The Postmodern Challenge: Informational Power in Limited Conflict and Competition

A Monograph

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Strategists must understand the importance of information as a tool of influence within the realm of international conflict. Over the past few decades, changes in the information domain have profoundly impacted how the United States must look at the informational element of national power. While it is relatively straightforward that changes in news media, advances in communication technology, and the distributive nature of social media have changed how many within the interconnected global commons consume information, what is more difficult to understand is how individuals or groups interpret this information. Epistemological perspectives help shape an individual's understanding of the nature of knowledge and its fundamental role in constructing a view of the world. Today's strategist primarily views the world through a modernist lens based on objectivity, reason, and universality. The postmodern perspective – which is growing more significant – sees truth and knowledge as subjective, non-rational, and context-specific. This paper proposes that postmodern thought challenges the United States' ability to successfully utilize the informational instrument of national power by reshaping the informational environment, particularly in engagements short of state-on-state open conflict. In this arena, narrative battle reigns supreme, supported by postmodern thought's challenge to objective truth, its rejection of sweeping metanarratives, and its championing of localized narratives focused on deconstructing oppressive power dynamics.

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Abstract

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Strategists must understand the importance of information as a tool of influence within the realm of international conflict. Over the past few decades, changes in the information domain have profoundly impacted how the United States must look at the informational element of national power. While it is relatively straightforward that changes in news media, advances in communication technology, and the distributive nature of social media have changed how many within the interconnected global commons consume information, what is more difficult to understand is how individuals or groups interpret this information. Epistemological perspectives help shape an individual's understanding of the nature of knowledge and its fundamental role in constructing a view of the world. Today's strategist primarily views the world through a modernist lens based on objectivity, reason, and universality. The postmodern perspective – which is growing more significant – sees truth and knowledge as subjective, non-rational, and context-specific. This paper proposes that postmodern thought challenges the United States' ability to successfully utilize the informational instrument of national power by reshaping the information environment, particularly in engagements short of state-on-state open conflict. In this arena, narrative battle reigns supreme, supported by postmodern thought's challenge to objective truth, its rejection of sweeping metanarratives, and its championing of localized narratives focused on deconstructing oppressive power dynamics. In response, this paper recommends strategists view the information environment through a lens that balances modern and postmodern perspectives as a means to inform educational, structural, and doctrinal changes for future narrative battle in limited conflict and competition.

Contents

Acknowledgement

Acronyms

EP   Electronic Protection

EW   Electronic Warfare

IDF   Israeli Defense Force

IRC   Information Related Capability

JDN   Joint Doctrine Note

JP   Joint Publication

LOAC   Law of Armed Conflict

MISO   Military Information Support Operations

MNIOE Multinational Information Operations Experiment

NATO   North Atlantic Treaty Organization

OPE   Operation Protective Edge

OPSEC Operations Security

PMESII Political Military Economic Social Information Infrastructure

Introduction

> In traditional international conflicts, the side with the stronger military force tended to win. In today's information age, it is often the party with the stronger story that wins.
>
> — Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Boston Globe*, 19 August 2006

Strategists must understand the importance of information as a tool of influence within the realm of international conflict. Over the past few decades, changes in the information domain have profoundly impacted how the United States must look at the informational element of national power. This element of national power unfolds in what US joint doctrine outlines as the information environment, which is composed of three dimensions: the physical, the informational, and the cognitive.[1] While it is relatively straightforward that changes in news media, advances in communication technology, and the distributive nature of social media have changed how many within the interconnected global commons consume information, what is more difficult to understand is how individuals or groups interpret this information. It is within the cognitive dimension that information is processed, assigned meaning, and interpreted for understanding or action.

Joint doctrine outlines some of the features that help to shape an individual's view. These include beliefs, morals, culture, identity, and ideology, to name a few. However, a more foundational level of understanding lies beneath these features. Epistemological perspectives help shape an individual's understanding of the nature of knowledge and its fundamental role in constructing a view of the world. The strategist's view is based on a modernist perspective fixed in objectivity, reason, and universality. The postmodern perspective – which is growing more significant – sees truth and knowledge as subjective, non-rational, and context-specific. So how

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[1] US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 3-13, *Information Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2014), I-2.

does the rise of the postmodern perspective affect the United States' ability to leverage the informational element of national power in today's age of global competition?

This paper proposes that postmodern thought challenges the United States' ability to successfully utilize the informational instrument of national power by reshaping the information environment, particularly in engagements short of state-on-state open conflict. In this arena, narrative battle reigns supreme, supported by the ability for postmodern thought to challenge objective truth, its rejection of sweeping metanarratives, and its championing of localized narratives focused on deconstructing oppressive power dynamics. This is not to say that the primary force shaping today's information environment is postmodernism. Misinformation, deception, and subversion were relevant long before postmodernism. The 24-hour news cycle and social media certainly dominate information distribution, and we are not poised to cross some threshold into a "postmodern world" where the modernist perspective is no longer relevant. However, the proliferation of postmodern thought and its epistemological constructs are certainly an enabling feature in generating skepticism and doubt about our world.

Postmodernism is by no means a single coherent theory and often evades definition, but this does not mean it is not worth understanding from a strategist's vantage point. Global competition will require the ability of the United States to shape the information domain. Therefore strategists must understand the factors that shape this domain at its most basic level. A strategist cannot simply write off some of the challenges posed by postmodernism as some abstract realm for academics, as these concepts have leaked beyond the halls of today's universities. These concepts should also not be feared as some wicked power that threatens the logic and reason shaping the strategist's world. The strategist is compelled to understand it for its ability to shape social and cultural dialogue and that while it challenges the modernist lens, it does not fully replace it in shaping how people view the world. To shed some light on this subject this paper will first cover a brief background of postmodern thought, its origins, and why it is

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becoming more influential outside of universities. Next, this paper will outline how postmodern thought can shape today's information environment and how today's doctrinal guidance on communication and information operations does not acknowledge these factors. Then, this paper will look at the 2014 Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Gaza Strip as an example of the challenges that arise when these ideas are applied in a contemporary narrative battle. Lastly, this paper will forward some ways in which the United States can attempt to better account for the effect of postmodernism in its application of informational power from a military perspective.

Many reading this paper may be reading about postmodern theory for the first time and wonder how something so abstract could influence or shape today's informational environment. As Joseph Nye has pointed out and recent history highlights, simply being successful on the battlefield may not be enough. It is within the cognitive dimension that the collection of words, images, videos, and stories will define a conflict. This is where information is turned into meaning. If strategists are going to build better stories, they need to understand the perspectives of reality, knowledge, and power that help to shape meaning through both a modern and postmodern lens.

Postmodern Thought for the Strategist

> The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one . . . The answer is: Let us wage war on totality.
>
> —Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*

Postmodernism, by its very nature, is difficult to understand. This assertion can be particularly true from the modernist lens of the strategist. Postmodernism is associated with movements in art, literature, and philosophy. Since its most staunch proponents offer a disparate set of ideas and will even refuse the label "postmodern," it is difficult to understand how these ideas can shape strategy. This study looks to simplify these concepts by focusing this section on

the impact of postmodernism on philosophy, with a particular emphasis on epistemology – how we obtain and understand knowledge – and narrative structure.[2] This section does not attempt to address the never-ending and often circular debate focused on the exact taxonomy within postmodern thought. At its most basic level, postmodernism represents an intellectual movement that was responsive to particular historical conditions. The circumstances that triggered this movement include the impact of two world wars, broad frustration with Marxism, the effects of a post-industrial society, and the rapid advancements in information technology.[3] This section will outline the sources of postmodern thought, its historical context, and its developmental foundation. However, because the term postmodern appears in differing contexts, it is necessary to be more specific about what this paper is not about.

