



# JOURNAL

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### **Where There is No Theory of Disinformation: Three Maxims to Guide Counternarrative Strategies**

[Dr. Jacob Udo-Udo Jacob](#)

Theories provide a format for looking at, organizing, explaining, and predicting phenomena. However, although disinformation is as old as communication, its narrative structures have not congealed enough for scholars to develop a theory or predictive model of “if X, then Y, ... and subsequently Z”, which can be generalized across cases and contexts. Until a causative, predictive, and generalizable theory is developed, counternarrative messaging will be mostly hit-and-miss. This article proposes three maxims to guide a counternarrative strategy and a way forward.

#### Introduction

Conceptually, counternarratives have their roots in the Hypodermic Needle Theory of communication pioneered by Harold Lasswell in the early 20th century. Lasswell’s (1927) *Propaganda Technique in the World War* was the first notable academic investigation of narrative propaganda aimed at influencing public opinion against an adversarial nation during an international conflict. Since Lasswell’s ground-breaking work, many scholars, notably Philip M. Taylor in his pioneering work, *Munitions of the Mind* (2003), have studied propaganda as a value-neutral process: suggesting that propaganda can equally serve the common good and can be used to counter malign influence activities.



Propaganda has its roots in the seventeenth-century Vatican when Pope Benedict XV created the Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide in 1622 to defend the Catholic faith against the rising influence of the Protestant

Reformation. From this religious root, propaganda went on to earn itself a pejorative meaning from the excesses of atrocity propaganda during World War I. Lasswell's study of WWI propaganda concluded that the mass media can exert strong effects on public attitudes, to the extent of achieving behavior change. Indeed, Lasswell saw Propaganda as "the war of ideas on ideas", (1927, p.12) and went on to develop a five-question model of communication to emphasize effects: Who says what, to whom, in what channel, with what effects? This became the dominant paradigm of communication research in the 20th century and drove the development of communication interventions – ranging from political communications during electioneering campaigns, to psyops and various other message-driven information operations in times of war. Many of the counter-influence campaigns of the Cold War era also derived their conceptual foundations from Lasswell's effects-based communication model. A vast majority of counternarrative campaigns today are also drawn from this model.

### Empirical and Conceptual Flaws

Counternarrative messaging can generally be grouped into two broad categories: campaigns that seek to counter malign narratives, and campaigns that promote desired attitudes and behaviors. The former assumes that counter-messaging campaigns, like bullets or hypodermic needles, can achieve desired impacts when they hit the target, while the latter assumes that messages, like vaccines, can be deployed to inoculate minds against malign appeals. This has been generally termed prebunking. Both are based on two different epistemological approaches but share a common linear causal-determinist model. They both emphasize the power of the message or the narrative and much less the context of meaning-making.

Since the 1970s however, starting from the influential work of Everett Rogers and D. Lawrence Kincaid (1981), communication scholars have criticized this linear model of communication. The model has endured nonetheless, mainly because it is simpler to design, deploy, track, monitor, and evaluate. The typical approach involves deploying the counternarrative intervention over a defined period and gathering data from a sample of target audiences on the effects of the messaging on their knowledge, attitudes, and overt behaviors. Typically, message, channel, and audience variables are controlled as independent variables to relate them to the dependent variable of a specified outcome. Usually, the individual audience member is the unit of analysis and the unit of response.



While this approach is useful, it is theoretically and empirically unsatisfying because it does not encompass the full spectrum of the communication process – from the source's credibility (political, religious, social, cultural, etc.) to the receiver's context of meaning-making. Besides, it is too narrow to reproduce, let alone evaluate the full spectrum of the communication process within which meaning-making and behavioral change are embedded. This leads to another conceptual error: the targeted individual is treated as an insulated entity – quarantined from the community and their group identity – with its implicit biases, loyalties, and influences within which meaning is embedded. This ultimately leads to the error of treating messages, including counternarratives, as commodities or products, to be prepared, packaged, and presented, and audiences as consumers.

Audiences, however, are not aggregates of individuals. They are interconnected groups with interdependencies within non-hierarchical structures and networks. Counternarratives can be more effective when narratives are treated as a network-embedded, cultural process. The tendency to focus on individual behavior change, instead

of group dynamics and social collectives, is the main undoing of message-centered counternarrative campaigns. This is why a theory or predictive model of counter-narrative messaging can be most helpful.

