audiences, and is communicated in the multiple unique forms most resonant to a wide variety of at-risk audiences.*

Addressing a problem as complex as radicalisation and by extension, extremism, requires a coordinated strategy utilizing multiple mutually reinforcing programs in a carefully choreographed campaign. Failing to do so would be like writing a book with disparate but brilliant chapters that have no plot or storyline. Each chapter will teach the reader something potentially valuable but fail to tell the whole story in a meaningful manner and how it relates to the other chapters. Teaching exclusively though, is not "doing". Doing requires triggering the identity of the audience in a manner that is predictable and favorable to the overarching strategy. As our adversaries know full well, narrative is a unique type of story that confers and reinforces identity while giving that identity meaning; *therefore, a powerful vehicle for triggering identity-based behavior.*

If we are to collectively write a bestseller about CVE, we must employ the art and science of narrative in order to give meaning to these brilliant and disparate chapters. The story-line of our book itself is our narrative with each chapter supplying a supporting narrative that both reinforces the storyline and also gives meaning its own compelling story.

Part I: What is narrative and how does it work?

Narrative, as it applies to CVE is a term widely quoted but poorly understood. Narrative, when well executed, is a delicate and potent combination of both art and science. The intent of this paper is to communicate a basic understanding of narrative as it relates to CVE and to help give CVE practitioners the context for employing not just narrative but an *Operational Narrative* strategy as the storyline of their comprehensive approach to countering the scourge of radicalisation and its potential to develop into violent extremism.

What is narrative?

Narrative is as natural to human beings as breathing. We are meaning-seeking animals and our primary means of meaning-making is narrative. Narrative is the way we create, transmit, and in some cases, negotiate meaning. Without narrative, life would be experienced as an unconnected and overwhelming series of random events. We organize, prioritize, and order our experiences through narratives that we usually inherit. What is more, we understand not only the world around us, but also ourselves, through the narratives we live by; our personal narratives inform our personal identities, our tribal / familial narratives inform our tribal / familial identities, and our national narratives inform our national identity.

*“Life stories do not simply reflect personality. They are personality, or more accurately, they are important parts of personality, along with other parts, like dispositional traits, goals, and values,”*¹ writes Dan McAdams, a professor of psychology at Northwestern University, along with Erika Manczak, in a chapter for the APA Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology.

¹ McAdams, D. and Manczak, E. (2015, August). McAdams, Dan P., Manczak, Erika (2015). Personality and the Life Story. In Mikulincer, Marioo; Shaver, Phillip R. (2015) APA Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology, Volume 4: Personality Processes and Individual Differences, American Psychological Association / Beck, Julie (2015). Life's Stories. How you arrange the plot points of your life into a narrative can shape who you are—and is a fundamental part of being human. The Atlantic ,Retrieved from: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/08/life-stories-narrative-psychology-redemption-mental-health/400796/>.

An example, familiar to most regarding these attributes, are the two epic narrative poems of Homer; *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Both works are replete with examples of how Homer portrayed the identities of individuals and groups and gave meaning to those identities. These iconic works, still powerful millennia later, well demonstrate the durability of identities presented in a well-constructed narrative.

With this baseline understanding of what narrative is, it is crucial to comprehend its three most basic elements in order to understand why it is so powerful in the hands of our adversaries as well as a critical vulnerability for those in opposition. Developing this understanding is what will allow us to not only “tell a powerful story” but to actually employ *Operational Narrative* as an effective tool of CVE that has the potential to trigger predictable behavior.

We, at *Narrative Strategies*, when introducing the art and science of narrative to operational professionals, focus on what we consider the three primary elements of narrative:

1. Identity
2. Meaning, not truth
3. Structure

Identity

The whole point of employing a tool such as narrative is that it is a powerful communication tool. As any marketing professional knows, “knowing your target audience” is crucial. Without such analysis all marketing of products and ideas would be either ineffective or radically less effective. What most do not realize is that Target Audience Analysis (TAA) is demographic and data driven. Demographics and data, while part of identity, are quite far from the whole of identity. Precision understanding of an audience requires understanding the identity of those targeted, not merely age, race, religion, buying preferences etc.

*“Identity: Narratives both transmit identity and co-create identity. For example; a strategic narrative when employed with supporting lesser narratives will trigger the identity layers (as many as possible) of the target audience in order to create an “us” between the messenger and the TA, or a “them” attached to the opposition.”*² Dr. Ajit Maan, President, Narrative Strategies.