In order to limit the scope of the discussion presented below, it is important to outline how this paper will differentiate its focus from other uses of the term postmodern, set aside some of the more extreme postmodern claims with regards to science, and highlight the areas most pertinent for shaping narrative battle in competition and limited conflicts. First, postmodern in this discussion does not refer to post-industrial views of socio-economic structures that focus on the globalization of markets and the shift of modern economies from those based in industry to those based in information technology and services. Second, this discussion does not focus on postmodern war as it relates to hybrid or gray-zone military strategies. While both of these terms are tangential and informed by some of the same forces that help shape postmodern theory, both lay outside the key concepts this paper will attempt to forward. The postmodern this paper will focus on relates to an epistemological viewpoint, or more simply put, as it relates to an understanding of truth and knowledge, and will refer to it as postmodernism, postmodern thought,

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[2] Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020), 30.

[3] Ibid., 21.

or the postmodern perspective. In this vein, one area of postmodernism that this paper will not focus on is its claims against science's objectivity. As with all inquiries into the nature of knowledge, postmodernism seeks to question the basic assumptions of how knowledge is created. One area postmodernism seeks to question is the ability of the scientific method to generate objective claims. However, since most postmodern claims about science fail to recognize or acknowledge the self-correcting and reflexive dialogue within scientific methods, it does not make sense for the strategist to focus on this aspect of the postmodern perspective. It is worth focusing effort on areas where postmodern thought has a real impact, and in the case of the strategist, it is crucial in seeing how it is applied to ethical and social problems.[4] Finally, although the term uses the prefix "post," postmodernism does not necessarily mean that it follows chronologically after modernism.[5] The term postmodern is less useful in trying to define an era or epoch, but rather most useful in comparing to the epistemological approach it seeks to counteract: the modernist intellectual movement.

The word modern first appeared in the late fifth century to differentiate the current era from that of the ancients. In the twelfth century, the modernist idea of human progress solidified around the concept that modern humans knew more than their predecessors, not because they possessed more perceptive vision, but that they possessed both their learned knowledge and the knowledge of the past. The most significant expansion of the modernist movement started in the seventeenth century during the Enlightenment. During this period, European philosophers, such as Descartes, Locke, and Kant, put forth the argument for rational thought to replace the dominant ideas of feudalism and superstition.[6] What emerged was a positivist epistemology that strove for

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[4] Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 40-42.

[5] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, 1st edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 79.

[6] Mary Jo Hatch and Ann L. Cunliffe, *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 36.

human progress through logic, reason, scientific methods, and the accumulation of knowledge. Additionally, modernists believed in an external objective reality that exists independent of human knowledge.[7] Military strategists will be familiar with this lens. Modernism dominated much of Western thought for centuries, and it is the primary way militaries view conflict. As with anything in human history, ideas about knowledge, reality, and progress are not stagnant but are constantly challenged.

While the main philosophical challenges to modernism stemmed from the mid to late twentieth-century, some critical influences predate this era. The writings of Fredrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher who lived from 1844 to 1900, are often seen as critical for setting the conditions for postmodern thought. Though not a postmodernist himself, Nietzsche's despair for reason, challenge to objective truth, and his "perspectivist" position certainly created the foundations to question dominant epistemological models.[8] Nietzsche denied that humans are capable of "pure reason." In this case, Nietzsche refers to reason as *a priori* knowledge or knowledge produced from purely theoretical deduction versus deductions tied to observation or experience.[9] This inability to separate reason from experience undergirds an important position for postmodern thought, that the traditional view of objectivity was a "nonsensical absurdity." His "perspectivist" position states that there only exist interpretations from particular points of view that could not be wholly unified and that you cannot separate the perspective in seeing from the perspective of knowing. This brought into question the entire concept of discovering universal structures or patterns to view the world.[10] Critically, Nietzsche's ideas shaped a general

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7 Hatch and Cunliffe, *Organization Theory*, 14. Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 30.

8 Leslie Paul Thiele, *Thinking Politics: Perspectives in Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern Political Theory*, 2nd edition (New York: Chatham House Publishers, 2002), 79; Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, Reprint edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 109; Butler, *Postmodernism*, 115.

9 Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 106.

10 Thiele, *Thinking Politics*, 79; Stephen Eric Bronner, *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 26.

background and philosophical mood of mistrust that provided a mode of thought that could be used as an instrument in the struggle for survival and power.[11]

Critical Theory represents a philosophical approach that sprung from generations of German thinkers, starting in the late 1920s, known as the Frankfurt School, and was another influence of the postmodern movement. Critical Theory's main goals were to create descriptive and normative methods of inquiry that could decrease domination and increase freedoms in all their forms within society.[12] These methods were chiefly concerned with revealing hidden biases and examining underlying assumptions that may require more scrutiny. These methods would prove particularly useful in challenging assumptions about knowledge and how it is generated.[13] For the theory to be adequately critical under this construct, according to Max Horkheimer, it must simultaneously be explanatory, practical, and normative. In other words, it must point out what is currently wrong with society, identify who can make the required change, provide clear norms for criticism, and outline definable practical goals for the transformation. While members of the Frankfurt School would later become staunch critics of postmodernism in general, their critical mood of inquiry and view of oppressive power set the tone for the next stage in the development of postmodern thought.[14]

Once the postmodern movement had the general mood and some critical tools to challenge the modernist paradigm, general events in the early twentieth century provided motivation to reexamine dominant modes of thought. Following the devastation of two world wars, some were questioning the broad modernist assumptions about human progress. Could the

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[11] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 7.

[12] James Bohman, "Critical Theory," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2021, accessed 24 February 2021, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/critical-theory/; Bronner, *Critical Theory*, 21.

[13] Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 13-14; Hatch and Cunliffe, *Organization Theory*, 229, 266.

[14] Bohman, "Critical Theory"; Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 272.

death and destruction of the first half of the twentieth-century signify some critical misjudgments regarding humanity's direction? In academic circles, these experiences, along with the proliferation of advanced technology and the disillusionment with Marxism, led to fears that society was devolving into an artificial, hedonistic, consumerist world devoid of the authentic human experience.[15] From these fears arose not only a deep suspicion of knowledge and power but despair in the Enlightenment-derived modes of thought that generated these constructs.[16] These fears and despair inspired the postmodern movement. While not particularly unified in its doctrine, three major themes emerged: that human truth does not produce any objective representation of reality, that societies use language to create their own local realities, and that metanarratives – overarching stories that provide structure to human understanding – are cultural artifacts that hinder human progress.[17]

Postmodernism, as it relates to social and philosophical perspectives, began to emerge in Germany and France in the mid-twentieth century from two movements: structuralism and post-structuralism.[18] Both of these movements pushed back against the methodological individualist perspective that power is derived from the independent action of individuals that have the agency to pursue their freely chosen interests. Structuralism and post-structuralism claim that power is not exerted by individuals on their environment but instead by the social environment on the individuals. Where structuralism believes that this social life is firmly grounded in powerful institutions and traditions, post-structuralism sees social power as more widely dispersed and in flux. This naturally leads the drive for post-structuralists to analyze the role of power in the social

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[15] Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 24-25.

[16] Butler, *Postmodernism*, 3,11.

[17] Butler, *Postmodernism*, 2; Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 26, 29, 34.

[18] Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 24; Thiele, *Thinking Politics*, 73-78.

construction of reality.[19] Three important proponents of this movement were Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida.

Jean-François Lyotard was the first of these French thinkers to assign the label "postmodernity" to the current state of the world in his 1979 book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Lyotard pushed back against "totalizing" philosophical traditions, and in particular, he criticized metanarratives as a means to legitimize certain types of knowledge. Exactly what is a metanarrative, and why are they so counter to the postmodern condition? Leslie Thiele defines metanarrative as "a story that subsumes all other perspectives to produce a singular, all-encompassing account of the world, an account that implicitly or explicitly legitimates certain social norms, political structures, and positions of power."[20] Some examples of these stories include religious doctrines, political ideologies such as Marxism, the "triumph of science" – the role of science and reason in creating human progress – and the pillars of Western Democracy, including the concept of inalienable rights of the individual.[21] Lyotard saw these metanarratives as both intellectually and politically totalitarian.[22] Based on a Nietzschean "perspectivist" view of knowledge, Lyotard forwarded that people operating in different social environments did not have the same access to these all-encompassing structures.[23] As these metanarratives necessarily fall away, what is left are *petit récit* or little narratives that are localized and regionally specific.[24]

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[19] Thiele, *Thinking Politics*, 73, 77, 78.