### Three Maxims

In the absence of such a theory or model, this commentary postulates three maxims that can provide important guideposts for the design and deployment of counternarratives. The maxims are drawn from communication theories and historical cases. They are, of course, open to further interrogation and revision.

#### 1. The Vaguer the Message, the Better

The way targeted audiences respond to messages is determined by where the messaging appeal is located on what Muzaffer Sherif and Carl Hovland (1961) have termed the latitude of attitude. Sherif and Hovland argue that attitude is made up of three zones or latitudes: the latitude of acceptance (behavioral appeals that are acceptable and sit well with one's core beliefs); latitude of non-commitment (behavioral appeals that are neither objectionable nor acceptable); and latitude of rejection (behavioral appeals that are objectionable to one's core beliefs).

Audiences use their anchored ideology as a comparison point to weigh any incoming appeal. They first judge how far the appeal is from their anchored position, which is located deep within their latitude of acceptance (see Figure 1). Fundamentally, the target audience's reflex response to a message is determined by the distance of the message's appeal from their ideological or emotional anchor. Social Judgment Theorists posit that instead of changing attitudes, messages that fall deep into a target audience's latitude of rejection can end up achieving the direct opposite of their intended purpose and can drive targeted audiences to hold on more firmly to their anchored ideology or emotions.



Figure 1. Sherif and Hovland's Latitude of Attitude: Instead of changing attitudes, messages that fall into a target audience's latitude of rejection can boomerang, ending up eliciting the direct opposite of its intended purpose.

In cases where there is an "ego involvement" or a high emotional attachment to an ideology, as with ideologically or emotionally committed individuals, the latitude of rejection is wider. In such cases, ideologies or political and religious beliefs are part of the individual's sense of identity and community and, hence are always protected. Seeking to influence audiences with high ego involvement or wide latitudes of rejection will produce a boomerang effect – a phenomenon where the targets are driven deeper into their anchored positions. Such messages fall at the far end of the latitude of rejection and can do more harm than good. Interestingly, messages that target the latitude of non-commitment are more likely to achieve the desired impact even among extremists, more than messages that explicitly seek to counter deeply held ideologies or beliefs.

For example, instead of seeking to counter deeply held religious beliefs a counternarrative campaign can highlight aspects of the individual's identity outside of their religious beliefs, thus taking the religious group out of the individual (see Jacob, 2021, for example). The individual is engaged with narratives that appeal to the other

aspects of their identity for example their football club, their relationships, jobs, etc. This shift in self-concept will not necessarily lead the targeted individuals or groups to change their attitudes or behaviors suddenly, but it will create a multi-dimensional space around dogmatic identities in ways that build a subtle separation between the believer and the deeply held beliefs. The separation of beliefs from the believing self can widen the latitude of acceptance, which in turn can expand the space for further continuous engagement.

## 2. Messaging is Nothing. Cognitive Access is Everything

Lasswell's definition of propaganda as "the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols" (1927, p627) provides an interesting conceptual guidepost for counternarrative messaging. Collective Attitudes describe the tendency of a social group to act in a particular context following a certain pattern of behavior. Collective attitude is not necessarily influenced by stimulation from a particular message, but they do deeply influence how a message is encountered.

The core mission of counternarratives is to amplify stimuli favorable to the attitudes that the creators wish to develop or strengthen towards a particular message, while nullifying stimuli that are unfavorable to the desired attitudes. Significant symbols can be mobilized and deployed in various forms for this purpose. We live in a society of symbols – from the rumors at the downtown hair salon to trending topics and hashtags on social media. Significant symbols also include emblems (such as flags, colors, and monuments), and political slogans (such as Make America Great Again; Stop the boats; Yes, We Can) that cultivate mental images with which we vicariously organize relationships, ideas, emotions, and communities of meaning we have not directly experienced.

A significant symbol can be a mechanism of solidarity, as much as a mechanism of outrage. Ultimately however, whether they come in the form of stories from an Uber driver, a primetime talk show host, or a political slogan inscribed on a red hat, significant symbols can deeply influence collective attitudes towards a message or an idea when cleverly managed and cultivated. Most importantly, they can often become a mechanism for priming an audience for an emotional appeal. Priming – another interesting communication concept, creates contexts for meaning-making and meaning-sharing by increasing cognitive accessibility and a converged way of thinking about a topic or issue (Brewer, et al. 2003; Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Willnat, 1997).

