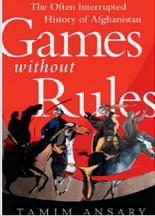
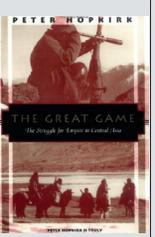


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WHAT IS A/THE NARRATIVE?

A STORY ABOUT STORIES

by **Dr Theron Verdon, Ph.D.**
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IN THE WORLD of communications, we often hear "What is the narrative?" or "How does this fit in our narrative?" or "We need a narrative." While serving in Afghanistan for Resolute Support Mission as Deputy Chief of Staff Communications, at least two of those statements were uttered quite a few times from quite a few people. A problem I noticed was that there appeared to be as many definitions of a narrative as there were people defining it. It is my hope to help explain what a narrative is to create a coherent understanding and framework for future communication operations. I am pulling on my experience as a Professor studying the use of narratives in strategic communication operations, and my time deployed in Afghanistan assessing and re-writing the Resolute Support Mission narrative.

Back in the Autumn of 2016, while in country, a series of events rocked Afghanistan. First Kunduz "fell" almost a year to the day it "fell" in 2015 (I use quotes for "fell" because there

were as many definitions of fell as there were people and news organizations using it). Then the Taliban released a new video, "Real Men", showing their training while appealing to the outside world for more money. Both events took place while Ashraf Ghani, the President of Afghanistan, was in Brussels at the Brussels Summit to request more international funding. Finally, a vehicle born IED blew up a police base in the Helmand district adding an exclamation mark to the month. Each of those events was their own story with all of them connected by two narratives. So, let's answer "What is a narrative?" so we can see "What is the narrative of these series of events?"

According to cognitive neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga, narratives help us navigate the world around us. For our brains, according to Gazzaniga, don't necessarily seek accuracy, but rather coherence, and that coherence is found in the stories and narratives that we humans tell to make sense of our world. As psychologist Jerome Bruner says, "we are storytelling creatures." In other words, our brains desire meaning, not information. That meaning is our stories and narratives. And yes, there is a difference between a story and a narrative.

Most people use story and narrative in-

terchangeably, but it's important to differentiate the two. A story is the explanation of an individual event. The story tends to have a few common features, context, events, and agents. Let's look at the VBIED attack on the Helmand police base as an example. A Humvee loaded with explosives driven by a member of the Taliban drives onto the base and blows up the hummer, killing many Afghan National Police Force members. When the Taliban tells the story it's a martyr (agent) attacking (event) the corrupted hypocritical police force (agents) in a war (event/context) to free Afghanistan (context) from its corrupt government and foreign invaders (agents). When the Government of Afghanistan and/or NATO/U.S. tell the story it's a radical insurgency who murders innocent men who are trying to protect their fellow Afghans. Consider that event, that story, a dot. That dot is part of a larger picture, the narrative. A narrative as Halverson, Goodall, and Corman state is a "coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories". The narrative organizes the stories and provides a system, or framework, for explaining and understanding those individual stories. Or if each story is a dot, then the narrative connects those dots to create a bigger picture.



Going back to October 2016, each one of those events; the "fall" of Kunduz, the time of the Brussels Summit, the release of the "Real Men" video, and the bombing of the police base told their own story. Each story, or dot, contributed to the Taliban's connecting strategic narrative. And yes, there is a difference between a strategic narrative and just a narrative, and it boils down to intent.

A narrative can, and usually will, arise organically, though it can be hijacked as we will see later. However, a strategic narrative is created for a reason, to frame perception and provide attitudinal and behavioral responses for the audience. In other words, it tells us how to *feel* about events, and/or what to *do* when confronted by those individual events.

Looking at each of those happenings in October 2016, and the whole insurgency, a Taliban narrative emerges. This narrative tells of how they are fighting a defensive war to protect Afghanistan from "foreign invaders" (a narrative unto itself) and a corrupt government, and if Afghans support and/or rise up to these foreign invaders and corrupt government, they will be removed, once again. The interesting aspect of the Taliban narrative is that it fits nicely in a larger organic narrative that is used by the world community to explain Afghanistan.