[20] Ibid., 95.

[21] Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 16.

[22] Hatch and Cunliffe, *Organization Theory*, 50; Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 34-35; Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, x.

[23] Peter Gratton, "Jean-François Lyotard," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2018, accessed 24 February 2021, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/lyotard/

[24] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 60; Gratton, "Jean-François Lyotard".

Michel Foucault was a French post-structuralist philosopher who studied the history of knowledge across various fields to include sociology, psychoanalysis, criminology, political science, and economics.[25] One of Foucault's main focal points was the linkage between knowledge and power. In his eyes, a statement does not just reveal the information contained within, but also the rules and conditions that apply to what Foucault described as a discourse. A discourse is a social system that controls who can speak and what can be said.[26] These rules and conditions are controlled by those in power and hence outline what can be true and known. He called this linkage power-knowledge.[27] Power-knowledge is then used to regulate behavior and ultimately reinforce the societal structures that suppress marginalized populations while holding up those already in positions of power.[28]

Jacques Derrida was a French post-structural philosopher whose primary focus was on the instability of language and a concept known as "deconstruction." The instability of language referred to Derrida's idea that the meaning of words did not come from a stable relationship of the words themselves – signifiers – to what they represented – the signified.[29] He also argued that determining the meaning of texts, both written and spoken, was elusive since they were always positioned within specific historical, cultural, and political contexts. Removal from said context, or if the context was changed, the text's meaning would be open to multiple and even opposite interpretations. If language was unstable, then any truth or knowledge expressed in this form was also unstable.[30] Derrida introduced the concept of deconstruction to help deal with these

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[25] Hatch and Cunliffe, *Organization Theory*, 51.

[26] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge: And the Discourse on Language* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 49, 135-140; Hatch and Cunliffe, 51.

[27] Hatch and Cunliffe, *Organization Theory*, 51; Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 33-34; Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 49, 135-140.

[28] Hatch and Cunliffe, *Organization Theory*, 51.

[29] Thiele, *Thinking Politics*, 78.

[30] Hatch and Cunliffe, *Organization Theory*, 52-53.

instabilities and multiple interpretations. Deconstruction's focus was on reading texts using different contexts, not as a way of determining their true meaning, but to determine a text's assumptions, contradictions, and exclusions. By breaking down text in this manner, one revealed language's ability to express, reproduce, or shape social power, and deconstruction attempted to fracture these exclusive or inclusive strategies.[31] This period of postmodern thought is now considered to be its "high-deconstructive" phase and offered few concrete options with which to create actual social change.[32] However, as postmodern thought moved through academic circles, it would advance globally in more actionable forms.

In the 1970s and 1980s, these ideas spread to England, Germany, and the United States, primarily into universities' humanities and social science departments. These concepts were not theories as understood in the traditional sense but as a collection of highly skeptical discourses that consistently failed to forward empirically testable positions. An important aspect of postmodern thought from this period was its use of obscure and often confusing language.[33] One of the reasons these authors expressed themselves and their ideas in this manner was a protest in itself. They sought to confront the idea of "Cartesian" clarity. From their perspective, the logical modes of communication that dominated the modernist mindset represented a "bourgeois" certainty in the world order that suppressed other less privileged forms of knowledge. However, the language of postmodernists of this period also led to numerous interpretations, adaptations, and misunderstandings that furthers the confusion around these concepts even today. This disarray places these concepts that much further out of the realm of the strategist.[34] Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay attempt to create a generalized summary of postmodern positions

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[31] Hatch and Cunliffe, *Organization Theory*, 53; Butler, *Postmodernism*, 16-17; Thiele, *Thinking Politics*, 78.

[32] Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 43.

[33] Butler, *Postmodernism*, 6-7, 9.

[34] Butler, *Postmodernism*, 9.

by outlining two principles. The postmodern knowledge principle is a "radical skepticism about whether objective knowledge or truth is obtainable and a commitment to cultural constructivism." The postmodern political principle is "a belief that society is formed of systems of power and hierarchies, which decide what can be known and how."[35] As noted earlier, postmodernism is not wholly unified or consistent as an intellectual movement; however, these two principles provide a valuable outline for the strategist.

More recent expressions of postmodern theory are what Pluckrose and Lindsay call "reified" postmodernism, and they represent an evolution of viewpoints into a more easily understood and accessible form.[36] The purest early forms of postmodern theory focused on dismantling and disrupting current forms of knowledge. Ultimately these deeply cynical and nihilistic forms were unsustainable as they did not provide a practical means to shape actual change.[37] The first step from beyond the "high-deconstructionist" form of postmodernism arrived in the late 1980s and is what Pluckrose and Lindsay call "applied" postmodernism. This formulation sought to create foundational precepts that could reconstruct a better world by retaining much of established postmodern theory while recognizing the need to acknowledge some objective truths required for stability. For example, they claimed that some unjust power dynamics within societies were objectively true. This resulted in social science scholars that took approaches focused on how phenomena ought to be, versus a detached assessment of the phenomena as they currently stood.[38] By the 2010s, postmodern theory took its next evolutionary step. Reification, as it relates to "reified" postmodernism, is the process with which something abstract is treated as if it were real. In this case, the postmodern knowledge and political

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[35] Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 31.

[36] Ibid., 181.

[37] Ibid., 45-46.

[38] Ibid., 46-48.

principles were now treated as objective fact – another step required to create a more solid base for action, irony notwithstanding.[39] This reification process was also associated with a simplification in the language used to communicate these ideas, breaking from its forebears' discursive and illusive language.[40] As a result, reified postmodernism was no longer confined to just academic circles but laid out a blueprint for reshaping real-world applications such as politics, economics, and education.[41] Pluckrose and Lindsay outline how this reification has moved postmodernism from obscure academic theories into general wisdom about how the world works.[42]

How can we see that postmodern thought is affecting more than just discussions in university lecture halls? Many of these ideas currently shape national and global discourse and have been for the better part of two decades. However, without the knowledge that these ideas come from postmodern scholarship they tend to go unnoticed. Narratives that elevate "lived experience" and "personal truth" over objectivity, and movements that seek to deconstruct formalistic power hierarchies are all deeply rooted in postmodern thought.[43] The effects of postmodern thought – especially its perspectivist position of knowledge – on generating a sense of shared reality is particularly evident in today's media environment. This includes both legacy media and social media platforms. While postmodernism is not entirely responsible for the idea of a "post-truth" media or "fake news," the challenges that postmodern thought places against modernist ideas of truth and knowledge are certainly an enabling factor.

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[39] Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 181.

[40] Helen Pluckrose, "The Evolution of Postmodern Thought," YouTube Video, 22 June 2020, accessed 30 Jan 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoi9omtAiNQ, 24:35-24:55, 29:45-30:05.

[41] Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 182.

[42] Ibid., 65.

[43] Ibid., 54, 111, 128-129.

This section is undoubtedly a brief and selective introduction to postmodern thought. However, it provides an important overview of the context that inspired and shaped its development and outlined the overall mindset critical to understanding how postmodernism can shape today's information environment. The horrors of the two world wars and the realization of other social changes forced some philosophers to question assumptions about knowledge, truth, and progress that stem from the modernist perspective. Where the modernist perspective focused on an objective reality that was knowable through Enlightenment-based reasoning and methods, postmodernism questions these very ideas in their most basic forms. Built on post-Nietzschean despair for reason, and the critical mood that emerged from the Frankfurt School, the "high-deconstructionist" phase of postmodernism created the foundation to challenge the modernist views of knowledge, truth, and language. These abstract views were developed within academia in social science and humanities departments for the better part of half a century and have now been reified into means of action that have left academia for real-world application. Now that they are well beyond the sanctity and safety of the lecture hall, it is essential to understand how these concepts affect today's information environment and the ability for them to hinder the modern strategist.

