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**FROM ANTI-VAXXER MOMS TO MILITIA MEN  
INFLUENCE OPERATIONS, NARRATIVE  
WEAPONIZATION, AND THE FRACTURING OF  
AMERICAN IDENTITY**

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# **FROM ANTI-VAXXER MOMS TO MILITIA MEN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS, NARRATIVE WEAPONIZATION, AND THE FRACTURING OF AMERICAN IDENTITY**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In spring 2020, several Facebook groups coalesced around opposition to coronavirus-related lockdowns. These online groups quickly devolved to hotbeds of conspiracy theories, malign information, and hate speech.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, they drew from multiple online communities, including those opposed to vaccination — known as “anti-vaxxers” — anti-government militias, QAnon supporters and other conspiracy theorists. How did the anti-lockdown online forum unite these seemingly disparate groups and ultimately mobilize people with such different ideologies to show up at local protests? While algorithmic recommendations helped people find these Facebook groups,<sup>2</sup> we find the answer to what makes these groups so compelling is their narratives, in this case narratives of government and elite conspiracies and of threats to individual freedom.

Drawing from the field of cultural sociology, we define narratives as social stories that help people understand events and assign moral meaning. Narratives elicit and play on emotion by tapping into deeply held beliefs and values. Critically, they also establish or reinforce group or collective identity. They may be used to speak to a core audience of believers and also to engage new and even initially unreceptive audience segments with potent cultural messages. Focusing on the networks linking the anti-lockdown narratives to other key social narratives, we illuminate the pathways linking seemingly disparate groups.

We conceptualize messengers, like Fox News, MSNBC, or the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) — or even social movements — as seeking to increase commitment to a group identity through strategic deployment and presentation of narrative. This task involves an incremental, iterative, and possibly non-linear process that has similarities to those used by sexual predators to lure victims.<sup>3</sup> Combining cultural sociology insights on narrative with interdisciplinary work on radicalization, we have developed the “WARP” framework. WARP stands for Weaponize, Activate, Radicalize, Persuade, and points to the way narratives are deployed in service of identity and collective action projects, the rhetorical or persuasive strategies used in service of these aims, and variations in individual response and susceptibility to influence operations. Using the data from the Russian influence operations on Twitter, we use the WARP framework to illustrate how

groups deploy and weaponize narratives to energize conspiracy theories, exacerbate social divisions, mobilize protest, and even promote violence. Russia's influence operations provide a prominent example, but other foreign as well as domestic actors have similarly used narratives. To the extent that these various influence operations use the same narrative touchpoints, the impact of foreign versus domestic influence operations is likely impossible to disentangle.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, understanding narrative as a weapon of influence and the process through which people become engaged with and mobilized by divisive content has significant policy implications. To counter or prevent the proliferation of weaponized and radicalizing narrative content, we must monitor the network of narratives, in particular the pathways leading to violence and hate. In addition, we must ensure that social media algorithms direct people away from radicalizing groups rather than feed them leads for new recruits. No company should be able to profit off of promoting the destruction of democratic norms and institutions. To this end, the social media companies' algorithms should be opened to public scrutiny and federal regulation.<sup>4</sup> Social media platforms also must demonetize and remove from algorithmic recommendations any individual, group, or page that weaponize narratives which undermine civil society and national security. We need more privacy protections to prevent malign actors from microtargeting vulnerable individuals. And, finally, we must concentrate on telling true and inspiring stories about the United States of America that draw us together instead of tearing us apart.

## INTRODUCTION

In spring 2020, several Facebook groups coalesced around opposition to coronavirus-related lockdowns and demands to reopen. While these groups ostensibly started as fora for people to express their discontent with their state's policies, the bulk of their membership hailed from outside the local communities, frequently involving people who were concerned about other freedoms, such as gun rights.<sup>5</sup> In addition to voicing concerns about economic issues and individual rights, these groups actively rejected evolving medical advice about recommended precautions such as masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Moreover, these online groups quickly devolved to hotbeds of conspiracy theories, malign information, and hate speech.<sup>6</sup> Their messages promoting distrust and misinformation have been spread aggressively by bots and trolls, similar to Russian patterns of interference in the 2016 presidential election. This pattern of amplification has led to speculation of involvement by foreign actors like Russia or China, if not in organizing the groups then in amplifying and promoting them.<sup>7</sup> Through online publicity for offline activities, the Facebook groups exaggerated the reach and size of both the community opposing lockdowns as well as those in support of various fringe ideologies.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in addition to mobilizing people to show up at local protests, these groups have been linked to real-world violence.<sup>9</sup>

Social media has the potential to bring together communities as well as to polarize them, both in the virtual world and in the real world.<sup>10</sup> The algorithms of profit-driven social media platforms encourage both community building and polarization,<sup>11</sup> by promoting content that encourages active and extended engagement in order to make audiences available to advertisers.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, online engagement reinforces underlying preferences, beliefs, and group membership. It provides opportunities for geographically and socially distant groups and individuals with common interests to find one another. It also presents opportunities for inauthentic actors to fake identities and

exploit these online interactions. Thus, social media provides an unprecedented tool for building collective identity among a wide array of interest groups and, in malign cases, for social manipulation and even social cyberwarfare.<sup>13</sup>

While social media influencers may magnify the reach and potency of particular messages,<sup>14</sup> it is challenging to understand why some messages resonate strongly enough to influence behavior online and offline. How, for example, did the Facebook anti-lockdown and reopen groups persuade mothers vocally concerned about the safety of vaccines for children to attend reopen protests alongside armed militia members protesting government restriction of personal freedom of movement? Why did false information and conspiracy theories spread faster and further on social media than accurate information?<sup>15</sup> How were their messages so potent that they encouraged not only prolonged online engagement but also attendance at protests?

The answer lies in large part in the narratives embedded in social media messages. We define narratives as social stories that help people understand events and assign moral meaning. Narratives are a powerful tool in the affinity-focused social media environment for building group cohesion, deepening conflict, and influencing behavior. We contend that actors both foreign and domestic leverage and manipulate salient narratives in an effort to exacerbate existing schisms in American society. The motives are varied depending upon the actor, but may include political power, economic gain, ideology, or, more trivially, influence on social media from likes and shares, among other reasons. Through an examination of narrative content and narrative networks, we explore how narratives are being used to make destabilizing messages – for example, COVID-19 and vaccine conspiracy theories alongside calls to overthrow the U.S. government – appeal to mainstream audiences.<sup>16</sup> We then consider the role of weaponized narratives in creating messages that resonate deeply enough with people to shape behavior and identities both online and offline, leading, in some cases, to radicalization and violence.

