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Addressing Australia's vulnerability to weaponised narratives

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Key points

- > Information overload has permanently changed the news environment for the public, challenging democracies as a result.
- > The human need to find patterns of meaning in events, combined with increasing information availability, exposes Australians to the risk of accepting false or damaging stories.
- > Nation-states can weaponise these narratives to further increase their spread, destructiveness, and focus toward an intended population, especially online.
- > As seen in the US and UK, the use of these narratives can disrupt and degrade the normal functioning of democracy.

Policy recommendations

- > In a time of endless globalised information flows, Australia must defend its democratic political discussion.
- > The Parliamentary Library should establish a dedicated team, provided with appropriate training, to track and highlight weaponised narratives and misinformation occurring in Australia's political debate.
- > Non-partisan lessons on the role, function and history of government should be promoted to the public and reintegrated into curricula for schools to help prevent future generations from falling prey to weaponised narratives.

An unexpected security challenge

Information overload resulting from the digital revolution has given rise to a new form of information threat vector: weaponised narratives. Nation-states, non-state actors and domestic figures have learned how to exploit factually incorrect but emotionally resounding narratives to divide, confuse or subvert a society.¹ In Australia they can pose risks to effective governance at Commonwealth and state levels, as well as to public companies.

Unlike cyber attacks aimed at digital networks, weaponised narratives target the human mind's cognitive biases. The use of false information for strategic advantage goes back to ancient times. All wars are to some degree a battle of narratives.

Today, however, the speed, ease and virulence of such messages, particularly helped by social media, have aided the development of weaponised narratives to be used outside of wartime, in a permanent battle for influence.

Moreover, the growing complexity of the world makes the lure of fundamentalism found in such narratives more attractive to audiences.

The low barrier of entry to producing content along with existing confirmation bias makes generating such narratives extremely easy. Repetition helps them grow and become accepted. Overly simplified narratives of a nation's relative rise or power can sap Australia's will to fight for its political, social and legal values.

A continuing theme of many weaponised narratives aimed at the West is the alleged failure of liberal democracy in the face of immigration, terrorism, economic, or social challenges today.

Endless online information flows allow partisans to confuse cause and effect in the public mind. For example, the genuine experience of economic stagnation by the middle class, is attributed to malign conspiracies, such as the 'New World Order'. In Asia, Western-backed civil society groups with non-coercive reform agendas are being cast as fronts for Western power that threaten the sovereignty of nations.

The use of information in this way presents a security challenge for Australia, whose democracy and public discourse relies on factual discussion in order to function. Moreover, weaponised narratives within the scope of Australian politics can sow enough discord to make federal politics dysfunctional and less able to respond to emerging threats.

In this environment, Australia should be prepared to fight for the primacy of its internal democratic discussion in a globalised information space.

The mind as network

Like viruses engineered for maximum damage, weaponised narratives can be engineered to increase speed of transmission and disorder within a society. Many weaponised narratives function similarly to conspiracy theories, pointing to an alien 'other' or malign backstory to assign a previously undisclosed significance to events. Although factually incorrect, they exploit 'near-universal' biases in the human

mind, including the in-built search for cohesive meaning.² The 'White genocide' narrative, for example, casts disparate demographic, economic and social events as a plot to extinguish white people. Applied to terrorism or immigration news, it gives these events a fresh dimension of meaning. Such a weaponised narrative becomes nearly impossible to refute or disprove, even as it disrupts productive discussion and divides a population.

The changed information environment allows the incorrect account of events to be repeated, annotated, and reapplied until the narratives are self-replicating and self-sustaining. Since weaponised narratives are formed of information there is no natural barrier to its reach with the public.

A simplified and persistent 'China rise' economic story can both appeal to the fears and hopes of the public while circumventing complexity and corrode Australia's will to fight for its political, social and legal values in the region.

The speed and momentum and persistence of narratives makes them more difficult to defend against. A Muslim member of parliament was falsely accused of refusing to lay a wreath to commemorate ANZAC day in a Facebook post that went viral before being refuted last year.³

Also last year, a Cambodian web-based publication blended misappropriated real-life content with disinformation to promote a conspiracy theory contending opposition figures were part of a plot to overthrow the government. The amplified narrative led to the arrest of opposition figure Kem Sokha, who was charged with treason.⁴

What has changed?

Social media has reversed earlier expectations that the internet would have a naturally democratising effect on society. While the objectives of propagandists have not altered appreciably – the internet has made the process tremendously cheaper. As the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica revelations show, social media companies use technology to exploit biases in the mind to keep users engaged. Propagandists, even amateur ones,

have discovered similar techniques. They can reach more targets across a more diverse range of society, and can do so faster than governments and institutions can realise, much less react with counter-narratives.⁵ Given that social media tends to cluster like-minded people together, these narratives are strengthened by a self-reinforcing community.

The decline of traditional print and TV news has ended the traditional news cycle. Consequently, weaponised narratives elude a central news summary and can also thrive undetected in separate and discrete sections of society. Being largely undetected, they can shape the thinking of the electorate without generating a response from stakeholders in media, government or the public.⁶

Foreign governments are taking advantage of these changes to attempt to influence Western countries, most noticeably Russia.