Here is an interesting example. At the start of WWI, the British cable ship Telconia cut the direct subterranean cables that linked Germany with the United States. This subversive action undermined Germany's ability to transmit news to audiences in North America and gave Britain a major strategic advantage: the control of the then-information superhighway. "Thanks to this prompt and premeditated action", writes propaganda historian Philip M. Taylor, "the British were able to seize the initiative in what was perhaps the most vital of all the propaganda battles: the struggle for the sympathy of the American people" (2003, p.177). With Germany unable to transmit their news stories and perspectives to America, Wellington House – a secret British organization set up in September 1914, then rallied journalists and newspaper editors in the US to write and disseminate stories that were sympathetic to Britain. With Americans now primed to be sympathetic to Britain, the ground was then set for Britain to unleash a messaging campaign targeted at the American government and people to join their side of the war. The audience had to be adequately primed for the message to be influential.

Essentially, the central question is not necessarily what narratives would most likely influence audiences, but what would most likely influence collective attitudes towards the narrative. Narratives of course have their place in countering disinformation, but they are useless if met with closed hearts and minds. To be successful, counternarratives must be backed by a broader strategy to open cognitive access.

### 3. Useful Information is the Meta-Message

There is a complex relationship between individuals or groups and the narratives they believe and share. Any message that seeks to alter that relationship arrives handicapped. Information, on the other hand, does not overtly seek to amend that relationship, rather it provides a service: reduce uncertainty, satisfy a curiosity. Information is inherently a meta-message as it creates an internal relationship with the receiver. When repeated consistently, this internal relationship extends beyond the self to the source of the information. A relationship of trust and dependence is built.

A messaging campaign that provides, or at least starts by providing useful information can be incredibly powerful. An interesting example is the curious case of Radio Tikrit. Radio Tikrit went on air just before the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It was interestingly named after Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit. Initially, the radio station provided generally useful information about the war: where there was the most fighting and how to stay safe. It also delivered pro-Saddam Hussein messages (Knight, 2003). For good measure, it also relayed horoscopes for the superstitious. As with most black psyops clandestine radio operations, the Iraqis did not know who was behind this new radio station, except for a few vigilant listeners who observed that the male baritone voice of the announcer was the same as the one on the US military's Radiyo al-Ma'ulumat.

During conflicts, information is an important humanitarian need, sometimes as important as food and medicine (Jacob, 2014). Audiences will gravitate towards whoever provides this humanitarian need (Jacob 2016). That was the case with Radio Tikrit. A relationship was built, almost very quickly between Iraqi audiences and the male voice on Radio Tikrit. Gradually, however, the radio station started highlighting the futility of the fight and soon started urging Iraqi soldiers to stop fighting and go back home to their aged and dying parents, their wives, and children. By this time, the radio station had already garnered the audience and relationship of trust it needed to be impactful. To transcend cognitive and ideological barriers, counternarrative campaigns must provide useful information to target audiences. This can help build the needed cognitive access.

### Conclusion

While the above maxims serve as useful guideposts, stakeholders need deeper insights into the patterns of narratives to be able to develop effective counternarrative strategies. To deliver such insights, regional disinformation observatories, each equipped with a comprehensive catalog of narratives, is a strategic imperative. These observatories could track, monitor, and tag, in real-time, the malign narratives that swirl the regional digital space, the groups and networks through which they are laundered: their seeding points, vectors, and amplifiers. The observatory will provide the needed data for a systematic study of the patterns of narratives, including their transmission and consumption patterns, and the impacts of countermeasures. Such a comprehensive study will provide the tools needed for the development of a comprehensive theory of counternarrative messaging.

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### **How Disinformation Works: Operation Mincemeat**

[Howard Gambrill Clark, Ph.D.](#)

Winning disinformation plays into the biases of the target. The target will want the disinformation to be true. The target becomes the unwitting amplifier and champion of the disinformation. The target becomes the trusted actor that gives legitimacy to the disinformation and allows the deception to grow.



The story of Operation Mincemeat<sup>1</sup> is often studied as sly disinformation sent to the Germans so that they would be less prepared for the British liberation of Sicily in 1943. However, the mission is primarily an example of resonance tradecraft—when the UK invisibly and insensibly gives ammo to and resonates the existing narratives and wishes and drivers of certain Nazi officers.