## **FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC MALIGN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS AND THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE**

Since at least 2014, Russia has engaged in a dedicated influence operation against the United States.<sup>17</sup> Although the approach is distinctly modern in its use of social media platforms, the methods align with old Soviet doctrine in using information warfare to gain a strategic edge over competitors.<sup>18</sup> The U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee suggests that the purpose of this ongoing operation has been to sow discord and undermine Americans' trust in democratic institutions.<sup>19</sup> This concerted operation serves to create a potent fifth column of “useful idiots.”<sup>20</sup> In keeping with classic Soviet disinformation tactics,<sup>21</sup> social media enables current Russian influence operations to enlist large swaths of the American public as witting or unwitting accomplices who aid in spreading and legitimating misinformation and subversive content that serves to destabilize American civil society. For example, they might spread unfounded conspiracies that COVID-19 is a hoax or rumors of vaccine risks due to microchip implantation that then fuel resistance to public health measures and prolong or even worsen the pandemic.

The Russians are not the only foreign power engaged in social cyberwarfare with the U.S. Other foreign powers are also engaged in information warfare on social media, with Twitter having identified information operations with roots in China, Iran, and Turkey, for

example.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, domestic groups from across the political spectrum have been engaged in their own influence campaigns.<sup>23</sup> Foreign operations typically amplify existing, divisive homegrown narratives.

The sharing of narratives is a social activity, and the storyteller strings together a chain of events that work together to convey a point to the audience. However, the moral or point of a narrative is often not contained within the story itself. Rather, the audience derives a story's meaning by reference to other stories it invokes. For example, University of California, Irvine sociology professor Francesca Polletta and graduate student Jessica Callahan explain: "We hear a story of a little guy going up against a big guy, and we recognize them as David and Goliath. We hope David will win and, if he does, we take the message that cleverness can triumph over brute force. Stories' persuasive power lies in their ability to call up other compelling stories."<sup>24</sup> The most powerful narratives can be invoked by simple reference, usually to the story's protagonist, because the audience already knows the story.

As a body of research on society and culture known as cultural sociology demonstrates, narratives have the capacity to build collective identity. Social movements, activists, and stigmatized groups make strategic use of narratives, or storytelling, to shape understandings and mobilize participants.<sup>25</sup> As Polletta points out, "storytelling is able to secure a sympathetic hearing for positions unlikely to gain such a hearing otherwise"<sup>26</sup> in large part because stories are open to interpretation. Characteristically ambiguous in their moral, they invite others to attribute their own meaning, thereby making new or minority ideas or opinions less antagonistic or threatening.<sup>27</sup> Narratives also have the capacity to engage new recruits<sup>28</sup> while also bolstering the feelings of membership of those already engaged. Audiences might take pleasure in catching a reference to a story they already know, especially if it is a story known mostly to insiders,<sup>29</sup> as in the use of dog whistles — references that broadcast loudly to an in-the-know portion of an audience but are subtle enough not to register with others, providing the ability to speak to two audiences at once.<sup>30</sup> But stories also carry deeper collective meaning when they hit a salient emotional chord, whether or not they are true. University of California, Berkeley professor emerita of sociology Arlie Russell Hochschild terms these "deep stories," which *feel* as if they are true.<sup>31</sup>

The power of narratives to shape identities and to drive interpretation of accounts and events is perhaps their most important feature of influence operations. In his account of how British consulting firm Cambridge Analytica used microtargeting to influence elections in multiple countries, whistleblower Christopher Wylie provides insight into the identity-affirming and fortifying aspect of narratives using the example of Fox News:

"The network was conditioning people's sense of identity into something that could be weaponized. Fox fuels anger with its hyperbolic narratives because anger disrupts the ability to seek, rationalize and weigh information... With their guard down, Fox's audience is then told they are part of a group of 'ordinary Americans.' This identity is hammered home over and over, which is why there are so many references to 'us' and direct chatting to the audience by the moderators. The audience is reminded that if you are *really* an 'ordinary American,' this is how you — i.e., 'we' — think. This primes people for *identity-motivated reasoning*, which is a bias that essentially makes people accept or reject information based on how well it serves to build or threaten group identity rather than on the merits of the content. This motivated reasoning is how Democrats and Republicans can watch the exact same newscast

and reach the opposite conclusion. But I began to understand that Fox works because it grafts an identity onto the minds of viewers, who then begin to interpret a debate about ideas as an attack on their identity. This in turn triggers a *reactance* effect, whereby alternative viewpoints actually strengthen the audience's resolve in their original belief, because they sense a threat to their personal freedom... This has an insidious effect in which the more debate occurs, the more entrenched the audience becomes."<sup>32</sup>

Wylie's observations suggest the use of various narrative strategies and helps explain the positional entrenchment, polarization, and seeming irrelevance and dismissal of facts that have recently become frequently observed features of the American political and social landscape. While Wylie points explicitly to narrative in Fox News's use of "hyperbolic narratives," his account also points to the strategic use of personalized narratives (directing chatting to the audience and use of personal pronouns) and narratives of group identity. Narratives are thus tools that draw and reinforce group boundaries, and individual reactions to narratives are often emotional responses grounded in that sense of belonging. For example, narratives around the pandemic created passionate, opposed pro-mask and anti-mask camps.

Russian election interference and other influence operations have utilized microtargeting of individuals to deliver personalized messaging to potentially receptive informants.<sup>33</sup> The Cambridge Analytica methodology leveraged both demographic information and personality tests such as the Big Five personality test that measures openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and extraversion.<sup>34</sup> One of the more disturbing aspects of their methodology focused on targeting "persuadable neurotics" who might most easily be lured into the narrative-driven outrage cycle that sets individuals up for emotion-laden identity formation and entrenchment of positions on political and social issues.<sup>35</sup> Google, which owns YouTube; Facebook, which owns Instagram; and Twitter all have paid advertising programs that boost visibility for microtargeted advertising. Their content suggestion algorithms also help audiences find material designed to keep them engaged.<sup>36</sup> Ads may be targeted based on a variety of data — for example, gathered from everything from clicked links to website visits to purchases to cell phone location data. The more money paid, the more visible the ad, and presumably the better targeted, the more successful the ad in driving audience engagement.

We can conceptualize influence operations as marketing campaigns.<sup>37</sup> In the Cambridge Analytica case,<sup>38</sup> these microtargeting campaigns were deployed for purposes of voter suppression in addition to more traditional voter turnout campaigns.<sup>39</sup> For example, the company targeted Black voters with ads that would invoke outrage and fear around a Hillary Clinton presidency, recalling Clinton's role in policies leading to mass incarceration and her past comments about career criminals and "superpredators."<sup>40</sup> Microtargeting campaigns also aimed to mobilize potential voters for and against a variety of candidates and causes. For example, they targeted voters characterized as "conscientious" on the Big Five personality test with messages related to school choice, national security, and religious freedom. In contrast, they targeted "neurotic" voters with messages that emphasized dangerous threats and how the preferred candidate would protect them.<sup>41</sup> Applying the lens of narrative to the Cambridge Analytica playbook helps illuminate the process through which individuals were targeted and emotionally manipulated to influence their behavior. In both the examples of voter suppression and of voter mobilization, Cambridge Analytica utilized narratives of government assault on

personal freedom, using microtargeting to present specific examples to the audiences that might be most moved by them. The marketing angle, especially when viewed in conjunction with narrative, involves designing content to appeal to particular types of individuals, delivering it to them, and calling them to action.