² Maan, D. A. (2010). *Internarrative Identity: Placing the Self*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America; Maan, D. A. (2015). *Counter-Terrorism Narrative Strategies*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America.

In order to predictably influence a group, any communication strategy with narrative as its core must connect with the identity, not just the demographics of that particular group. This then prompts the question “what is the difference between conventional TAA and one that incorporates identity into that analysis?”

Understanding the identity of an individual group requires analysis, or what we term Cultural Identity Analysis (CIA). The difference between TAA and CIA can be confusing so let us look at an example which should be of value in explaining the difference.

During consecutive deployments to Afghanistan, 2009-2013, I learned to put narrative at the core of my Information Operations campaigns. In order to achieve results in the East where Pashtun tribes dominate the cultural landscape it was incumbent upon me to learn “who rural Pashtuns are”. Pashtun tribes, largely (but not exclusively) inhabiting much of Afghanistan and Pakistan, express their identity through a millennia old tribal honor code called Pashtunwali. Pashtunwali not only defines behavior but that behavior defines who Pashtuns are individually and collectively. Pashtun history, traditions, governance are literally built upon and representative of some aspect of Pashtunwali.

When dealing with Pashtuns success depends in large part on how your words and actions are interpreted by way of Pashtunwali. This tribal honor code has developed over millennia and predates Islam. Although most Pashtuns consider Pashtunwali to be synonymous with Islam, it is not. This is representative of how the narrative of Pashtunwali gives meaning to Pashtun identity despite truth.

Pashtunwali regulates virtually every aspect of a rural Pashtun’s life and no thought or action is devoid of considering the ramifications of honor inherent to the code. This concept represents how the narrative of Pashtunwali triggers behavior. This is one reason that violent Islamic extremist groups espousing Sharia struggle to build sustainable relationships with Pashtun insurgents. The Taliban, largely Pashtun, are often and violently at odds with non-Pashtun extremists attempting to impose an aberrant version of Sharia common among Sunni oriented violent extremists. Extremist narratives rarely resonate with rural Pashtuns unless presented by a respected and traditional tribal elder and are presented in story form and couched with tenets of Pashtunwali.

If during my learning period regarding rural Pashtuns I had only considered demographics such as age, rural vs. city dwelling, married, number of children, household income, religion or profession, I would have learned little of value regarding what triggers behavior in rural Pashtuns. The bottom line is that identity, not demographics matter most.

Meaning, not truth

Meaning: Narratives do not necessarily tell the truth, they give meaning to a succession of events, facts (real or otherwise). That does not imply that narratives involve lies. It does though mean that when narrative is presented correctly it does not allow the audience to derive their own meaning. The narrator(s) control this.

Once again returning to our comparison to Homer's works, we see clearly that these powerful narratives solidified the identity of those in the story and gave meaning to the events of the story. Neither *The Iliad* nor *The Odyssey* are considered purely factual accounts but occasionally and partially historical accounts of events replete with meaning regarding Greek gods, their attributes, human frailties etc. Attributed to the 8th century B.C. both narratives are still an intrinsic part of Greek identity.

Both of these powerful narratives were also responsible for spreading Greek culture widely since *The Iliad* was the only powerful narrative of its era. Homer's story was marketed widely and became a tool that standardized the culture and war fighting of widely separated Greek populations. Both also still offer meaning regarding the human experience in historical context. For nearly two millennia schoolchildren and well-educated adults alike can relate to the meaning of these extraordinary narratives to include and more importantly, to have a relative understanding of what it meant to self-identify as an ancient Greek.

*“Once certain stories get embedded into the culture, they become master narratives—blueprints for people to follow when structuring their own stories, for better or worse.”*³ Monisha Pasupathi, a professor of developmental psychology at the University of Utah.

As an American and a Texan, the story of the *Alamo* is another very good example of meaning, not facts as expressed through narrative.

³ Pasupathi, M. (2015, August). *The Epic Identity of the Iliad and Odyssey: Pindar and Herodotus' Lofty Legacy*. Retrieved from Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University: <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5857>.

Presented from the American side, the fight at the Alamo for Texan independence from Mexico was a soul-stirring story recounting the meaning of fighting for freedom against an oppressive government. The 1960's movie starring John Wayne is the narrative that most Americans identify with although historical analysis reveals many glaring discrepancies with the movie. The same story told from the Mexican perspective was one of a courageous army marching several thousand kilometers to put down a rebellion of disrespectful and ungracious insurgents. Both versions of the same story and with common facts give divergent meanings to the identities of both American and Mexican audiences. Such is the power of a persuasive narrative.