While in Afghanistan, and working on assessing the Resolute Support Mission narrative, I analyzed multiple news stories. As I was analyzing, a broader narrative emerged that I named the Failed State Narrative (FSN). The Failed State Narrative of Afghanistan is the ordering and framework of stories that many news media outlets and governments use to make sense of Afghanistan. The FSN focuses on problems Afghanistan has faced in the past, present, and potential future.

These stories emphasize issues identified by the Fund for Peace's Fragile State Index (formally known as the Failed State Index). The FSN consists of stories that highlight issues involving political legitimacy, lack of public services, human rights and rule of law violations,

security problems, factionalized elites and external intervention. Stories of roads being blown up, governmental corruption, leaders abusing opponents, Taliban attacks, division between Ghani and Abdullah, and the constant reminder of Western intervention feed the FSN. When someone reads a story about corruption in Afghanistan that story "makes sense" because their perception of Afghanistan is framed by the Failed State Narrative. Because of its nature, the FSN is easily accessed by those wishing to reinforce negative perceptions of the current state of Afghanistan.

The Taliban's strategic narrative tells of how invaders have always tried to conquer Afghanistan through force and coopting nationals, but in the end, the righteous will run the invaders out and take over that land from the corrupt government. A large part of that narrative is the chaos, corruption, and occupation which fits nicely in the FSN. Though they may not call it the FSN, the Taliban are feeding the Failed State Narrative with their words, images and actions. They have co-opted it for the broader world to see Afghanistan as a lost cause "so the West might as well leave."

However, the FSN is not owned by anyone and is flexible. Other agents have weaponized the FSN too. Take, for instance, Russia and their Afghanistan peace talks in Moscow, which helped feed the FSN. By inviting the Taliban to the diplomatic talks, they frame the Taliban as a legitimate organization. By framing the Taliban as a legitimate organization worth of diplomatic talks, it pushes a story of questioning the political legitimacy of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA). Having another nation recognize the insurgency as a legitimate political entity to discuss matters of political importance sends a signal perhaps that GIROA is *NOT* able to exercise basic functions of a government. According to the Fragile State Index, a factor involved with political legitimacy is the ability of a state to exercise basic functions that infer a population's confidence in its

government and institutions.

Another agent weaponizing the FSN is Iran. Let's put aside their supplying of the insurgency with training and material. Iran's interference with the Helmand River dam projects affects GIROA's ability to provide public services to their people. These individual stories, or "dots", help feed the Failed State Narrative. The insidiousness of the FSN is that it passes what Walter Fisher called narrative rationality. The narrative fits our prior accepted understanding of Afghanistan, it "makes sense". Or in other words, "Oh, Kunduz fell... well, that makes sense. Afghanistan is a failed state anyway."

The staying power of a narrative is its flexibility to accommodate multiple perspectives even over time. The Failed State Narrative of Afghanistan finds its flexibility in that it almost exclusively provides context for the stories to exist, thus allowing for multiple perspectives. Communicators can then frame *events* and *agents* to their liking within the already accepted context (see previous VBIED example). The dots may change colors, but they still produce the same picture.

So, what is a narrative? It's not a story; it's a "story" about stories. It's the broader shared meaning that organizes and explains multiple events, or the world around us. Hopefully, with this understanding of narrative, when we hear "What's the narrative?" there won't be quite as many definitions. †

About the author

THERON VERDON, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the State University of New York Oneonta where he teaches strategic communication, persuasion, persuasive campaigns, and rhetoric. Dr Verdon is also a Public Affairs Officer in the United States Navy reserve. From 2016-2017, he was mobilized to Afghanistan; while there, Lt. Verdon was the primary author and subject matter expert for all Resolute Support Mission foundational documents from audience analyses and talking points to master narrative and Resolute Support Communication Playbook.

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