In sum, narratives elicit and play on emotion by tapping into deeply held beliefs and values. Critically, they also establish or reinforce group or collective identity. From a cultural perspective, collective identity shapes the moral meaning derived from narratives. From a marketing perspective, narratives may be targeted, deployed, and delivered to particular individuals and market segments to encourage particular attitudes and behaviors. From an influence operations perspective, narrative weaponization can be used to move populations from overt disagreement to open conflict. Moreover, shared interpretations serve as an expression of shared identity based on group membership. As Polletta and Callahan conclude in their research on fake news, “stories may have political impact less by persuading than by reminding people which side they are on.”<sup>42</sup>



**From an influence operations perspective, narrative weaponization can be used to move populations from overt disagreement to open conflict.**

## NARRATIVE NETWORKS

Much research on the spread of malign information has examined how networks spread messages. Traditional network research tends to focus on the transmission of information by examining the connections between people, often which people communicate with each other and how frequently. However, a focus on narratives, while compatible with this approach, also offers the possibility of examining the network of narrative content, namely the connections between narratives and how often and in what context they are shared. Such an examination has the potential to provide powerful explanations about the ideological and emotional pathways, and not merely the communication pathways, through which different social groups and movements are linked.

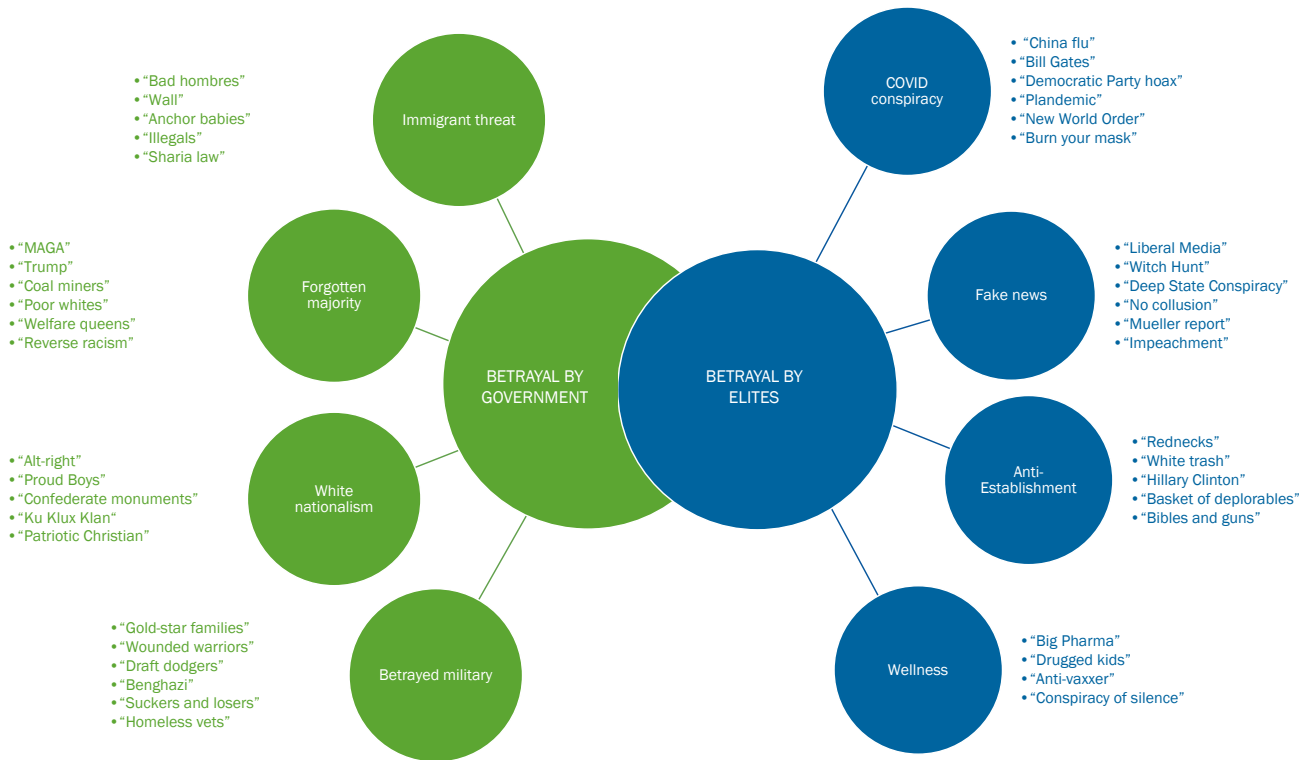
For example, Facebook groups represented leveraged opportunities to attract and induct new audiences into ideological communities adjacent to concerns about state lockdown policies while also mobilizing reopen protests. A traditional focus on social networks would show that people involved in Facebook groups related to reopen protest, vaccine concerns, and/or anti-government militias also participated in the anti-lockdown Facebook groups. However, studying narrative networks illustrates how these seemingly strange bedfellows united in the anti-lockdown Facebook groups around existing, homegrown narratives of betrayal by the government and corrupt elites.

Narratives of government betrayal often invoke the Vietnam War.<sup>43</sup> A “stabbed in the back” narrative grew out of the need to explain how America’s mighty military failed in Vietnam, a loss many believed could only have happened if government bureaucrats had tied one arm of the military behind its back.<sup>44</sup> These narratives grew to prominence on the American right following the defeat in Vietnam<sup>45</sup> and have continued to gain strength with the protracted U.S. military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>46</sup> Narratives of government betrayal also gained traction following the passage of civil rights legislation among groups of white Americans that believed the government had betrayed the

majority’s interests to protect minority rights instead.<sup>47</sup> These powerful narratives speak of betrayal of “real Americans,” particularly by privileged elites, and of being stripped of power and of needing to take it back.<sup>48</sup>

Particular narratives are invoked through specific keywords. These sets of keywords or images in whole or in part signal the sharing of a narrative or a reference to it. Figure 1 presents a sample of these relationships between narratives and keywords based on our research of salient social narratives. For example, the keywords “basket of deplorables” refer to the narrative of Clinton’s disrespect toward Donald Trump supporters, while “Bibles and guns” alludes to an offhand remark by then-presidential candidate Barack Obama about disenfranchised people clinging to their Bibles and guns but also to the need to protect the First and Second Amendments so frequently invoked by the American right.<sup>49</sup> Together with other related narrative references, these narratives are often used in anti-establishment stories. Taken together with stories of COVID-19 conspiracies and fake news for example, they tap into a core story of “regular Americans” being betrayed by the government and a corrupt elite.

**FIGURE 1: NARRATIVE KEYWORDS, REFERENCES, AND CORE STORIES**



Keywords may reference more than one narrative, and they are often the path through which various narratives and core stories are linked. At the same time, storytellers may combine narratives unrelated by keywords, thereby creating another pathway that connects them. Shared keywords and references as well as common combinations point to narrative adjacencies, helping to explain how one narrative may lead “down the rabbit hole” to a host of others.