Russia's deployment of weaponised narratives has taken a number of forms. First, it has attempted broad social engineering, using networked media platforms to reach millions of American voters, with messages designed to foster division, apathy and mistrust of social and political institutions. Second, it has performed targeted messaging aimed at bolstering specific groups such as the 'alt-right' to reject the core precepts of US foreign and economic policy. Third, it has rapidly adapted its messaging so that less productive narratives are discarded and replaced.

Democracy's right to sensible dialogue

Since information today doesn't come in scheduled editions as much as endless flows, Australia needs to adapt to this environment by assigning value to the unequal quality of political information available.

The country must defend its right to democratic discussion in the contested information environment. Liberal democracy requires a strong element of reason in its political news for it to be useful for effective governance.

Weaponised narratives, meanwhile, bypass

reason and appeal directly to senses and emotion.

As Parliament is a key area of national information space to defend, the Parliamentary Library should form a task force to monitor the language and topics in the legislative chamber for signs of weaponised narratives and overt misinformation seeping into the official debate.

The Parliamentary Library could, in consultation with other departments, such as DFAT and intelligence agencies, make reports both periodically and upon request about weaponised narratives and disinformation that are relevant to parliamentary debate. The purpose is not to restrict topics in Parliament but to add valuable context on the manipulation of ideas flowing through Australia's political information space.

The goal would be for the Parliamentary Library to help ward off irrational, unproductive political debate driven by weaponised narratives. The Parliamentary Library would need to be given training in the matter.

Assigning the Parliamentary Library the task of collating and sharing information on weaponised narratives with lawmakers ensures other departments within the government don't inadvertently drive domestic debate, either.

The choice of the Library also helps to avoid classified assessments entering parliamentary debate with restrictions on their origin, which creates more uncertainty and distrust among MPs and the public.

The media

Media outlets should be conscious of the risks of spreading, even if inadvertently, weaponised narratives in the area of political and social opinion formation.

This is especially true of those promoting factually defective opinion, in the guise of seeking 'equal time' from media.

A key question for editors should be: Does the narrative rely primarily on facts or emotion and imagery? Does it convey a sense of emergency for a non-emergency situation? Does a story promote the idea that moderate politics cannot confront the challenges of modernity?

The first – and last – line of defence

Politicians are far from immune to weaponised narratives. The emotive ideas and images such narratives employ can drive engagement of the media, social media and constituents alike, all ingredients that benefit politicians or campaigns.

Parties should develop internal processes to prevent candidates from acting as local transponders of foreign-originated weaponised narratives.

The constant test within Australia's political debate will be how true a given narrative is with regards to Australia's politics. Making 'truthfulness' a criterion may be a step towards ameliorating the cynicism and apathy that surrounds democratic politics at the moment.

Leaders should pledge not to pursue issues if they are likely to be the brainchild of a hostile external power.

... in the longer term

There is no more capable citizen in a time of propaganda than the one who knows what she believes of democracy and why she believes it.

State education efforts should place more emphasis on linking good citizenship with the ability to think for oneself – as opposed to outsourcing opinions to others. Equally important is a strategic emphasis on civics.

In the shorter term, a non-partisan campaign by the Department of Education and Training to broaden and deepen the public's understanding of the role, function and tradition of democratic institutions should be undertaken on broadcast and social media.

As Australia's information space grows more contested, defending the nation's right to fruitful debate would also help establish the posture of the nation. Claiming the high ground for reason and evidence is key in an information struggle. Early efforts to address the risks of weaponised narratives reflect the emerging nature of the challenge. Consequently, they remain a work-in-progress.

Australia should not be shy about offering guidance relative to its own strengths and experiences. Nor should we be discouraged from reaching out to other like-minded nations to assist in countering this fast-evolving threat.

Endnotes

¹ White Paper on Weaponised Narrative, Dr Brad Allenby, Arizona State University, June 2017

² Narratives are about 'meaning,' not 'truth', Dr Ajit Maan, *Foreign Policy*, December 3, 2015

³ Muslim MP Anne Aly falsely accused of refusing to lay wreath on Anzac Day, *The Age*, April 27, 2017

⁴ This Country's Democracy Has Fallen Apart – And It Played Out To Millions On Facebook, *BuzzFeed*, January 22, 2018

⁵ Nine Links in the Chain: The Weaponized Narrative, Sun Tzu, and the Essence of War, Jon Herrmann, *The Strategy Bridge*, July 2017

⁶ Russia and the Weaponized Narrative with Braden R Allenby, *Cyber Law & Business Report Podcast*, May 2017

About this publication

This series of National Security College Policy Options Papers offers short, evidence-based and forward-looking insights for policy-makers on topical security, foreign affairs and geostrategic issues facing Australia domestically, in the Indo-Pacific region and globally. We seek contributions from and collaborations with qualified researchers and experts in these fields.

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