**Narrative Contest: Cognitive Warfare in the “Post-Truth Era”**

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**Tips**

**●If guns in traditional warfare are meant to destroy the enemy's body, then narratives in cognitive warfare are meant to change people's minds.**

**●In the cognitive domain, all carriers of information, such as language, text, sound, and images, can become "cannonballs fired at thoughts" under a carefully woven narrative structure, achieving effects that are difficult to achieve with conventional means.**

**●In modern society, the battle over “narrative” has become an important battlefield in the cognitive domain. “The same fact, different expressions” has become an important manifestation of cognitive warfare.**

**The so-called "post-truth era" is an era in which people put emotions before the truth and let emotions guide cognition. In modern society, it is easy to obtain a little truth, but it is difficult to obtain the whole truth. When the truth is incomplete, people's cognition is easily misled. Therefore, the competition around "narrative" has become an important position in the battlefield of cognitive domain. "The same fact, different expressions" has become an important manifestation of cognitive warfare.**

**On “Competing Truths”**

**In his book Post-Truth, British scholar Hector MacDonald proposed a concept called "competing truths," which means describing a thing in many different ways, which are equally true but contain only one side of the truth. For example, the following two sentences: The Internet has broadened the scope of global knowledge dissemination; The Internet has accelerated the spread of misinformation and hatred. If you only listen to the first sentence, people will think that the Internet should be vigorously promoted; if you only listen to the second sentence, people will think that the Internet should be strictly regulated. In fact, both sentences are true, and "competing truths" only tell us one side of the truth.**

**Why not tell the whole truth? Because the other party wants to influence our perception. In a speech on the first anniversary of the 9/11 incident, then-President Bush told the American people four facts: first, Iraq is still funding terrorist activities; second, Iraq and al-Qaeda have a common enemy, which is the United States; third, Iraq has had a 10-year connection with the top leaders of al-Qaeda; fourth, Iraq has trained members of al-Qaeda and taught them to make bombs and other deadly weapons.**

**After listening to the four facts told by Bush Jr., people would think that Iraq is likely to be related to the September 11th incident, or that Iraq may also be planning to attack the United States.**

**In fact, the four facts Bush said are all true, but he did not say "Iraq attacked the United States" - that was the inference formed by the audience's own minds. There are also some truths that Bush did not say, which are: first, there are many countries and regions that have connections with al-Qaeda; second, the United States has also provided training and funding to al-Qaeda; third, there are many countries that are hostile to the United States, and they all seem to be considered "having a common enemy with al-Qaeda"; fourth, most importantly, there is no evidence at all that Iraq was involved in the "9.11" incident.**

**In an era of information overload, in some cases, intercepted truths can be as misleading as lies, or even more misleading than lies. “The truth is like a mirror that has been broken into countless pieces, and everyone thinks that the small piece they see is the complete truth.” Cognitive warfare in the “post-truth era” is to change the cognition of the target of the war and the relevant people by telling “competitive truths”, so as to secretly achieve or assist in achieving the purpose of the war.**

**Three Strategies of Narrative**

**If guns and cannons in traditional warfare are used to destroy the enemy's body, then narratives in cognitive warfare are used to change people's minds. In the cognitive domain, all carriers of information, such as language, text, sound, and images, can become "cannonballs fired at thoughts" under a carefully woven narrative structure, achieving effects that are difficult to achieve with conventional means, such as inciting public sentiment, motivating one's own soldiers, undermining the enemy's morale, and even inciting "color revolutions." It should be noted that the object of the narrative may not necessarily be the enemy, but may also be one's own people and soldiers. As long as the purpose of "strengthening oneself" and "weakening the enemy" can be achieved, such narratives can be included in the scope of cognitive warfare.**

**So, as a commander, how should you tell the "competing truth"? There are three most commonly used strategies.**

**The first strategy is background setting. During the Xianfeng period of the Qing Dynasty, Zeng Guofan led the Hunan Army to fight against the Taiping Army. Due to lack of experience, they were always defeated in the early stage. In a memorial drafted by him to Emperor Xianfeng, he wrote "repeated defeats". Zeng Guofan's staff read it and adjusted the order of these four words to "repeated defeats and repeated battles". Emperor Xianfeng was not angry after reading it, but praised the bravery of the Hunan Army. These two statements are about the same fact, both saying that they always lose battles, but they are different in nature. The former shows that the ability is not good, and the latter emphasizes that the spirit is commendable. The difference between the two at the strategic level is that in the statement of "repeated defeats", "repeated battles" is the background and "repeated defeats" is the result; while in the statement of "repeated defeats and repeated battles", "repeated defeats" is the background and "repeated battles" is the result. The cognitive characteristics of the brain determine that we always focus on the results and ignore the background. The order adjustment of these four words seems simple, but it reverses the subject and reference of the statement, producing a completely opposite narrative effect.**

**The second strategy is to provide numbers. The human brain tends to be more receptive to numerical information. Once supported by data, the narrative content will seem more authentic and credible. For example, during the Spanish-American War between the United States and Spain, the mortality rate of the US Navy was 0.9%, while the mortality rate of New Yorkers during the same period was 1.6%. Therefore, this data was cited by the US Navy as a recruitment advertisement to prove that joining the US Navy is even safer than sitting at home. In fact, this comparison is extremely misleading: those who can join the army are healthy adult men, while all residents of New York City include the old, the young, the sick and the disabled.**

