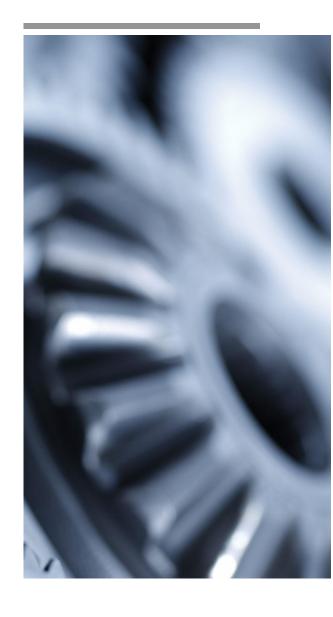# The Three N Approach to Strategies for United States Government Information Operations

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Authors:
Dr. Karl Kaltenthaler, University of Akron/Case Western Reserve
Dr. Arie Kruglanski, University of Maryland

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Dr. Karl Kaltenthaler, Professor

University of Akron/Case Western University

Dr. Karl Kaltenthaler is a Professor of Political Science and the Director of Security Studies at the University of Akron. His research and teaching focus on political violence, political psychology, public opinion and political behavior, countering violent extremism (CVE), and counterterrorism. He has worked on multiple research studies involving Afghanistan, Bangladesh, several European countries, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Syria, Tajikistan, and the United States. Dr. Kaltenthaler's current research centers on the radicalization and recruitment process into Islamist violent extremism in different types of social and political environments, as well as ways to counter this process (Countering Violent Extremism). His body of research and analytic work has resulted in academic publications and presentations, as well as analytic reports and briefings for the US government. His research has been published in three books and multiple book chapters as well as articles in *International Studies Quarterly*, *Political Science Quarterly*, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, and several other journals.

Dr. Arie Kruglanski, Distinguished University Professor

University of Maryland

Dr. Arie W. Kruglanski is a Distinguished University Professor, a recipient of numerous awards, and a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and the American Psychological Society. He has served as editor of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Attitudes and Social Cognition*, editor of the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, and associate editor of the *American Psychologist*. His work in the domains of human judgment and belief formation, the motivation-cognition interface, group and intergroup processes, and the psychology of human goals has been disseminated in over 400 articles, chapters, and books, and has been continuously supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, NIMH, Deutsche Forschungs Gemeineschaft, the Ford Foundation, and the Israeli Academy of Science. As a founding Co-PI and Co-Director of START (National Center for the Study of Terrorism and the Response to Terrorism), Kruglanski also conducts research with the support of grants from the Department for Homeland Security and from the Department of Defense on the psychological processes behind radicalization, deradicalization, and terrorism.

The Three N Approach to Strategies for USG Information Operations

Dr. Karl Kaltenthaler, Professor, University of Akron/Case Western Reserve[1]
Dr. Arie Kruglanski, Distinguished University Professor, University of Maryland[2]

This paper seeks to answer the following question: What can we learn from the process of radicalization into extremism that can be applied to information operations to make them more successful? We contend that the 3 N model of radicalization applies more generally to the process whereby information is absorbed and is having impact. This process assumes that information absorption and impact are driven by motivation—that is, human needs. The 3 Ns refer to needs, narratives, and networks, which together help us understand why some individuals become radicalized. Radicalization, the internalization of an extremist narrative, is driven by exposure to an extremist narrative validated by a social network of trusted others who—through the narrative—provide a means to satisfy the crucial human need for significance. The need for significance refers to the innate human desire to feel that one matters, that one is respected, and that one has dignity. The US government has paid major attention in information operations to the role played by social networks and narratives. We recommend an additional focus in information operations on the *needs* that drive human cognition and behavior, primarily the need for significance, which is the preeminent social need.

Key Takeaways

- Individuals are most likely to internalize narratives when those narratives come from networks of trusted others and point to compelling ways to increase the recipient's sense of personal significance.
- Significance is the need to feel that one matters, one has dignity, and is respected.
- It is crucial that information operations accurately identify the significance needs of target populations and create narratives that hold the promise of increased significance.

The Purpose of This Thought Piece

The United States is involved in competition with multiple states and non-state actors in the information environment. This competition centers on shaping perceptions and influencing behavior among governmental and non-governmental actors on a range of issues.

[1] *Contact Information*: kck@uakron.edu
[2] *Contact Information*: arie@psych.umd.edu

The United States government holds, correctly in our opinion, that more attention needs to be paid to competing effectively in this information environment. This is essential to protecting US interests and US national security and that of its allies. These days, US state and non-state adversaries are very active in trying to influence the behavior and attitudes of their own populations as well as those of US population and allies. Understanding what contributes to the success of influence operations is central to shielding Americans from negative foreign influence, as well as improving US efforts to influence target populations abroad in ways that protect and advance US interests.