Postmodern Effect on the Information Environment

> Our information environment is sick. We live in a world where facts are less important than narratives, where people emote rather than debate, and where algorithms shape our view of the world.

> —David Patrikarakos, *War in 140 Characters*

The information environment greatly influences the effectiveness of informational power, and it is undeniable that today's information environment is vastly different from that of twenty or thirty years ago. Indeed, changes in information technology, digital infrastructure, and media platforms have altered the scope and scale with which individuals and groups can communicate.

However, on a more fundamental level, the proliferation of postmodern thought has had a staggering effect on how the world views global conflict and competition. While technology and innovation have impacted the information environment's physical and informational dimensions, postmodern thought's most prominent impact is in the cognitive dimension. This dimension focuses on "individuals' and groups' information processing, perception, judgment, and decision making."[44] It is within this dimension that humans turn information into meaning and is the nexus of informational power.

This section will concentrate on how postmodern thought has shaped an information environment that favors localized narrative battle as the most effective form of informational power within the scope of limited conflict and competition. This is not to say that postmodernism is the primary driving force in the information environment, but the proliferation of these modes of thought from academia and beyond are enabling factors that shape certain forms of narrative battle. Far beyond a simple campaign of themes and messages, these narratives help form meaning and potentially shape political outcomes. Postmodernism supports this narrative battle by its assertions of subjective knowledge, the linkage of power and knowledge, and its resistance to metanarratives.

The first aspect of postmodern thought that drives the information environment to favor localized narratives stems from the postmodern knowledge principle and the impact of cultural constructivism on the perception of reality. Cultural constructivism is a concept that proposes all truth claims reflect the values of a specific, and often local, culture. That is to say that because knowledge must be expressed in the language, concepts, and categories within a culture, these biases will ultimately shape a subjective view of reality – a specific and narrow form of relativism. This does not mean postmodernism is a complete denial of an objective reality, but rather there are barriers based on cultural biases and assumptions that prevent humans from

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[44] US Joint Staff, JP 3-13 (2014), I-3.

knowing the world as it truly is. This also does not imply that cultural interpretations actually create reality but that all knowledge is simply "local" to the knower. Those in power have the ability to shape the rules and conditions of this truth-seeking discourse. Hence, they can directly frame what can be known using Foucault's power-knowledge.[45] These concepts ultimately challenge the idea of universal truths, atomize knowledge, and contravene the modernist basis for discourse and progress.

The second aspect of postmodern thought that drives the preference of localized narratives is its perspective on how knowledge affects politics and the power dynamics that drive this process. Politically, postmodernism focuses on the structural forces of society, the impact these forces have on knowledge creation, and the reinforcing effect this relationship has on power maintenance. Since those in power control these forces, power is maintained by promoting legitimizing structures that include civility, reasoned discourse, objective evidence, and even the structure of language. From this concept, postmodernism's view of politics outlines that not only does power shape what is considered true, but also what is morally correct. Because of this, through the postmodern lens, power implies domination, and subjugation denotes oppression. Broken down, this means that society is essentially structured into categories and hierarchies that serve the interests of those in power.[46] This power dynamic is ever-present and must be resisted. The natural result from this dynamic is that oppressive structures of power must be challenged and deconstructed. The overall effect of this perspective is the breakdown and reversal of universal claims and the focus on local truths that empower and emphasize oppressed narratives.

The last way postmodern thought has angled the information environment towards this domination of local narrative battle is the corrosive effect its ideas have on metanarratives, also known as grand narratives. Lyotard posited that the main characteristic of postmodernism is an

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[45] Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 32-34.

[46] Ibid., 35-37.

"incredulity towards metanarratives."[47] This radical skepticism of these stories was centered on growing distrust of the liberal social order. This distrust fueled the idea that these were cultural phenomena based purely on Western myopia and arrogance.[48] Here postmodernists accept the post-structuralist concept that instead of these sweeping metanarratives, there are no underlying structures to the human experience. That since the world is ultimately formless and fragmented, there is no hidden order. If an order does exist then it is artificially enforced in the name of power.[49] Metanarratives reinforce power-knowledge, try to objectify truth, and ultimately promote the subjugation of the oppressed. For this reason, metanarratives, in the eyes of the postmodernist, must be deconstructed, examined, and replaced by local narratives that are not universal but rather understand truth from a cultural context and eventually flip status-quo power dynamics. In this sense, knowledge generated by scientists and historians are just examples of narratives that compete alongside other narratives for acceptance, no particular viewpoint having a more reliable claim to reality, and all are just different forms of fiction.[50]

If one cannot obtain truth through purely objective methods, if power and the social forces it creates determines what is knowable, and metanarratives simply reinforce this dynamic of subjugation, how can anyone find the meaning with which to act in the world? For the postmodernist, these conditions naturally guide one away from the modernist dichotomy of objective universal and subjective individual way of knowing, pointing toward local narratives.[51] These narratives represent the lived experiences of small, local groups who, through their cultural lens, are the producers of the most important form of knowledge, value, and discourse.[52]

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[47] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

[48] Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 25-26.

[49] Hatch and Cunliffe, *Organization Theory*, 131.

[50] Butler, *Postmodernism*, 15.

[51] Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 29.

[52] Ibid., 29, 42.

Understanding how these narratives shape meaning for different groups of people and how they can be influenced is necessary to have a complete picture of the cognitive dimension.

It is difficult to look at today's world and not see the challenges to the understanding of the truth, knowledge, and metanarratives that have driven human progress for the last two hundred years. An example of this challenge is evident in the recent politicization of scientific research. Whether it is a rejection of the biological differences between men and women or the dismissal of evidence related to humanity's impact on the climate, arguments centered around agenda-driven interpretations replace good-faith arguments about research results. A scientific process becomes a narrative, shaped by its proponents' bias and assumptions, and is no more valid than any other narrative perspective. Recent declines in democratization and the negative responses to globalization can also be viewed as challenges to the structures that drove the Enlightenment-fueled progress of the last two centuries. While none of these examples are directly the result of postmodernism, the proliferation of postmodern views on knowledge, truth, and power enables fragmentation and atomization within the information environment. Knowledge through the lens of cultural constructivism and the relationship of knowledge and power drives a postmodern view that seeks to deconstruct broad universal narratives that support those in power and seat knowledge into a more localized and culturally-centered view. The strategist must not only understand that this view of epistemology exists but must also be able to integrate this perspective with the modernist point of view when shaping informational power.

Gaps in Understanding

> I've been commenting on the challenges our country – not just our government – but our country faces in fighting a war in this new media age. And while the enemy is increasingly skillful at manipulating the media and using the tools of communication to their advantage, it should be noted that we have an advantage as well: and that is, quite simply, that truth is on our side and ultimately, in my view, truth wins out.
>
> —Donald Rumsfeld, *Remarks at the Council on Foreign Relations*, 17 Feb 2006

As the previous section discussed, postmodern thought continues to transform the information environment in its reified form. As Carl von Clausewitz points out in *On War*, one of the most important judgments at the beginning of a conflict is determining its nature.[53] However, if those that shape national policy and develop military strategies are stuck seeing the world through a purely modernist lens, then there is a greater chance of not fully understanding our adversaries or the nature of the resulting conflicts that arise. Clearly, in the quotation above, Secretary Rumsfeld viewed the world with an assumption about the universal and objective nature of truth. This modernist view of epistemology is prevalent in the doctrine and guidance that outlines the military's view of informational power. From a review of these documents, it is clear that the understanding of the cognitive dimension, narrative, and the "battle of narratives" does not reflect how postmodern thought shapes the information environment.

From a doctrinal perspective, the information environment contains three elements: the physical dimension, the informational dimension, and the cognitive dimension. Joint doctrine holds a reasonably firm grasp on the first two dimensions, but this makes sense since they included concrete and quantifiable elements, such as physical systems and platforms that collect, process, store, and transmit information.[54] However, the third dimension is the most vulnerable to the effects of postmodern thought, and this dimension is the least defined and most challenging to understand. Joint Publication (JP) 3-13, *Information Operations*, identifies three correct characteristics of the cognitive dimension: it is a complex and open system, it is human-centric, and it is the most important of all three dimensions. However, JP 3-13 fails to provide a comprehensive understanding of how this dimension is shaped aside from a laundry list of

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[53] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Revised edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 88.