**The third strategy is to characterize the problem. Characterization is a kind of value judgment. Generally speaking, ideas or behaviors that conform to people's values ​​will be accepted, and vice versa. Characterizing the problem is a very important strategy in the cognitive domain, because it will determine many of people's subsequent thoughts and behaviors. For example, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 was an outright war of aggression, but Japan defined it as a "war of civilization, a war of liberation, and a war of national salvation": the so-called war of civilization is "the victory of advanced civilization over backward civilization"; the war of liberation is to "liberate" the Chinese from the rule of "Manchu barbarians"; the war of national salvation is to "unite" the yellow race against the white race in the West through conquest and transformation. While Japan deliberately characterized the war, it actively engaged in public relations and even bribed Western media and journalists. Under its propaganda, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 was beautified from a war of aggression to "China's defeat means that millions of people have been liberated from ignorance, despotism and dictatorship." As a result, the vast majority of Western mainstream media at the time had no sympathy for China, and some even believed that Japan's defeat of China was "the victory of civilization over barbarism", "the victory of progress over conservatism", and "an advancement of human civilization".**

**How to deal with the "post-truth era"**

**In an age full of “fragments of truth,” how should we respond to our enemies’ carefully crafted narratives?**

**Adhere to logic. Follow only objective and rigorous logical reasoning, and do not be controlled by subjective emotions. When facing information provided by the enemy, first draw an "information puzzle" in your mind to see if the facts given by the other party are sufficient to deduce the conclusion he wants. If key facts are missing, think about why the other party does not say it. Before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, people from US intelligence agencies "leaked" to the media "conclusive evidence" that Saddam's regime possessed weapons of mass destruction. The media then hyped up the security threats facing the region and successfully incited the public's fear. If the so-called "conclusive evidence" is analyzed, it will be found that it is nothing more than: first, Saddam's regime controls scientists with the technology to develop nuclear weapons; second, according to unconfirmed intelligence, Iraq is trying to buy uranium from Niger and Somalia; third, once sufficient weapons-grade fissile materials are obtained, Iraq may manufacture nuclear weapons within a few months to a year. These "evidences" are a mixture of partial truth and subjective speculation, which is enough to give people the impression that "Iraq is manufacturing nuclear weapons." But after careful analysis, we will find that these so-called "evidence" are not enough to conclude that "Saddam's regime has or will have nuclear weapons." So why didn't the US government release the key evidence? Because they don't have such evidence at all. Lying is very costly and will seriously affect the country's credit if it is discovered. Telling "competing truths" is very costly, but it is enough to achieve the goal - to incite public sentiment and provide an excuse for the US government to take military action.**

**Tracing back the motives. Following the facts provided by the other party, think about the possible actions they may take; by comparing the differences between the "possible results" and the "actual results", trace and understand the original motives of the other party. On June 5, 1967, Israel took the initiative and dispatched its air force to destroy about 400 aircraft from Egypt, Syria and other Arab countries, ensuring that the Israeli ground forces gained an advantage in the subsequent Six-Day War and finally controlled many areas such as the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip. After the war, Israel defended itself by saying that Egypt was about to launch an attack on Israel and that the Israeli army's actions were only "defensive self-defense" rather than "offensive aggression." According to relevant investigations, Egypt did plan to attack Israel on May 27, code-named "Dawn", but the plan was eventually canceled by Egyptian President Nasser. Although Israel's statement was questioned by international public opinion, it also provided a legal basis for the Israeli army's offensive operations to a certain extent, which is the so-called "just cause". The key to the problem is that Israel's claim that they will be attacked is not necessarily a lie, but it is a huge misleading to suggest that such an attack will happen soon. There is reason to believe that the narrative of "defensive self-defense" as a cognitive warfare operation may itself be an important part of the "Six-Day War". Egypt's canceled offensive plan provided Israel with an excellent excuse to launch a war.**

**Restore the truth. In the final analysis, a more representative and comprehensive truth is the best weapon against misleading truths. In August 2016, the Syrian Civil Defense Organization (commonly known as the "White Helmets") released a photo: a little boy named Omran was sitting in an ambulance, with disheveled hair, ragged clothes, bare feet, and blood on his body. The text of the picture said that Omran had just been rescued by the "White Helmets" from a bomb attack carried out by the Syrian government. This heartbreaking photo appeared on the pages of many Western media, and while arousing widespread sympathy, it also aroused strong condemnation of the Syrian government by the international community. In the end, Omran's father revealed in an interview that after the explosion, a group of people snatched Omran from him and then took the photo, "the only purpose was to consume us for the Western media" and "as for who caused the sudden incident, there is still no conclusion." As more and more truths are revealed, the "White Helmets" organization, which "represents justice and hope", is gradually proven to be a pawn in the Western propaganda war. Through "staged photos", "hints", "misleading" and even direct fabrication, they create various focal points of contradictions and point the spearhead at the Syrian government, helping the opposition to build momentum in public opinion. As the truth is revealed, the "White Helmets" gradually lose the trust of the people and become a "clown" organization that directs and acts on its own.**

**Facts determine opinions, and opinions determine actions. From a deeper perspective, perhaps facts are not important. What is important is "how the facts make us feel", and feelings are the main basis for most people to act. The revelation is that when facing the enemy's "narrative", do not be easily carried away by emotions. Try to use reason and logic to crack the truth, understand the opponent's motives, and fight back with "counter-narratives" to be invincible in this cognitive war in the "post-truth era".**