Narrative networks help us understand how social media engagement algorithms may have cross-pollinated groups with adjacent narratives. Wilson Center scholar Nina Jankowicz<sup>50</sup> describes the narrative jumps she encountered in researching Facebook activism around the reopening of a gym in New Jersey:

“In the ‘REOPEN NJ’ group, multiple posts alleged that the video of George Floyd’s death had been created by crisis actors to instigate a civil war, to undermine President Trump, and to distract the American people... And, their authors write, they are protesting the wrong thing anyway: Bill Gates is conducting the ‘real’ genocide against Black children with his vaccine program, meant not only to enrich himself but to plant microchips in our bodies to track and control us. According to these groups, Gates also paid the World Health Organization to label the coronavirus a pandemic.”<sup>51</sup>

Thus, in the example, we see narrative linkages between various COVID-19 conspiracies with narratives related to Black Lives Matter, vaccines, child safety, and betrayal by corrupt elites. Moreover, the allusion to crisis actors links to frequent comments by InfoWars’ Alex Jones, a vocal conspiracy theorist, who claimed that mass shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut and elsewhere were faked “false flag” events designed to foment public demand for gun control.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, as Jankowicz reports, Facebook’s algorithms were complicit in pushing suggestions for her to join similar groups:

“Within 12 hours of joining just two of these groups, Facebook ‘suggested’ I follow a Facebook page whose owner insinuates to her nearly 170,000 followers that the Democratic Party organized the George Floyd protests as part of its election strategy. Thanks to my recent memberships, the top suggestion on Facebook’s ‘Groups’ discovery tab was ‘SHEEP NO MORE,’ a 10,000-member group with Pepe the Frog, a cartoon beloved by white supremacists, in its cover image. It shared 710 posts a day related to the QAnon conspiracy until Facebook began removing QAnon content in August. Groups that would make sense for me to join based on my 14 years of engagement on the platform are now interspersed with those about 5G conspiracies, ‘alternative’ health remedies, and false-flag operations, thanks to my research for this story.”<sup>53</sup>

To hold attention or “increase engagement,” social media platforms suggest and promote content<sup>54</sup> with similar keywords. While these keywords reference salient social narratives, the platform algorithms drive visibility without attending to the underlying social significance of the stories that very different groups are telling with these same keywords. Social media platforms thus, perhaps unwittingly, create a network of narratives related by shared references.

In Figure 2, we depict a theorized narrative network based on our research on prevalent social narratives. We show keyword references for narrative families that have been described as part of the reopen protests — COVID conspiracy, gun rights, white supremacy, QAnon, and anti-mainstream media narratives — as well as adjacent narratives of betrayal by elites and the government, including betrayal of the military, forgotten majority, anti-establishment narratives, and anti-immigrant narratives. The figure graphically depicts the linkages between these various narratives and the pathways through which someone could quickly jump — or be lured or pushed — from one narrative set to another. The narrative network provides insight into the interrelated, underlying narratives shared by

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groups that may otherwise on the surface seem ideologically disconnected. It offers, for example, a theoretical narrative-based explanation for how anti-vaxxer moms, commonly perceived as concerned about health and well-being of their children, and armed militia men, commonly perceived as concerned about government overreach and infringement of rights, mobilized to protest alongside each other not only at reopen protests but also at QAnon rallies.

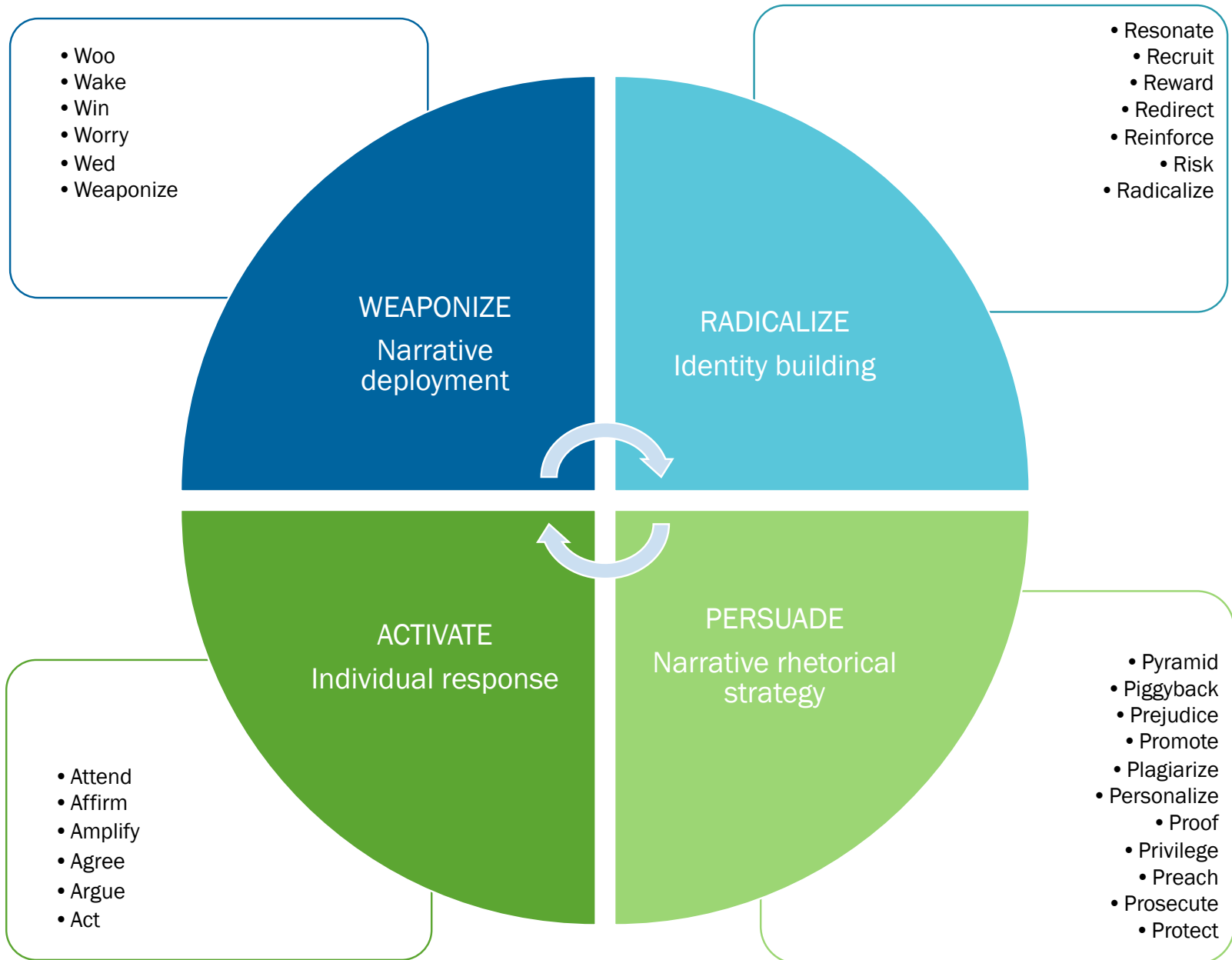


## THE WARP FRAMEWORK

Alt-right groups on websites such as Reddit and 4Chan sometimes describe their activities as “slipping red pills to normies.”<sup>55</sup> This is a reference to the 1999 film “The Matrix,” in which the protagonist Neo is offered a red pill that will reveal hidden truths. Unlike in the film, however, red pilling in this context is a term for indoctrination.<sup>56</sup> “Subreddit” online communities on Reddit have become places where “normies” and “newbies” are exposed to fringe narratives along with more mainstream ones that might have attracted them in the first place.<sup>57</sup>