This thought piece is an attempt to use a theoretical framework originally developed by Arie Kruglanski and his colleagues for understanding the factors that shape the radicalization into violent extremism of susceptible individuals.[3] Though initially applied to the domain of radicalization, this particular framework is rather general and fit to inform thinking about how to design more effective information operations across various contexts. In essence, this framework offers a way of understanding social influence more generally and identifying the crucial elements that make it effective. The emphasis of this thought piece is on how understanding those elements and their workings can assist the US government in using its resources to better shape the international information environment to the United States' advantage.

What is the Three N Approach to Understanding Radicalization?

The Three N Approach was created to understand why some individuals radicalize into extremism. Radicalization into extremism refers to the process whereby an individual moves from a state of not agreeing with an extremist narrative to internalizing that narrative. Thus, this approach is focused on the motivated cognitive process of adopting an extremist narrative as a compelling way to view the world.

The three Ns referred to in this approach are **needs, networks, and narratives**. These three factors work together to raise the probability that an individual exposed to an extremist narrative will come to internalize that narrative.

Needs
All humans have needs. These needs are biological or psychological in nature. Biological needs include nutrition, hydration, and rest. They are essential to individuals' survival. In addition, humans have a number of psychological needs, one of which is the need for significance. As noted earlier, it is the need to feel that one matters, has dignity, and merits self-respect and the respect of others (viz., members of one's ingroup). While psychological needs are not essential for physical survival, they are essential

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[3] For a comprehensive discussion of this framework, see Kruglanski et al. (2014) and Kruglanski et al. (2019).

for well-being. Moreover, these psychological needs motivate individuals to set specific goals that they then pursue via behavior. As all human behavior and cognition are motivated, an argument that fails to address the listeners' needs will fall on deaf ears. An extremist narrative typically is effective because it addresses an important human need and offers a way to satisfy it. That need is the need for significance.

The 3 N approach views the human need for significance as key to understanding what makes an individual receptive to the narrative coming from an extremist network. When a person's perceived sense of significance is not where he or she wants it to be—known as significance loss—he or she can experience feelings of distress and anxiety. Thus, significance loss is something people try to avoid, and when it is experienced, they are motivated to take action in order to restore it.

Several things can cause people to experience significance loss: failure at life goals, the perception that others do not respect them, humiliation, loss of loved ones, and the perception that the government does not care about them. The sense of unfairness that governmental corruption can evoke as well as poverty and oppression can also instill a sense of humiliation and consequently, a sense of lowered significance. Corruption is significance-reducing because those who have to bribe officials for their favors are likely to view having to do so as conveying a lack of respect for their rights and, hence, an indignity.

Becoming an extremist, either in thought or deed, can bestow a sense of significance on an individual. Being part of a movement that strives for a cause (e.g., religious, national, or social) gives an individual a sense of belonging, a notion of life with a purpose, and a way to gain respect and agency. Living up to a value that the movement's narrative presents (e.g., defending one's group or fighting its enemies) makes one a good, worthy person in one's own eyes and in the eyes of others in the network. Extremist narratives divide the world into good people and bad people. By internalizing these narratives, one becomes aligned with the righteous—those who have the noble mission to defeat evil.

Narratives
The narrative is crucial to the radicalization process. The narrative is the story that tells the potentially radicalizing individual why he or she has been robbed of significance, and how it can be regained. Without the narrative, there is nothing to guide individuals to understand their loss of significance and help them find their way out of the distress that they feel.

Typically, an extremist narrative consists of three parts. The first part of the narrative explains what has been done to rob the individual, or his or her ingroup, of significance. Second, the narrative describes who is responsible for this injustice. Third, the narrative says what can be done to right the wrong and reclaim lost significance (i.e., the call to action).

Without significance loss, the call to action in the extremist narrative is not compelling, as the narrative is enticing precisely because it promises significance gain through action. An individual who has experienced a loss of significance, either because of a personal failure or because his or her group suffered a setback or injustice, should thus be particularly susceptible to a narrative that promises a restoration of significance.

Networks

Networks refer to social groups in which the individual is embedded. In this context, networks are groupings of trusted others who are crucial to the radicalization process. These networks validate and convey the narrative to their members and reward these individuals with acceptance and respect if they conform to the narrative and act on its behalf. Members of the network trust each other and feel accepted and respected by each other. Social trust is a crucial element in the radicalization process because trust is what makes individuals listen to a narrative. A narrative is more likely to resonate with individuals if it is coming from others who they believe have their best interests at heart. A person may have a need for significance and hear a group's narrative but nonetheless may reject that narrative if it is coming from those who he or she does not trust.