[54] US Joint Staff, JP 3-13 (2014), I-2, I-3.

surface-level factors.[55] So if the cognitive aspect is the most important and complex portion of the information environment, why are we left with such a cursory description of this dimension?

US joint doctrine's description of the cognitive dimension, which mirrors a similar characterization in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) strategic communications guidance, is shallow and fails to account for the fundamental challenges to the modernist view of epistemology in postmodern thought. As currently defined, the cognitive dimension focuses on the minds of those individuals that will transmit, receive, respond, and act on information. This includes factors that shape individuals' perceptions, such as beliefs, norms, experiences, and morals, but what it fails to identify are the factors that undergird these components based on assumptions about knowledge, truth, and their relationship with power.[56] Attempts to leverage informational power, even if the sender believes the information transmitted is objective fact, may be viewed by the receiver as being constructed from a logic that conflicts with their own "local" knowledge. The strategist must look beyond superficial cultural differences and understand the logic that shapes an audience's ideas about knowledge and truth. Rather than taking these structures for granted or mirroring internal reflections of epistemology, the strategist must ask questions related to how an audience views information as either legitimate or illegitimate. Without this understanding, it will be difficult to shape informational effects that weave a convincing narrative to support overall strategic ends, but then joint doctrine is not very clear on what a narrative is in the first place.

After reading the vast collection of joint and coalition documents that discuss elements of US informational power, one cannot help but walk away with the idea that the concept of narrative is both everything and nothing at the same time. There is simply no unifying vision of what narrative is to the strategist. As Hew Strachan discussed in his book *The Direction of War*,

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[55] US Joint Staff, JP 3-13 (2014), I-2, I-3, VI-2

[56] Ibid., I-3.

the term "strategy" is used so often and in so many contexts that it essentially loses its meaning.[57] Something similar has occurred with the term narrative. In JP 5-0, *Joint Planning*, narrative is never defined, but the term appears in a myriad of contexts: strategic narrative, narrative overview, narrative comparison, and narrative-and-sketch.[58] Shockingly JP 3-13, the joint doctrine solely focused on information operations, not only fails to define narrative, but the only two references relate to a narrative-sketch in the context of course of action development.[59] Joint Doctrine Note (JDN) 2-13, *Commander's Communication Synchronization*, defines narrative as an overarching expression of the context and desired results, and JP 3-61, *Public Affairs*, comes the closest by stating that "a narrative is a short story used to underpin operations and to provide greater understanding and context to an operation or situation."[60] At best, the official US perspective on narrative is shallow, confusing, and does not provide much in the way of understanding.

The United States' partners in Europe, both within NATO and otherwise, have a more well-rounded definition of narrative, though it still does not fully account for postmodern thought. The NATO directive for Strategic Communication does not define narrative but instead says NATO's narrative is "of a democratic, multinational alliance uniting across borders to guard, with courage and competence, against threats to our homes."[61] This might be considered something of a grand or metanarrative. The clearest definition of narrative from all of these documents is

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[57] Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 27-28.

[58] US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2020), I-1, III-3, IV-18, G-1.

[59] US Joint Staff, JP 3-13 (2014), IV-3, IV-6.

[60] US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Doctrine Note (JDN) 2-13, *Commander's Communication Synchronization* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2013), III-9; US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 3-61, *Public Affairs* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2016), I-11.

[61] Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, ACO Directive 95-2, *ACO Strategic Communications* (2012), 9.

provided by a German project called the Multinational Information Operations Experiment (MNIOE). In a white paper they produced in 2014, the MNIOE characterizes a narrative as a "system of stories" that describe the history, purpose, and achievements of a collective entity and contribute in a unifying fashion to facilitate the entity's continuous transformation. Since stories can help information "stick," they can help convey meaning in a way that naturally resonates with an audience's worldview. This enables narratives to express the essence of an institution or group for both internal and external audiences.[62] However, all of these descriptions fail to account for postmodernism's emphasis on breaking down large universal narratives, its favoring of more localized perspectives, and how multiple narratives compete against one another in defining a conflict.

As it stands now, US doctrine correctly identifies the importance of the "battle of the narrative" but does so from a strictly modernist perspective. JDN 2-13 astutely points out that in an enduring conflict, there is a struggle to garner favor within domestic and international debate for a prescribed outcome that accommodates one side or the other. Failure in this battle can impact both the cognitive and physical dimensions and is ultimately critical to long-term and operational success. In the past, the United States was slow to recognize the importance of this battle of the narrative and was "often ineffective in applying and aligning the narrative to goals and desired end states." Additionally, JDN 2-13 identified that the key to this battle for perception is establishing the reasoning for the conflict and the desired outcomes, but then this document falls prey to the same issues that limited the current doctrinal understanding of the cognitive dimension.[63] JDN 2-13 states that a conflict's "reasons" and "outcomes" must be well grounded in realities, including important factors within the Political, Military, Economic, Social,

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[62] Multinational Information Operations Experiment, *Narrative Development in Coalition Operations*, 1 September 2014, accessed 13 March 2021, https://www.lymec.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Narrative-Tool-v1-0_20141113_Final_Final.pdf, 5.

[63] US Joint Staff, JDN 2-13 (2013), III-9, III-10.

Information, Infrastructure (PMESII) construct. What is missing are the factors that define local realities and their perceptions of narratives as a whole.

Understanding how opponents perceive the world, not just through the filters of history, culture, and religion, but on a more fundamental level in which they understand the nature of reality and knowledge is critical in determining the very nature of a conflict. Current doctrine related to operating in today's information environment does not properly account for the effect of postmodern thought within the cognitive dimension or how it shapes narrative battle. Shallow, cursory, and confusing study of both the cognitive dimension and narrative further prevent an effective application of US informational power across the spectrum of competition and limited conflict. A focused example of these challenges is evident in a recent conflict involving one of the United States' closest allies when Israel faced Hamas in 2014.

Contemporary Narrative Battle: Operation Protective Edge

> We need to avoid accepting the militarizing and securitizing grammars that treat occupations or wars as issues that always involve counterterrorist solutions, and one way of doing that is to be cognizant of the biopolitical and thantopolitical features of the discourses that *enable, rather than constrain* the disproportionate use of force in Gaza.
>
> —Marouf Hasain, Jr., *Israel's Military Operations in Gaza*

What happens when concepts such as just war theory and the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) are not viewed as constructs that constrain a military conflict but instead are viewed as a means to expand violence in the name of peace?[64] From the postmodern perspective, even displayed restraint is viewed as a discourse that supports those with relative power to legitimize their actions. This perspective was particularly relevant in the seven-week conflict between Hamas and Israel in 2014 labeled by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) as Operation Protective

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[64] Marouf Hasian Jr., *Israel's Military Operations in Gaza: Telegenic Lawfare and Warfare* (London: Routledge, 2016), 10.

Edge (OPE). From the outset, Hamas knew it could not win the conflict in a direct fight with the IDF but instead aggressively sought to win the narrative battle on the political stage.[65] Even though the IDF was thoroughly successful on the conflict's tactical and operational levels, Israel failed at the strategic level and faced mounting international pressure to end the conflict. Hamas was successful in eliciting sympathy for their plight and outrage towards the actions of the IDF.[66] This section will outline how the effects of postmodern thought on the information environment shaped how the conflict was perceived both locally and on the international stage and its ultimate impact on the conflict's political outcomes. The breakdown of the Israeli metanarrative and the doubt created around the application of LOAC supported a local narrative battle that favored Hamas. This narrative battle also created tension for Israel, where the more they made gains in the physical battlespace, the more they lost the overall political aspects of the conflict.[67] This was particularly evident in the shift of the United States' position on the conflict and helped shaped how the conflict was brought to its end 51 days after it started.