What is important in this portion of this paper is that, when developing a narrative, it is essential to develop the meaning of your story based on the identity of the audience intended.

Structure

Form / Content: When most of us think of a narrative we think about what the narrative is about – the theme or the content. Equally important though is structure or form. What the story is about is content and how the story is told, the structure. Both form and structure are culturally dependent.

Generally speaking, western stories follow a different path than non-western. For example, a western styled narrative will generally be relatively linear with a beginning, middle (conflict), and end or resolution. This is not necessarily the form non-western literature takes. It is fairly common outside the west for story-telling to take a meandering path as well as be epic in nature. Meaning and multiple conflicts or evolutions will occur throughout the telling with characters displaying identity traits common among the elements of society most likely to hear, read or watch the story. Also common will be that the challenges or conflict encountered will be those most common to the intended audience. This allows the narrator to express meaning in how those challenges are met, resolved (or not) and all within the framework of identities common among intended audiences.

A related topic to form, and one most especially relevant to CVE and political narrators, is length and presentation. One of the most challenging aspects of fighting extremism is social media and the requirement to condense meaning, identity and structure into a short social media post, tweet, or article. This accentuates the problem of “getting

a narrative right” for a specific target audience. Brevity for some of the most important audiences requiring mitigation relative to radicalisation makes it acutely important to make every letter, punctuation mark, meme or associated music count. This is simply another reason that cultural identity analysis is of the utmost importance.

Part II: Putting it all together

By now I would imagine that everyone is wondering what all of this talk of Homer, the Alamo, Pashtuns etc. has to do with narrative centric CVE. The answer is simply that effective CVE requires many different approaches, and in order to communicate effectively a narrative strategy is required. Each approach or program targets unique audiences. Therefore, the overall campaign requires a compelling narrative while each supporting program would also require its own narrative. These individual narratives when part of an overall campaign would be considered “interactive narratives”, or sub-narratives.

The preceding sections are the most basic building blocks of narrative. Like any artisan, how one arranges these blocks when building a comprehensive program is dependent upon the skill, artistic vision and expertise of the artist. This is why we often say “the art and science” of narrative. The blocks are based on science and how they are arranged would be the art.

At the very beginning were listed several examples of different types of CVE programs. Every one of them is based on research and every one of them has demonstrated some level of contribution to the mitigation of radicalisation when executed properly. What is rarely seen are multiple approaches or programs interactively coordinated with each other. This we would contend is a major flaw in most CVE campaigns.

There is no reasonable debate as to the complexity of the problem of CVE, its causes and its potential treatments. If we can accept this premise, then we must also accept that we must carefully and expertly coordinate the application of multiple approaches at the same time. In order to do this, there is the absolute requirement to be able to communicate effectively in a manner that expresses our meaning to the identities of those we are attempting to reach and in a manner most resonant to them. Based on this statement, it is essential that narrative, based on its three foundational elements, become the “glue” that binds common but different objectives together. Our adversaries, be they right-wing

extremists or violent Jihadist types, do this inherently. As an example, DAESH, AQ, Boko Haram all share common overarching narratives and yet each have their own unique narrative which triggers behavior in their own sphere of influence.

It is not enough to merely state that terrorism based on extremist ideology is bad and that we must stand against it. The individuals reading this are all too aware that this statement is grotesquely oversimplified. Our extremist adversaries understand the need for a compelling and motivational narrative. Our adversaries by all measure have succeeded at some level of employing narrative to support their goals. To think we in opposition can effectively mitigate extremism without competing effectively in the narrative space defies logic.

This does mean merely employing “counter-narratives”. Our enemies have employed what is best described as “weaponized narrative”. We would submit that in order to compete on the narrative battlefield we need to employ what we consider to be *Operational Narrative*. *Operational Narrative* is a strategy that combines both a compelling narrative along with supporting interactive narratives that does not allow our adversaries to dominate the narrative space. Narratives, counter-narratives along with supporting interactive narratives must be deployed in conjunction with each other and well-orchestrated in order to trigger the identities targeted in a predictable and favorable manner.

This is a challenging task and not to be undertaken lightly. In order to be effective, there must be a coordinating authority that can assist in developing content, provide cultural identity analysis, coordinate communications and provide the assessments so critical to “fine-tuning” and adjusting content throughout the campaign.