Exposed to particular narratives, not every “normie” will choose the red pill or slide down the rabbit hole. Individuals are inundated with a wide array of information and narrative content on social media. Individual variation in preferences and interests creates algorithmically-influenced selection<sup>58</sup> into associations and forms of media, which in turn influence the strength, saliency, and frequency of exposure. Moreover, some psychological traits may make people more susceptible to certain types of messaging than others. For example, Cambridge Analytica tailored messaging to appeal to each of five specific personality traits: openness, disagreeableness, conscientiousness, extroversion, and neuroticism.<sup>59</sup> Identifying the effect that exposure to particular narratives has on individual behavior and sentiment is challenging in reality, in part because the lack of transparency in algorithmic influence combines with lack of real-world metrics as well as ethical considerations in attempts at replication. We propose “the WARP framework” (Weaponize, Activate, Radicalize, Persuade) as a tool to understand these complex processes.

FIGURE 3: THE WARP FRAMEWORK



A framework for understanding the role of narrative in mobilization and radicalization, WARP builds from American University professor Kurt Braddock's definition of radicalization as "an incremental social and psychological process prompted by and inexplicably bound in communication, whereby an individual develops an increased commitment to an extremist ideology resulting in assimilation of the beliefs and attitudes consistent with that ideology."<sup>60</sup> WARP goes further in its conceptualization, moving between the psychological and the social, and considers not just the individual's movement into a group but the group's drawing of boundaries around the individuals they recruit. These boundaries then construct collective identity through which individuals, once inducted, filter and interpret the narratives presented to them.

We conceptualize messengers — like Fox News, MSNBC, Russia's IRA, or even social movements — as seeking through strategic deployment and presentation of narrative incrementally to increase commitment to a group identity. This construction of collective identity is an incremental, iterative, and possibly non-linear process that has similarities to those used by sexual predators to lure victims.<sup>61</sup>

**Weaponize.** We can imagine the weaponized function of narratives deployed in service of ideological messaging and identity building: to "woo" audiences, to "wake" them to particular issues, to "win" them to a particular side, to "worry" them about threats, and to "wed" their interests to those of the broader group. They also may "weaponize" narratives against the opposition, for example, using hate speech.

University of Washington professor Kate Starbird's study of alternative narratives around mass shootings concludes that the alternative news sources provided a host of conspiracy theories that then proliferated through Twitter networks: "We also detected strong political agendas underlying many of these stories and the domains that hosted them... with the conspiracy theories serving a secondary purpose of attracting an audience and reflecting or forwarding that agenda."<sup>62</sup> Although not the focus of her study, the research is suggestive of several aspects of weaponized narrative deployment in service of a variety of ideologies connected through narrative. Starbird's research focuses on both alternative new sources and on individuals using those sources to construct and proliferate narratives on Twitter. Her findings suggest weaponized narrative may be the domain not only of organizations, communities, and groups but of freelancing individuals who often gain financial incentives for increasing traffic to their websites.<sup>63</sup> Thus, we see the potential for what we term a "gig economy" of narrative deployment and weaponization, in which individuals take it upon themselves to create and disseminate narratives reflecting their own collective identities and ideologies.

**Activate.** On the receiving side, individuals become incrementally activated by narrative messaging. They may exhibit a variety of behaviors that outwardly signal the level of their identification with the group through their interaction with messaged content. They might "attend" to certain types of content or messages from certain groups and even begin to seek it out; "affirm" messaging by showing affinity for ideas related to the groups, for example by "liking" or marking content with positive emojis; they might "amplify," spreading narrative messages by sharing messages and statements from others, for example, by retweeting on Twitter or by upvoting posts on Reddit or by using hashtags; they might "agree" through comments or statements supporting messages. One step beyond agreement is to "argue," speaking out against views that contradict those of the group, in defense of group ideology. Argument potentially indicates response to a perceived identity threat and is more likely to represent action

outside the circle of “true believers,” where one is more likely to invite disagreement and criticism. Finally, individuals might be influenced to “act” in support of group goals. Through their responses, individuals may not only engage in offline behavior in service of group ideology, but they may also become online ambassadors, spreading the group’s messages to others. Whether individuals activate quickly or slowly may be a function of individual susceptibility, group dynamics, and narrative resonance.

**Radicalize.** The group identity-building projects at the heart of weaponization and activation are aimed at drawing and enforcing group boundaries and developing salient collective identity. Groups may seek to “resonate” with individuals through emotionally resonant messaging, to “recruit” members, to “reward” them for their participation or attention, to “redirect” and define their interests in favor of the collectives’, and to “reinforce” or sometimes police the boundaries between “us,” the in-group, and “them,” the out-groups.<sup>64</sup> Reinforcing may also involve drawing individuals away from other relationships and severing ties that might pull them out of the group, much like as has been commonly observed of cults. In addition, in service of collective identity, groups might seek to construct and emphasize the “risk” or threat of annihilation from “them,”<sup>65</sup> and in extreme cases ultimately to “radicalize” individuals by building a salient enough collective identity that individuals are willing to engage in violence in service of the group.

**Persuade.** In order to persuade individuals, messengers employ an array of narrative rhetorical strategies, including to “pyramid,” to stack related narratives for greater emotional and messaging power; to “piggyback,” to combine seemingly unrelated references to connect stories or to point to new meanings of old stories;<sup>66</sup> to “prejudice” with negative reference to an out-group or known set of villains;<sup>67</sup> to “promote” or praise extremist ideologues and key figures as heroic figures;<sup>68</sup> to “plagiarize” through repeated use of particular narratives using the same, evocative terminology;<sup>69</sup> to “personalize,” using narrative references in combination with personal pronouns (“I,” “we,” “me,” “us”); and to offer “proof,” pointing to perceived authoritative or trusted sources as sharing the narrative. Messengers might also “privilege” in-group members by sharing references to which only they would be privy, for example, through the two-audience trick of using dog whistles that convey particular meaning only to those in the know.<sup>70</sup> We can also detect strategies for narrative inflation or escalation,<sup>71</sup> including to “preach,” the use of religious or of civil religious language and narratives, for example invoking “good and evil” or patriotism;<sup>72</sup> to “prosecute,” focusing on violent acts committed by outgroups to dehumanize them and justify further violence;<sup>73</sup> and to “protect” referencing the safety, security, or need to protect something vulnerable or sacred,<sup>74</sup> through violence if necessary.