On 8 July 2014, the IDF began OPE, which became the third and largest conflict between Israeli and Hamas since the former withdrew from Gaza in 2005.[68] Since the end of the last conflict between Israel and Hamas in 2012, Operation Pillar Defense, economic and political tensions between the two foes were again peaking by mid-2014. The economic situation reached a critical state within Gaza due to the tightening of the Israeli blockade, which dated back to 2007. Additionally, in mid-2013, Egyptian President el-Sisi closed the Egyptian-Gaza cross

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[65] Benjamin Runkle and William Caldwell, "The War of Narratives in Operation Protective Edge," *Jerusalem Post*, 29 March 2015, accessed 25 January 2021, https://www.jpost.com/opinion/the-war-of-narratives-in-operation-protective-edge-395516.

[66] David Patrikarakos, *War in 140 Characters: How Social Media Is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 32.

[67] Patrikarakos, *War in 140 Characters*, 28, 43.

[68] State of Israel, *The 2014 Gaza Conflict: Factual and Legal Aspects* (Jerusalem: Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015), accessed 24 February 2021, https://mfa.gov.il/ProtectiveEdge/Documents/2014GazaConflictFullReport.pdf, vii; Raphael S. Cohen, *From Cast Lead to Protective Edge: Lessons from Israel's Wars in Gaza* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017), 24, 70.

border tunnels to increase security in the Sinai Peninsula which further isolated those within the territory. Some of the acts of violence caused by the increased tensions included the killing of civilians on both sides. These killings proved to be the kindling for the 2014 conflict. On 12 June, three Israeli students were kidnapped while they hitch-hiked in the West Bank. Their bodies were found 18 days along with evidence that they had been killed by Hamas operatives. In an apparent response to this incident on 2 July, a group of Israelis kidnapped and killed a Palestinian from East Jerusalem.[69] Five days later, Hamas began its rocket attacks against the Israeli people.[70]

On 7 July, Hamas launched a total of 60 rockets into Israel.[71] In response, the IDF launched an aerial campaign to protect Israel's civilian population.[72] On 17 July, the conflict saw a significant shift when Hamas conducted cross-border raids into Israel utilizing underground tunnels from inside Gaza. At this point, the IDF expanded its operations to include land operations against these tunnels.[73] By 5 August, the IDF withdrew its ground forces after destroying 32 of the tunnels that led to Israel and 81 defensive tunnels inside Gaza. The seven-week conflict came to an end on 26 August when both parties agreed to an Egyptian-negotiated ceasefire.[74] The end result included minor gains for those living in Gaza and improved Israeli security, but at what expense? The physical devastation for those living under Hamas' rule, and the political implications for Israel, were similarly devastating.

The seven-week conflict between Israel and Hamas included massive destruction and loss of life within Gaza's borders, and it would be these images that ultimately shaped the outcomes of this conflict rather than the military accomplishments of the IDF. In total, Hamas launched over

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[69] Cohen, *From Cast Lead to Protective Edge*, 24, 72, 80-81.

[70] State of Israel, *The 2014 Gaza Conflict*, x.

[71] Ibid.

[72] State of Israel, *The 2014 Gaza Conflict*, vii; Cohen, *From Cast Lead to Protective Edge*, 24, 70.

[73] State of Israel, *The 2014 Gaza Conflict*, x.

[74] Cohen, *From Cast Lead to Protective Edge*, 124.

4,800 rockets and in excess of 1,700 mortars into Israel.[75] Most of these were indiscriminately

aimed at population centers and resulted in seven civilians killed and 25 million dollars in direct

damages. Additionally, the IDF saw 67 soldiers killed primarily to ground operations within

Gaza.[76] Those living in Gaza saw destruction on a slightly different scale, primarily due to

Hamas' strategy of integrating their military assets into heavily populated areas.[77] Israel launched

over 6,000 airstrikes against targets in Gaza to attempt to stop the rocket attacks and hinder

Hamas' military leadership. A UN-sponsored report estimated the conflict resulted in 2,251

deaths within Gaza, with militants only accounting for 35 percent of that total.[78] From a tactical

perspective, the IDF won every battle, however, the Israeli people felt the military failed to

accomplish its objectives, and international audiences focused on what was perceived as a

disproportionate use of force.[79] Israel lost the narrative battle even as the IDF used detailed

procedures to avoid collateral damage while Hamas did the exact opposite.[80] Hamas appeared to

have an asymmetric advantage within the information environment, they knew it, and it drove

their strategy to cast doubt on the legitimacy of Israel's actions. But how?

    First, the breakdown of the Israeli metanarrative created challenges to the legitimacy of

how the IDF conducted the war. As was discussed earlier, metanarratives legitimate certain social

norms, political structures, and positions of power.[81] Since the creation of the nation of Israel, the

Israeli metanarrative focused on the persecution and suffering of the Jewish people; they were a

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[75] United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry Established Pursuant to Human Rights Council Resolution S-21/1* (New York: UN Headquarters, 2015), 8.

[76] State of Israel, *The 2014 Gaza Conflict*, xi.

[77] Cohen, *From Cast Lead to Protective Edge*, 92, 143; United Nations, *S-21/1 Report*, 15.

[78] United Nations, *S-21/1 Report*, 6, 9.

[79] P. W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2019), 197; Cohen, *From Cast Lead to Protective Edge*,7.

[80] Cohen, *From Cast Lead to Protective Edge*, 13.

[81] Thiele, *Thinking Politics*, 95.

small minority surrounded by a large threatening Arab majority. In biblical terms, they were

David versus Goliath. However, from a postmodern perspective, this metanarrative simply

enabled a dominant Israeli discourse that used militarist rationales to create the appearance of

parity between the actions of the IDF and those of Hamas.[82] As an artificial construct that simply

supports the disproportionate power relationship between Israel and Hamas, the postmodern view

demands this metanarrative be deconstructed and for the conflict to be viewed without this

overarching structure. From this standpoint, Israel did not simply look like a victim of attacks by

their neighbor but instead are the Goliath versus Hamas' David.[83] Framed in a "strong versus

weak" lens, the legitimacy of IDF action begins to fracture.

The second way the information environment benefited Hamas was in how postmodern

thought shaped perspectives on the rules that govern the application of military force. The IDF

recognized that minimizing collateral damage during operations was both essential and

complicated based on Hamas' efforts to embed their military within Gaza's population. Following

a study of OPE, former US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey noted

that the IDF's conduct represented an admirable level of restraint on par with US procedures for

minimizing civilian casualties. Then why is it that during the conflict numerous organizations,

such as Amnesty International, claimed the IDF displayed "callous indifference to the carnage

caused," all while Hamas was indiscriminately targeting civilian populations centers within Israel

with their rocket attacks?[84]

Certainly, part of the blame lies with the IDFs execution of some techniques used to

minimize casualties. One example is the "roof knock," where an Israeli aircraft would use a small

munition to strike the roof of a building to warn its residents to evacuate before a large strike.

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[82] Hasian, *Israel's Military Operations in Gaza*, 1, 4.

[83] Zaki Shalom, *Israel, the United States, and the War Against Hamas, July–August 2014: The "Special Relationship" Under Scrutiny* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2019), 1.

[84] Runkle and Caldwell, "The War of Narratives in Operation Protective Edge."

Often time Gazans would either not hear the "roof knock," would not understand what the "roof knock" meant, or were simply not afforded enough time from the "roof knock" to the actual strike to safely leave the building.[85] However, from the postmodernist perspective, there is another lens to undermine the legitimacy of Israel's application of force.