By definition, making narrative operational requires intelligence specifically designed to support this effort. Conventional intelligence operations do not currently nor routinely collect and analyse narratives. Additionally, current intelligence operations do not carry out cultural identity analysis of the human terrain. These are glaring gaps in our capability to employ *Operational Narrative*. These gaps though can be closed and with far less difficulty than it would be imagined. It is a matter of refocusing already existing resources and training collectors and analysts to filter information in accordance with the three foundational elements of narrative.

Once armed with cultural identity analysis of multiple at-risk groups and analysis of our adversaries' narrative, it is possible to build narratives and related supporting narratives that effectively compete for dominance in the narrative space as well as build the interactive narratives that both support multiple programs and effectively counter adversarial narratives. Whether a program targets migrants, traumatized communities, or economic hardship they are all part of an overarching campaign but playing a specialized role.

The most basic and admittedly simplified Operational Narrative paradigm would be comprised of the following;

1. A simple but compelling over-arching narrative that is comprised of general but resonant themes.
2. Every program targeting extremism under the umbrella of the over-arching program would also need their own interactive narrative that relates to the over-arching narrative though focused on the identity, meaning and form most resonant with their specific audience.
3. Narrators selected based on cultural identity analysis.
4. Access to and resources required to disseminate narratives and supporting themes and messages both long term and in real time.
5. Cultural analysts for both development and assessment of campaigns.
6. A campaign control structure capable of coordinating messaging with observables.

There is no doubt that coordinating this effort is a seemingly daunting task. It will require a concerted effort by these related but unique communities and programs to apply analysis and rigor to developing such a strategy, including the acquisition of government support. These tasks though are not insurmountable. We are unfortunately living in a time when extremism is not waning. In fact, opposing types of extremism are driving each other into more violence. This is commonly seen in the symbiotic relationship between violent extremism based on an aberrant form of Islam and the extremism of the far right. If we choose to continue the path we are on and not develop new and more effective mitigation, it is at our own peril.

Conclusion

This paper began by comparing a comprehensive approach to CVE as a book of brilliant chapters but devoid of a storyline. As has been presented, an *Operational Narrative* campaign, built around the three primary elements of identity, meaning not truth, and structure offers the real possibility of correcting this strategic oversight. Any battle uncontested cannot be won. Narrative is the primary weapon of our extremist adversaries. We can ill afford to continue allowing them to wield it unopposed.

The hard truth though and one that must be addressed by nations, regions, NGOs or otherwise is that, in order to employ *Operational Narrative*, all participating entities must be willing to work together in a well-coordinated and effective manner. This is one of the most daunting hurdles to overcome. All the elements of a comprehensive campaign have invaluable expertise and honorable intent but that simply is not enough. Like the book in our analogy, each entity, like characters in a narrative, has a unique and specific role to play in order for a campaign to be a “best-seller”. Everyone must accept their role and direction in order for a comprehensive campaign to achieve its potential.

We will close on a note of optimism. In the course of our collective careers, the *Narrative Strategies* team has encountered countless brilliant, selfless, and dedicated professionals. There is not the slightest doubt that those we have encountered throughout understand the concepts and potential of Operational Narrative. Our biggest challenge and one which can be rectified through the advocacy of CVE professionals is to convince those in policy that we must engage on the narrative field of battle, in a convincing manner, and sooner than later. We have every confidence that should we in the narrative field and the remarkable CVE professionals recognizing the critical value of a narrative-centric campaign come together, we will succeed in changing policy and operations for the good of all.

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Further reading

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Content

Programme	5
ANDREAS ARMBORST	
Preface	9
PAUL CAUBAUGH	
CVE without narrative – “A book without a story”	11
JOEL DAY AND SCOTT KLEINMANN	
Combating the cult of ISIS: a social approach to CVE	23
ASIEM EL DIFRAOUI	
The role of culture in preventing and reducing violent extremism.....	41
EUROPEAN FORUM FOR URBAN SECURITY	
Preventing and fighting radicalization leading to violent extremism in Europe – the importance of local security analyses and evaluations ...	51
PATRICK FRANKENBERGER	
Is the Internet a Factor in Radicalization? Jihadist propaganda is targeting youngsters.....	65
DANIEL KOEHLER, FRANK BUCHHEIT AND ASIYE SARI-TURAN	
Applying quality standards in countering violent extremism and deradicalization. The case of Baden-Württemberg.....	75
SUSAN SZMANIA	
Investing in CVE and terrorism prevention program assessment and evaluation.....	91
CLIVE WALKER	
Preventing terrorism and countering extremism in the United Kingdom: Policy content, conflict and confusion.....	99
Authors’ Biographies	113