To the extent that the narrative-focused radicalization process works in a linear way — if it actually does — such linearity may be difficult both to execute and to observe. On Twitter, Reddit, Facebook, and other social media platforms that utilize group posting, various amounts of narrative content are immediately available, not doled out in strategic drips and drabs. Moreover, even though we seem to build communities on these social platforms, the data available to researchers does not show one-on-one communication as in the chat transcripts used in previous research on sexual predation.<sup>75</sup>

The online process may have adapted along with the constraints of social media platforms and may represent an accumulation and critical mass of messages and responses rather than a step-by-step progression. For example, as in Wylie’s discussion

of Fox News, messengers may begin with worrying or weaponized content, creating an identity-building hook from the outset, and then round out the process in ways that deepen individual engagement and commitment to the cause through repeated exposure to various types of narrative deployment.<sup>76</sup>

We illustrate examples of various aspects of the WARP framework using tweets from Twitter’s comprehensive digital archive of state-backed information operations.<sup>77</sup> We draw from their collection of tweets from Russia’s IRA posted in English between 2009 and October 2020, pulling examples with narrative references invoking core narratives of betrayal by the government and elites. These core narratives appeal on a visceral level to both anti-vaxxers concerned about safety and individual choice and anti-government militias concerned the government will strip their individual freedoms.

The narratives on Twitter have been more likely to be more mainstream and palatable than those on sites which have become havens for deplatformed extremists.<sup>78</sup> Thus, while we can identify examples of extreme positions for Weaponize, Radicalize, and Persuade, the messages are not as strident as those that might be found on other platforms with less or looser monitoring. In addition, the nature of the data does not allow for investigation of individual responses to show a person’s engagement or offline activation. Finally, because English-language tweets in the accounts identified by Twitter peaked around the 2016 election and steadily decline with each new round of crackdown, there was little discussion around COVID-19 and state shutdown policies. Yet the posts point to a long seeding of the ground prior to the polarization around this particular issue.

**TABLE 1: EXAMPLES OF WARP IN IRA TWEETS ACROSS A VARIETY OF NARRATIVES**

WEAPONIZE	NARRATIVE DEPLOYMENT
Woo	We are proud and no one will tell us what to do, especially stupid ignorant politician! #instotus #patriots #patriot <a href="https://t.co/H9OwB8LhP4">https://t.co/H9OwB8LhP4</a>
Wake	RT @HealthRanger: Vaccine-pushers challenged to DRINK MERCURY if it’s so “safe” <a href="https://t.co/gGIE2FCxnL">https://t.co/gGIE2FCxnL</a> #antivax #mercury
Win	Militia’s built this country. Militia’s will win it back
Worry	The U.S. states have taken shocking martial law measures without an official declaration, showing our potential unconstitutional future under fears of the coronavirus that likely won’t go away after the pandemic has subsided <a href="https://t.co/PganaFck1A">https://t.co/PganaFck1A</a>
Wed	Strong connecting links bind the media giants, from search engines like Google to social media like Facebook, to the oligarchy and security state on which they rely giving the interests of the elite determinative influence over which information we access



Weaponize	ANTIFA Website Caught Selling Ultra-Concealable Knives 4 Slicing Up Trump Supporters At Rallies Antifa, come to Texas, knife to a gun fight <a href="https://t.co/xW8fVzn9IZ">https://t.co/xW8fVzn9IZ</a>
<b>RADICALIZE</b>	<b>IDENTITY BUILDING</b>
Resonate	Memorial Day isn't about alcohol and BBQ, it's about the soldiers that died to protect our freedoms. #MemorialDayWeekend.
Recruit	I would rather take care of TEN homeless US Veterans, than 50,000 migrants/illegal aliens.. How About You? <a href="https://t.co/Fa3H2Krxix">https://t.co/Fa3H2Krxix</a>
Reward	For people who support our troops, who love this country & who appreciate the sacrifices of our Vets, thank you! <a href="https://t.co/FDHFkzbAoU">https://t.co/FDHFkzbAoU</a>
Redirect	...you can love your country without having to love your... government. #BeingPatriotic <a href="https://t.co/2HW49H2bIE">https://t.co/2HW49H2bIE</a>
Reinforce	The more I learn about my government, the more I like my gun. #2a #GunsInAmerica #BeingPatriotic <a href="https://t.co/CveWLqap50">https://t.co/CveWLqap50</a>
Risk	In today's news: - Neo-Nazi wins Illinois GOP primary. - White supremacist murders black folks in Austin with mail bombs. - Unarmed black man Stephon Clark shot & killed by police in his own backyard. This is Trump's America.
Radicalize	RT @mgaudy1980: #Qanon Never give up your guns. Fight! Fight! Fight! because once we lose them we are just the walking dead <a href="https://t.co/Gy">https://t.co/Gy</a>
<b>PERSUADE</b>	<b>RHETORICAL STRATEGIES</b>
Pyramid	#MAGA hats should be placed right next to Nazi flags as symbols of fascism and white supremacy!
Piggyback	<p>DEMOCRATS:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. They want to disarm our citizens.</li> <li>2. They lie to minorities.</li> <li>3. They steal our healthcare.</li> <li>4. They tax our citizens into poverty.</li> <li>5. They spit on our troops.</li> <li>6. They hate our President.</li> </ol> <p>Democrats are the party of illegals and obstructionists</p>

FROM ANTI-VAXXER MOMS TO MILITIA MEN

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Prejudice	You can always count on the government to take advantage of a crisis, legitimate or manufactured. This coronavirus pandemic is no exception. <a href="https://t.co/OFI3ialL4p">https://t.co/OFI3ialL4p</a>
Promote	White patriots protect #Ferguson with rifles while black thugs are arrested. Fixed it. God Bless the #OATHKEEPERS <a href="http://t.co/PTRn4fPYOq">http://t.co/PTRn4fPYOq</a>
Plagiarize	Trump and Republicans see a 'deep state' foe: Barack Obama <a href="https://t.co/YgGxBzbq5Y">https://t.co/YgGxBzbq5Y</a> Trump and Republicans see a 'deep state' foe: Barack Obama <a href="https://t.co/c7wKp91VvD">https://t.co/c7wKp91VvD</a> <a href="https://t.co/JBXGWKI2Li">https://t.co/JBXGWKI2Li</a> <i>(Tweets, not flagged as retweets, from separate profiles and with different link URLs)</i>
Personalize	I voted for Trump because I knew he's the only man who could save America from liberal degeneracy. I'm still sure that I made a right choice
Proof	RT @HealthRanger: Flashback: UK government admits swine flu #vaccine causes brain damage, awards compensation to 60 families <a href="https://t.co/nâ€¦">https://t.co/nâ€¦</a>
Privilege	Caravan of ILLEGALS is climbing over the border fence as I'm typing this post. Where is the National Guard & Border Patrol? Boot those invaders right back into Mexico. This is ridiculous how Soros funded Libtard SJW groups helped them get here unabated!! <a href="https://t.co/dIBILfVeLO">https://t.co/dIBILfVeLO</a>
Preach	We believe that every American should stand for the National Anthem, and we proudly pledge allegiance to one NATION UNDER GOD! <a href="https://t.co/H1ZSTBahTs">https://t.co/H1ZSTBahTs</a> <a href="https://t.co/fOLKsfPY1g">https://t.co/fOLKsfPY1g</a>
Prosecute	Over 30% of murders in the United States were committed by illegal aliens. #BeingPatriotic #stopviolence #USA <a href="https://t.co/c8DXIGAfoP">https://t.co/c8DXIGAfoP</a>
Protect	RT @laurie6805: #PizzaGate #PedoFiles Do NOT let this story die out. Our Children are depending on you