A postmodern critique of OPE will not focus on how the IDF applied the concepts of just war theory or LOAC but will instead focus on how these constructs represent a discourse that supports the current power dynamic and is used to justify violence. At the outset of the conflict, the Israeli's held the most power on both the military and diplomatic fronts in the Israel-Palestinian conflict. The disempowerment of the Palestinian Authority and the vilification of Hamas as a terrorist organization since it gained control of the Gaza Strip prevented the Palestinians from presenting a unified and coherent opposition to Israeli power. This disparate power relationship enabled an Israeli-dominated discourse as the first rockets were launched into Israel in July. In this case, according to a postmodern view, Israel was in a position to shape the truth in what Marouf Hasian calls "just war rhetoric." This rhetoric was meant to justify using violence in search of peace.[86] In this sense, just war theory and LOAC are simply artifacts of language used to shape how the conflict is viewed. One example of this is how Hasian argues that the IDF essentially rationalizes the perspective that the Gazan people are Hamas "infrastructure."[87] From the modernist view, the IDF was doing everything in its power to minimize casualties using legal constructs while securing its population. From the postmodern view, Israel was using its position of power to overmilitarize the situation to reinforce the status quo. However, Hamas was not powerless, and this is where the amplification of local narratives helped flip the balance of power.

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[85] United Nations, *S-21/1 Report*, 10-11.

[86] Hasian, *Israel's Military Operations in Gaza*, 3, 10.

[87] Ibid., 7.

Set against the overwhelming military strength of Israel and the "just war rhetoric" that favored the current power structure, Hamas needed to compete on a local narrative level using perspective to help shape the wider view of the conflict. During the conflict, Hamas attempted to shape the local narrative by actively soliciting the images of victims of Israeli strikes to generate sympathy for Gaza and amplify the outrage against the IDF.[88] However, Hamas was not the only driver of the anti-Israeli narrative. The ubiquitous nature of smartphones and social media meant individuals were also involved in this fight. A young Gazan teenager named Farah Baker garnered nearly 200,000 followers on Twitter as she attempted to counter what she believed to be a western media twisting the facts in favor of Israel. She became a citizen journalist outlining what she believed to be the truth about the conflict from her perspective. Nearly three weeks into the conflict, she tweeted: "Hello, I'm Farah Baker. I live in #Gaza and Hamas is NOT using me as a human shield." From her perspective, this is the truth. She was never asked to move to a location by Hamas to protect anything; she was simply staying put inside the home she had known her entire life.[89] What she may or may not have known was that directly across from her residence was the Al-Shifa hospital, a building that was used for military purposes by Hamas during the conflict. She was made into a de facto human shield, but since her story was local and personalized, it helped counter Israel's information war against Hamas.[90]

Another critical factor in advancing the anti-Israeli narrative coming from Hamas and individuals within Gaza was its resonance. Resonance can make emotional or aesthetic connections to past stories or concepts that help to validate a particular narrative. In the case of Farah Baker's real-time documentation of the conflict on social media, three characteristics were fundamental in creating a coherent narrative. First and foremost were the images of children

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[88] Patrikarakos, *War in 140 Characters*, 32; Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar*, 196.

[89] Patrikarakos, *War in 140 Characters*, 24-26, 40-41.

[90] Ibid., 40-41.

among those killed in Israeli strikes. The martyrdom of children can be emotionally effective in highlighting the disparity in means used by the IDF compared to the impact on the Gazans on the ground. Second, Farah Baker provided an image that resonated with western audiences: a dramatic leading lady. As a strong protagonist, Farah was not a faceless participant in the conflict. Her poise and vulnerability as a teenager caught up in a circle of violence lent credibility to her perspective and naturally increased the story's drama. Lastly, the nature of Farah's experience and her means of telling her story echoed the experience of another young woman caught up in conflict: Anne Frank. A narrative structure that echoes well-entrenched elements of the past can strengthen an audience's connection to current events, which was evident by the West's reaction to Farah's content.[91]

Under earlier conditions, a young Palestinian in Farah's position would have been relatively powerless, but ultimately, she was able to help shape the narrative that drove how the outside world viewed OPE. Social media was a significant factor in her ability to spread her message, but postmodern support for local knowledge and the resonance she could create with external audiences meant she could broadcast her "truth" and bypass the normal gatekeepers of influence.[92] Through the power of both her words and the emotional impact of her images, she further strengthened the tension the Israelis felt between making physical gains on the battlefield and losing ground on the narrative front. She also played an important role in shaping the international reaction to the conflict.

One way to view how the anti-Israeli narrative shaped the political outcomes of OPE is to look at how the US position of the conflict changed throughout the events. As Israel initiated its military response to the first rocket attacks on 7 July 2014, the press secretary for the Obama administration, Josh Earnest, outlined the United States' condemnation of Hamas and support for

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[91] Patrikarakos, *War in 140 Characters*, 27, 36-37.

[92] Ibid., 39, 42.

Israeli. He roundly denounced the targeting of Israeli cities. He stated that "no country can accept rocket fire aimed at civilians, and [the United States] support[s] Israel's right to defend itself against these vicious attacks."[93] This qualified support for Israel's action held during the first few weeks of the conflict. Hamas was seen as the initial aggressor, and Israel was responding to secure its population. Towards the end of July, however, things began to change. US Secretary of State John Kerry referenced images of women and children on stretchers and shrapnel being removed from an infant's back when he asked, "when is everyone going to come to their senses?"[94] Hamas and Israel were being placed on an equal playing field in terms of culpability and this would impact how the United States understood the conflict. Following the shelling of United Nations facilities on 31 July and 4 August, the US tone on the conflict continued to shift. Even with acknowledged evidence that Hamas was using these buildings to stockpile weapons and launch attacks, the US State Department emphasized that "the suspicion that militants are operating nearby does not justify strikes that put at risk the lives of so many civilians." President Barak Obama weighed in about this time, expressing his distress at what was happening to innocent women and children in Gaza.[95] The change in tone also affected US policy. A US draft ceasefire leaked on 28 July appeared to place Hamas and Israel on equal footing in terms of culpability but heavily favored grievances forwarded by Hamas in what the Israeli government called a "prize for terror." The Obama administration also held up a shipment of weapons to Israel on 14 August. The United States claimed it was a bureaucratic hang-up, denying it was a punitive measure, but its effect helped to dampen Israeli credibility, effectiveness, and ultimately how the conflict was viewed on the world stage.[96]

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[93] Shalom, *Israel, the United States, and the War Against Hamas*, 91.

[94] Ibid., 95.

[95] Ibid., 95, 98-100.

[96] Ibid., 82-83, 88.

An information environment influenced by postmodern thought supported a narrative battle that helped elevate Hamas and weakened the legitimacy of the IDF's military actions in the eyes of the world. From a postmodern perspective, the conflict was not simply a case of Israel doing what was necessary to secure its citizens but was a discursive process where an oppressive power used legitimizing language to maintain the status quo. Hamas could not compete on a level playing field with Israel, but individuals like Farah Baker could undermine Israel using informational power. This tension between gains made on the battlefield and losses on the political front ultimately led to a conclusion where the IDF won tactically but failed strategically.

A Way Forward: Dual-Cognition and Narrative Battle

How can strategists proceed with the ideas presented so far? How can these abstract ideas shape a way forward in how the United States applies informational power? First, this section will propose a concept to view the information environment as one that contains both modern and postmodern ideas about knowledge and truth. This section will then outline three potential efforts based on understanding, defining, and approaching an information environment cast through this combined modern and postmodern lens. These efforts focus on education, structural changes to how the military looks at the information domain, and some recommendations to change doctrine.

Before looking at the specifics, a broad perspective is in order. At first, it would appear that modern and postmodern thought cannot coexist, that there would be some kind of inflection point where the world steps from one mode of thought to another, but that does not need to be the case. The dichotomy between an independent objective reality and one that is of pure social construction does not need to be absolute or zero-sum. Surely individuals that are squarely aligned on the extreme positivist or deconstructionist sides of this discussion will disagree, but those on the fringe always will. Language certainly can shape perceptions and even reality to some extent, but this does not mean logic, reason, and scientific methods have to be made null

and void. Humans have argued about the nature of knowledge and truth since the ancient Greeks, and we will continue to do so. Rather than stand on some relativist precipice, we can view this as a recognition that we have entered an era of dual-cognition where objective features are still present, but there is an increased influence of subjective views regarding knowledge and reality. Where those lines are drawn is not clear but will be just another tension. From this viewpoint, a strategist can both realize the vulnerabilities of a modernist view without having to throw their hands in the air in frustration. The first step in developing this type of understanding needs to be based on education.