The British specifically targets two German intelligence agents who would want the deception to be true. And when the disinformation made it into the highest echelons of the Third Reich, the ruse worked because the top players also wanted it to be true—boosted and provided more legitimacy by a German intelligence officer's (trusted and intelligent) desperate need and passionate advocacy for the disinformation to be authentic. For the lie to be true.

As Edward Jay Epstein asserts in his 1989 book *Deception*:

- *The deceived becomes its own deceiver.*<sup>2</sup>
- *...the victim's leadership has to be in a state of mind to want to accept and act on the disinformation it receives from its own intelligence...fits in with the adversary's prevailing preconceptions or interest...*<sup>3</sup>
- *...the victim has to be in a state of mind in which he is so confident of his own intelligence that he is unwilling to entertain evidence, or even theories, that he is or can be duped.*<sup>4</sup>

The deception strategy would have failed, no matter how perfectly the disinformation looked authentic on its own, had the British not targeted persons and networks that desperately wanted the deception to be true.

British population intelligence (of Nazi intelligence officers) was precise and surgical.

The lessons learned apply to today's disinformation in great power competition. Disinformation propaganda on its own—in the ether without thought to specific audiences' desires and narratives—are unlikely to succeed. For disinformation to find traction—whether today or a century ago—it must play into the audience's foundational narratives that are tattooed onto their subconscious. Technology innovation accelerates at a breakneck speed every hour. But the approximate target of many influence campaigns—the subconscious mind—remains the same. Thus the deception tradecraft of yesteryear applies equally to today.

### Background

World War II. 1943. The British wanted to land in Sicily to begin the liberation of Italy.

The British intended to spread disinformation to influence Germany to focus defenses elsewhere—leaving minimal defenses for the British landing in Sicily.

The British wanted the Third Reich and its allies to waste their defenses elsewhere. The British wanted Germany and its allies to think the British would land in Greece and Sardinia with any landing attempt in Sicily being a mere feint—a tactical deception.

The British sent disinformation (fake intelligence) of an intent to land in Greece and Sardinia. Hitler fell for the ruse. Reinforced defenses in Greece and Sardinia and did not strengthen his positions in Sicily.

In turn, the Allies landed in Sicily successfully with fewer casualties had Germany seen through the disinformation.

### The Means of Disinformation

The British stole a corpse. Put the corpse in military uniform (providing the false identity of a fictional Royal Marine Major William Martin) with documents about classified plans to invade Greece and Sardinia—this was all disinformation. Care was taken to make the corpse's effects look convincing—personal and professional items a British officer traveling with classified notes might have on him.

But tossing disinformation into the enemy camp clumsily would do nothing. The ruse would be obvious. Skeptical enemy agents would question the veracity of blunt deception.

The British, instead, played into the goals and aspirations of just a handful of identified German officers—to include spies and intelligence officers—who would not only readily accept the disinformation. But would rally behind the disinformation and aggressively champion it be seen as 'real'.

The following describes the subtlety and targets and reinforcement of disinformation that made Operation Mincemeat a success. Everything to make the disinformation look authentic.

### Targeting Specific Enemy Agents in a Specific Location to 'Stack the Deck'

The following is a summary of who and how the British targeted their disinformation. It is numbered to show the many consecutive steps taken to try to ensure an unwitting German intelligence officer would become the champion of the disinformation.

### Choice of Spain

Spain was chosen because they were neutral. A corpse washing ashore German-occupied territory with sensitive intelligence might have been too obvious a deception. Too on the nose.

By proper course, the Spanish government would have conducted a basic criminal investigation on the cause of death immediately and continuously update the British embassy in Madrid as time and manpower allowed. And if deemed an accident would have quickly and respectfully buried the body in accordance to Christian traditions and returned all his effects back to Great Britain.

The Madrid government did not wish to break its neutrality and would not have shared any official documents to the Germans due to Spanish policy of neutrality. And out of fear of eventual annihilation by the Allies.

### First Intended Target Adolf Clauss (To No Avail—Fail)

The British chose Huelva (coast of southern Spain). Because there was an uncommonly ambitious and enthusiastic young German spy named Adolf Clauss, who was the son of the German Consul for Spain and was under the cover of an agricultural technician. The British predicted Clauss would have paid off Spanish officials sympathetic to Germany to at least describe or photograph the body's effects and documents out of an ambitious hope that there might be some hidden gem of intelligence.