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Source: Transparency Center, Twitter<sup>79</sup>

The Russians targeted left- and right-leaning audiences with narrative messaging about betrayal by the government and elites. It is as yet unclear whether they influenced polarization or whether they merely targeted already polarized audiences to foment further unrest.<sup>80</sup> During the 2016 election, for example, the IRA assumed fake American identities with right-leaning accounts such as the Tennessee GOP (@ten\_GOP) and left-leaning accounts such as Blacktivist (@black\_matters).<sup>81</sup> This technique, known as astroturfing, creates a false consensus effect that looks like it's a grassroots effort rather than outside sponsored content.<sup>82</sup> These accounts and others pretending to be Americans amplified existing social divisions along race and political party lines; for example, the fake IRA accounts engaged strongly in opposite sides of the polarized discussion around Black Lives Matter.<sup>83</sup> Some research demonstrates that Twitter users who engaged regularly with the fake IRA accounts showed greater changes in their behavior over time, but other researchers demonstrate no effect.<sup>84</sup>

In the Weaponize and Radicalize sections of Table 1, the presentation of messages with narrative content related to betrayal by the government and elites seems to become increasingly intense with each successive narrative maneuver. While the Persuade category has more and less intense rhetorical strategies, it operates more like a toolbox of persuasive strategies and does not have a rank order. It is also common to see messages use more than one rhetorical strategy at a time. In the Weaponize portion of Table 1, anti-government narratives are deployed to appeal to an audience, in this case to their sense of pride and power (*woo*). They move through informing them about issues (*wake*), in this case the “danger” of vaccines pushed by “suspect” experts. They escalate to fearmongering about the loss of freedom under government lockdowns (*worry*). They invite support of the people and ideas on the “correct side” of issues (*win*), in this case support for militias to “take back the country” from the “corrupt” government. Then, much as we see in our narrative network example (Figure 2), they tie separate issues or groups together, for example, tying tech giants and the security state to “suspect elites” who control the flow of information (*wed*). Finally, they *weaponize* narratives, in this case preparing Trump supporters to bring guns to fight the “evildoers” from Antifa who are “planning to attack them” at rallies. In their weaponization of betrayal narratives, the Russians sought to foment fear about government overreach. They also conveyed an elevated sense of threat on multiple fronts to provoke violent responses from their target audiences.

Similarly, in the Radicalize examples, the tweet examples show progressively aggressive identity-building projects, although not representative of maneuvers from one particular group. They start with a message about Memorial Day (*resonate*). The narrative references call upon the audience's patriotism to remember fallen heroes and on resentments about disrespect for soldiers' sacrifices in Vietnam as well as the more recent anger and frustration of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who frequently quipped that “America wasn't at war, it was at the mall.”<sup>85</sup> The next step, *recruit*, plays even more explicitly on these sensibilities, inviting the audience actively to consider or even show their interest in and concern for veterans. Then there's the *reward* — a thank you to the troops and those who support them. The next step, *redirect*, creates a boundary around and defines the group, in this case redefining patriots as people who love their country but not the government. In the next maneuver, the narrative reference serves to *reinforce* group boundaries by pitting “us” gun-loving “patriots” against “them,” the government. In an example of the *risk* step, the Russian tweets used narrative to emphasize the risk to “black folks” from the government. In the *radicalize* step, the Russians urge

the audience to “fight!” for the group, in this case supporters of QAnon and gun rights. These examples suggest the Russians sought to peddle a patriotic identity that was also firmly anti-government.<sup>86</sup>

In the Persuade portion of Table 1, we present various narrative-related rhetorical maneuvers that the Russians used to make their messages more potent. They invoke references to Nazis, fascism, and white supremacy (*pyramid*) and use these to characterize MAGA. In contrast, they reference a wide range of offenses and tie them together as sins the Democrats have committed (*piggyback*). They *prejudice* against the government, characterizing it as opportunist in its handling of the pandemic and alluding indirectly to other crises the government has exploited. They *promote* the Oath Keepers, blessing the anti-government militia group for their armed appearance during protests related to the police killing of a Black man in Ferguson, Missouri and characterizing them in white supremacist language as “white patriots” protecting the city from “black thugs.” They repeat (*plagiarize*) a message that pits Trump and Republicans against the Democrats and the “Deep State,” duplicating the messages from different accounts. They *personalize* satisfaction over voting for Trump. They *privilege* their target audience with dog whistles by referencing George Soros, a billionaire known for supporting Democratic causes whose name is often invoked as an antisemitic dog whistle, and acronyms (SJW stands for “social justice warriors,” a mocking term for activists concerned with historical injustices in American society) to convey that Jews and liberal groups are flooding the country with illegal immigrants to the detriment of “real Americans.” They provide a URL ostensibly linking to an article that provides *proof* text supporting the narrative that the government tried to deny the fact that vaccines are harmful. In an example of *preach*, they invoke God to strengthen their self-identification as God-fearing Americans who stand rather than kneel for the National Anthem. Heightening an anti-immigrant narrative, they *prosecute* illegal immigrants with accusations of murder. Finally, in the example of *protect*, they boost the persuasive power of narratives like “Pizzagate” and the hacked emails of former Hillary Clinton presidential campaign chair John Podesta with an entreaty to “save the children,” both precursors to the viral QAnon conspiracy theory. In these examples of persuasive maneuvers, the Russian accounts presented narratives layered with rhetorical devices that played on deep-seated social prejudices and magnified the significance of social actors and events. They thus used persuasive techniques to point to the moral meaning of their betrayal narratives as pertaining to good and evil.<sup>87</sup>

The Russians amplified already existing social divisions, helping exacerbate destabilizing unrest across the United States, just as they did with several European countries.<sup>88</sup> We contend that any polarizing and mobilizing results the IRA and other groups have achieved in their influence operations stem largely from their leveraging narratives related to poignant social divisions in American society and from use of strategic narrative deployment, identity building, and rhetorical maneuvers as described in the WARP framework.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a perfect opportunity for foreign influence operations to capitalize on all of the groundwork laid previously. The Russians had been steadily seeding narratives of betrayal by the government and elites. During the pandemic, the moment was ripe for messages alluding to these same narratives to mobilize anti-vaxxers and anti-government militias to protest perceived government overreach in public health initiatives that constrained individual freedom. Understanding the core

narratives in the protest messages helps explain why seemingly disconnected groups converged on the same side of the issue. Furthermore, they help explain how these same disparate groups could also be powerfully influenced by the anti-government and conspiracy theories of a stolen election that incited the violence at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.

## CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Disinformation, misinformation, and other types of influence campaigns have become easier with the rise of the contemporary internet, allowing unlimited broadcasting of social media messages targeted to specific audiences<sup>89</sup> and designed to sow chaos and enhance existing discord.<sup>90</sup> Understanding narrative as a weapon of influence and the process through which people become engaged with and mobilized by divisive content has implications for policy. Current events suggest the success of various influence operations in energizing conspiracy theories, exacerbating social divisions, mobilizing protest, and even promoting violence.

In this paper, we have argued that social media influence operations, regardless of whether they are foreign or domestic and benevolent or malign, leverage — and at times weaponize — the emotional and persuasive power of narrative. They focus especially on narratives related to salient and divisive social issues to influence individuals and mobilize them to action. Moreover, the underlying core stories shared by popular narratives provide pathways through which individuals engage in a wider network of narrative-based messaging and thus link seemingly disparate communities.

Using the WARP framework illuminates how the Russian influence operation on Twitter weaponized narratives, whether aimed at the American left or right, to cast suspicion on a government characterized as guilty of compounded betrayals of the military, constitutional freedoms, and the American public. The operation also took aim at elites, depicted as placing their own interests above the public good. In a move toward radicalization, the messages range from warnings about vague but impending threats to encouragement to arm up and be ready for violence. The framework also highlights the rhetorical maneuvers used to lend already potent social narratives greater persuasive power.

In these examples we see the seeds, planted deep in common and connected social narratives, of a call to violence against the U.S. government. Using narrative networks, the Russians cleverly amplified long running domestic narratives that disguised anti-government positions as patriotism, defense of freedom, and a battle against corruption.<sup>91</sup> These seeds bloomed to unite different groups — anti-vaxxers, militia groups, QAnon supporters — against the COVID-19 lockdowns. These groups shared a common understanding of the lockdowns as an assault on individual freedom and a betrayal of the American people by a grasping, opportunistic, and corrupt government controlled by liberals and elites. In these examples we can see the narrative pathways that may have led these various interests to view protest against the U.S. government as a patriotic battle against corrupt elites. We can also see how this narrative cocktail could be used to mobilize individuals to attend protests, an act made easier by the lockdowns designed to slow the spread of COVID-19. Months later, fueling this anti-government and anti-elite sentiment with a potent narrative about a stolen election, these combined narratives propelled these same groups to the assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6.

The time is ripe to study narrative as a weapon of influence and the process through which people become engaged with divisive content to the extent that they are mobilized and even moved to violent action. Such study is a necessary step to developing effective defensive and offensive measures to combat malign influence operations. It may also be the key to developing effective strategies to heal social polarization and bring the country together again. It is necessary not only to address the social issues that fuel the divisive power of particular narratives but also to counter divisive narratives with equally powerful and evocative narratives of national unity. To counter or prevent the proliferation of weaponized and radicalizing narrative content, we need to monitor the network of narratives, in particular the pathways leading from benign narrative messaging to messaging that promotes violence and hate.

It is also necessary to attend to the social media pathways that connect narrative networks, amplify their messages, and expand their reach to new audiences. The economics of the attention market depend upon a reward-for-engagement loop designed to keep audiences signed on and tuned in. The attention economy therefore amplifies messages that evoke strong emotional response, regardless of whether they are true. Moreover, platform algorithms connect users and content that draw on the same sets of keywords, thereby strengthening networks of narratives but drawing users into different networks than they might otherwise engage with. In this system, individual posts are only part of the equation, and removing an offending post may be no more effective than pulling off the top of a weed with a deep root system. Microtargeting of individuals so that they receive messaging designed to pique their responses compounds these issues. Technological advances in machine learning and artificial intelligence combined with the for-profit trade-ins on our privacy and attention have increased the potential visibility of all kinds of groups and provided them with unprecedented opportunities to reach new audiences. Yet no one, not even the platforms themselves, understand what they have built. 64% of people join extremist Facebook groups because of algorithm recommendations.<sup>92</sup> Platform giants like Google and Facebook provide opportunities to target specific individuals based on detailed individually-based information, as has been demonstrated by several political campaigns.<sup>93</sup> Yet there is currently zero regulatory oversight as of this writing on who can advertise on these platforms, making domestic audiences ripe for exploitation by foreign adversaries and other malign interests.<sup>94</sup> These advertising platforms targeted at the attention market must be regulated.

Social media companies' algorithms should be opened to public scrutiny through academic research and oversight through federal regulations.<sup>95</sup> Using this information, social media platforms should demonetize and remove from algorithmic recommendations any individual, group, or page that weaponizes narratives which undermine civil society and national security. We are not suggesting limiting free speech. Instead we posit that while individuals are free to express themselves according to the rules of each platform, social media companies should not actively help them find audiences by boosting and amplifying messages that, for example, encourage hate, violence, and harmful disinformation. Moreover, all further algorithmic changes should be treated as what they are — experimentation on human subjects. As such, they



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should be subjected to the same restrictions and oversight as other human subjects research,<sup>96</sup> particularly with an eye to preventing harm among vulnerable populations. In addition, the platforms should be required to support public safety messages that direct people away from radicalizing groups rather than encourage them to join up.

As with federal regulation that limits foreign campaign contributions, federal regulators should restrict and audit who can advertise on the platforms by requiring advertisers register with a federal entity like the Federal Trade Commission before they are allowed to advertise. This then would enable auditing of advertisements on the platforms through government oversight and academic researchers.

The United States also needs to treat data privacy as a matter of national security. When China can use a social media platform like Facebook to reach into American sovereign territory to harass Uyghurs,<sup>97</sup> the American government should recognize that this can happen to anyone for anyone's purposes. The U.S. needs to enact greater privacy protections that restrict and limit the data that can be collected, sold, and aggregated to prevent malign actors from microtargeting individuals.

Finally, the United States needs to rebuild a national sense of collective identity. Using the same narrative processes that have divided us, the country can also reunite by invigorating our sense of commitment, service, and belonging to the nation. The nation needs shared stories that, as Yale sociologist Phil Gorski says, are both true and inspiring<sup>98</sup> — that tell an accurate accounting of the American past while still pointing us toward the ideals that inspired the nation's motto *e pluribus unum*. As a nation, we need to concentrate on telling the stories that can unite us in a sense of common purpose and mobilize us to action on behalf of each other as members of a shared community — stories about our nation that draw us together instead of tearing us apart.

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