To develop informational power that is effective in an information environment shaped by postmodern thought, those professionals required to engage in this effort must have a basic understanding of epistemology from both general and specialized education. This effort could target three main categories: basic officer education, joint professional military education for both officers and senior enlisted, and education for professionals specializing in operations within the information domain. A review of the current policy for officer education highlights that Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) levels one and two do not have any learning objectives that challenge a modern perspective of epistemology.[97] Throughout a professional's career, touchpoints would help build an understanding to support the more functional proposals in this section, starting with how the military structurally views information operations.

The information domain is the least understood and most underutilized aspect of unified action. One explanation for this could be the size of the umbrella under which we place information operations. One way to look at this is how JP 3-13 describes Information Related Capabilities (IRCs) and outlines the structure for a notional information operations board. JP 3-13 lists the following as IRCs: Operations Security (OPSEC), information assurance, counter

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[97] US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction (CJCSI) 1800.01F, *Officer Professional Military Education Policy* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 15 May 2020), 1-B-4.

deception, physical security, Electronic Warfare (EW), and Electronic Protection (EP). The members included on the information operations board are those tasked with deception, Military Information Support Operations (MISO), OPSEC, EW, public affairs, intel, and cyber.[98] This coupling of processes focused on messaging with functions that direct the protection of physical systems, employment of EW and EP, and information collection creates significant risk in shaping narrative battle. Shaping narrative elements that are fully integrated with unified action is a far more abstract task than creating cyber defenses for physical networks. Separating these functions would enable a more focused effort that, coordinated with other physical aspects of information operations, could lead to more effective control of narrative battle.

The second doctrinal effort to help shape narrative battle in today's information environment revolves around creating a more in-depth and unified definition for cognitive dimension and narrative. As referenced earlier, JP 3-13 provides an insufficient description of the cognitive portion of the information environment and fails to provide a more in-depth discussion regarding the means with which to analyze aspects of this dimension.[99] Cloud-shaped thought bubbles and surface-level consideration for what influences the decisions of key actors and populations do not provide enough context to this complex subject. Additionally, there is no synthesis within joint and coalition doctrine in defining narrative in a manner sufficient enough to deal with today's information environment. Adopting a definition akin to the one provided in the MNIOE white paper and coordinating this definition across the complement of information-related doctrine would help provide guidance in narrative battle. Decoupling the term narrative throughout the rest of joint doctrine would also assist in reducing confusion. In the application of informational power, a narrative must represent the power to create meaning and intent through words, media, and action. More than just an overarching story that drives themes and messages, a

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[98] US Joint Staff, JP 3-13 (2014), I-3, V-4.

[99] Ibid., V-5.

narrative represents the perception of the conflict within the audience's mind and is not simply a narration directed from one actor to another. This perspective will also enable a more nuanced view of how these narratives interact in the information environment.

Currently, the way that doctrine looks at "the battle of the narrative" is inherently flawed and needs to be revised. JPN 2-13 states that "the goal of the battle of the narrative is to gain superiority over the adversary's narrative, to diminish its appeal and followership, and, when possible, to supplant it or make it irrelevant."[100] In this light, the battle pits the two opposing narratives against one another in a zero-sum standoff that provides an overarching definition of the conflict. This concept is overly totalizing and fails to discern that meaning generated to understand a conflict is developed in more than just one thread. "The battle of the narrative" should instead be referred to as "narrative battle" as the struggle for meaning occurs across multiple audiences and is manifest in multiple narratives. Each of these narratives has its own systems of stories, each impact long term success in different ways, and each require unique approaches in determining how they are shaped. In a general construct, these narratives must be broken down into three types, though every conflict or competition is particular and may require further categorization. This is similar to a concept forwarded by international relations scholars Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O'Loughlin in their article "Strategic Narrative."[101] The three narratives that will always be present are domestic, international, and conflict-local, but what additional narratives in play will vary from situation to situation.

As the MNIOE white paper points out, a narrative is a social construction. This process interrelates historical and current events, accounts for a community's experiences, embodies belief systems, and represents the collective's symbolically constructed shared identity.[102] Since

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[100] US Joint Staff, JDN 2-13 (2013), III-9.

[101] Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O'Loughlin, "Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power," *Media, War & Conflict* 7, no. 1 (April 2014): 76-78.

[102] MNIOE, *Narrative Development in Coalition Operations*, 9.

these factors can be more clearly understood for the domestic audience, the domestic narrative will be more constructive in nature and revolve around building consensus that generates political support for US efforts abroad. However, the nature of social construction for the conflict-local audience presents a different situation. Externally generated narratives will be generally resisted, as they typically do not resonate with the local community's experiences, belief systems, and identity. Narrative supremacy may not be the correct approach on this level. Instead, an approach to shape the current conflict-local narrative to better suit strategic goals presents a more realistic way to affect this social construction process. The approach to the international front will most closely mirror the approach forwarded in the MNIOE white paper.[103] This effort will mix both the build and shape approaches, both internally focused on coalitions and externally to key international players that can shape political outcomes through official diplomatic channels or international public pressure. At a minimum, there needs to be a doctrinal shift in how narratives are defined and how these narratives are understood to create meaning across multiple levels and ultimately shape political outcomes.

Changing how the US military views informational power must start from an understanding of how postmodern thought shapes the information environment. Rather than supplant modernism completely, we find ourselves in an era where the line between objective and subjective reality is blurred. For this reason, it is important for US doctrine to reflect this in definitions critical to narrative battle. This includes generating more in-depth discussions of the effect of subjective epistemologies on the cognitive dimension and clearly defining narrative and its role in meaning-making. The United States must reassess its approach towards narrative battle by identifying its subcomponents, tailor approaches to each of these unique elements, and retreat from the zero-sum framing of narrative supremacy.

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[103] MNIOE, *Narrative Development in Coalition Operations*, 13-14.

Conclusion

Short of large-scale state-on-state open conflict, the ability to influence using the informational instrument of national power will continue to gain importance as one of the primary tools in shaping political outcomes. This ability to influence audiences is more complicated in today's information environment. While it may be easier to understand how the 24-hour news cycle, information technology, and social media impact this environment, accounting for changes due to the proliferation of postmodern thought is more difficult. In 2014 the IDF faced this challenge as every tactical or operational success ended up complicating their ability to shape a politically favorable outcome. Their view of the truth could not be reconciled with the narratives promoted by Hamas and the civilians within Gaza. Strategists must take time to reflect on how differing epistemological constructs influence informational power.

This paper set out to highlight how postmodern thought challenges the application of informational power through its ability to reshape today's information environment. Postmodern thought arose from general questions about the direction of human progress following the destructive power of two world wars and the sweeping social and technological changes of the second half of the twentieth century. The ideas on truth, knowledge, and power developed by Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and numerous other postmodern thinkers will continue to erode an approach to narrative battle based solely on a modernist lens. Strategists must understand how subjective views of knowledge, the influence of power over discourse, and the resistance to universalizing metanarratives can shape how conflict and competition are viewed on multiple levels. Current doctrine from the United States and NATO do not adequately account for how these ideas shape today's information environment but instead take a shallow and cursory view of the cognitive dimension from a modernist perspective. Changes to doctrine are needed to account for the realization that our concepts of truth and knowledge cannot rest in a purely modern or postmodern mindset but instead recognize the

tension between objective and subjective perspectives. Additionally, the concept of narrative battle must account for the fact that the shaping of meaning occurs on multiple levels – domestic, international, conflict-local – as a means to break away from the current zero-sum concept of narrative supremacy.

Postmodern thought is not going away anytime soon, and its reified forms will continue to shape a wide range of issues over the coming decades. Strategists cannot afford to ignore the effect postmodernism has on today's information environment, nor should they be afraid of its often confusing and abstract nature. Like anything that creates fog or friction on the battlefield, the effect of postmodernism cannot be willed away. Strategists must understand its history, context, and general perspective if they hope to have a chance at telling the stories that will shape politically favorable outcomes in the future.

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