Clauss' motivations included:

- Ego, unusual ambition, youthful adventure seeking.
- Living up to his father's status.



The British were wrong. Clauss and his paid Spanish agents/assets failed to access the documents.

### Second Intended Target Karl Erich Kuehlenthal (Success)

The British had a secondary target if Clauss failed to act. The backup was Karl Erich Kuehlenthal. German intelligence officer in Spain. His grandmother was Jewish, and he kept this fact hidden from the Third Reich.

Kuehlenthal's motivations included:

- Was "paranoid and desperate to please his superiors."
- To become valued as an unparalleled successful intelligence officer.
- To make up for the fact that his grandmother was Jewish if the Third Reich ever discovered his ancestry in the future.

Kuehlenthal, as was hoped by the British, paid off a Spanish naval officer sympathetic to Germany. Kuehlenthal was handed the letters for one hour to take photos. "Stumbled on the scoop of his career" before the paid Spanish spy could replace the letters without sounding any alarms.

Kuehlenthal flew, then, immediately to Berlin to hand over the photographs to German intelligence headquarters. And passionately championed the disinformation was true.

### The British Enabler

Huelva was also chosen because the British vice-consul there, named Francis Haselden, had the stomach and willingness to break diplomatic rules and authorities and, on his own accord, informally communicate with the intelligence planners in England.

Haselden also knew which Spanish government employees and soldiers had secret sympathies for Germany. To whom Haselden could spread disinformation—to corroborate the disinformation on the corpse.

The documents were returned to London. British intelligence determined, despite German agents' best attempts to make the documents look like they were still sealed, were able to ascertain that the documents had indeed been opened and then resealed to look as if they were untouched.

London sent disinformation encrypted cable (knowing the Germans could unencrypt this particular encryption of this particular cable) to Haselden that the envelopes had not been opened. This was purposeful disinformation in case the Germans were 'listening' (they were).

Haselden then leaked disinformation to Spaniards thought to be sympathetic to Germany. Who would then pass on this information (that the Brits thought the envelopes were unopened and the disinformation un-leaked) to German agents in Spain.

British listed the body (Major Martin) as a military casualty in British newspapers (disinformation). The story ran as if the fake deceased major was a tragic loss of life. The story ran as if the British didn't were unaware that the corpse's effects were discovered by Germany. The story ran as if the corpse was not at the center of deception warfare. The story ran as if there was nothing to hide—as if the effects of the corpse were never revealed. The British government knew German intelligence read this particular newspaper.

### Disinformation Makes It To Berlin (Plays to Biases)

Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz in Berlin received the (dis)information intelligence report from Spain. He passed it on to higher given Kuehlenthal's absolute certainty of the authenticity of the corpse's effects. And he passed it on knowing that Hitler's wrong opinion was that the British landing would not occur in Sicily. Hitler's bias may have been from his ego that second guessed Mussolini's opinion that the invasion would target Sicily.

The planted fake intelligence had also been given to Joseph Goebbels. Who was apparently suspicious. But was first and foremost a sycophant of Hitler. Hitler had a prior belief that the British would not land in Sicily. Goebbels want to please Hitler overrode his suspicions, and he remained quiet about the fake leaked intelligence.

### Conclusion

The best deception is self-deception. And those that are self-deceived are those that should be amplified and provided further evidence.

Whether in that rarest of all types of conflicts—so-called conventional war—to the shades of grey that comprise political warfare occurring every day, disinformation only works when it finds traction with the already willing. The willing are unaware who the influencer is, that they are being influenced, that they have become the unwitting champions of the deception, and that even future historians will find it challenging to recognize that there was ever a concerted purposeful influence campaign to begin with.

This article is a reflection on the educational [podcast](#), 2017 [primer](#) on narrative warfare education (that informed a chapter in Dr. Ajit Maan's [Dangerous Narratives: Warfare, Strategy, Statecraft](#) as well as the short educational primer [Influence Warfare Volume I: A Blueprint](#).

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<sup>1</sup> There are dozens of brilliant articles and documentaries on Operation Mincemeat. For this article I primarily drew from the following sources—also recommended to students and practitioners of deception and counter-deception:

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<sup>2</sup> Epstein, Edward Jay, *Deception - The Invisible War Between the KGB and the CIA*, EJE Publication, New York, 2014, originally published by G. P. Putnam in 1989, p. 176.

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