Networks are important in that they convey a sense of ingroup solidarity. The individual depends on the network for his or her sense of significance and dignity. These outcomes can be obtained if the individual abides by the network's narrative and shows a readiness to defend the group against its enemies with bravery and devotion.

The Three Ns and Influence Operations

While the 3 N approach was created to explain radicalization, it can be used to understand any process whereby people internalize narratives conveyed by others. The model can also be used to influence that process. In fact, the 3 N model has been used to guide counter-radicalization programs, build community resiliency efforts, and target de-radicalization strategies and tactics.

In the case of influence operations, the 3 N approach can help achieve two important ends. It can increase understanding of the relative success, or the lack thereof, of ongoing influence operations by the US government, its allies, and its adversaries. The approach can also help to shape more successful influence operations by correctly targeting all three primary and foundational components of why people come to believe things.

Understanding the Relative Success of Influence Operations

The 3 N framework calls for identifying and understanding—through a multi-step process—the needs, narratives, and networks that shape how people come to believe what they do.

1.) The first necessary step is to determine what audience is to be analyzed. What parameters define the audience? These parameters can be demographic, geographic, or temporal. The parameters must be explicitly delineated in order to accurately assess the relative success of the information operation.

2.) The second and equally crucial step is to determine what a successful information operation looks like. How does the analyst measure success? It will obviously involve a measurable change in attitudes in the target population that is consistent with the goal of the party initiating the information operation. In other words, there should be change in the target population from time T to time T+1 that can be demonstrably attributed to the influence operation carried out by the influence operator.

3.) **Needs:** The third step is to identify what the needs are that are most important to the target audience, and how a deficit in these needs being met is reducing audience members' sense of insignificance, thus making them open to significance-promising narratives.

4.) **Networks:** The next step is to identify the networks that are trusted and used for information by the target audience. What attributes make the network trusted? Are there any indicators of what would make the network untrustworthy? Identifying these networks can be helpful in determining which communication sources are likely to be credible to members of the network.

5.) **Narratives:** The final step is to identify the narrative that is influencing the audience in ways that matter to the US government. Very importantly, the analysis of the narrative needs to identify its constituent parts in terms of a) the wrong done to the target, b) the perpetrator of that wrong, and c) the way to regain lost significance by righting the wrong.

Examples of Successful Information Operations

Russia: Putin has Made Russia a Great Power Again. Russian President Vladimir Putin has done a masterful job of convincing large swathes of the Russian populace to support him since he came to political prominence in 1999. Putin took important, concrete steps toward putting the Russian economy and living standards on a better footing and lowering violent crime in Russian cities; however, the most important thing Putin did to solidify his support was to make the Russian populace feel more significant after a decade of perceived embarrassments and slights at the hands of the West. Putin's narrative is that the West has been responsible for Russians' loss of significance, and he is responsible for restoring it.

- **Needs:** When Putin came into the Russian national political scene, there was a feeling of despondency among many Russians. Russia, a once great imperial and then Soviet power, had been reduced to penury and was no longer a major force in global affairs. Putin clearly recognized the significance loss that the Russian population perceived. Putin referred to the

collapse of the Soviet Union as a "catastrophe," not because he yearned for a return to Communism, but because he wanted Russia to be recognized as a great power again (Osborn, 2011). He was aware that this was a very attractive political strategy to win support from a demoralized population. One of the actions that was most important for boosting Putin's popularity was the Russian seizure of Crimea from Ukraine in August 2014. Putin went from a 64% approval rating before the Crimea operation to an 89% approval rating after it (Kim, 2019).

- **Narratives:** The narrative pushed by Putin was that Russia was regaining what was rightfully part of Russia, and the West wanted to deny Russia that right. As Putin's approval rating skyrocketed in Russia at that time, favorability toward the West plummeted (Poushter, 2018). This happened not only in Russia but in other countries where there was a substantial presence of Russian media, such as Central Asia (Laruelle & Royce, 2019).

It is telling how resilient Putin's approval rating was in the wake of the negative economic consequences of sanctions on Russia and slowed Russian growth because of lower global demand for oil. Only when the Russian government indicated that it was raising the minimum age for pensions, which threatened to put many Russians at the brink of poverty and hence greatly reduced their felt significance, did Putin start to see his approval rating appreciably decline (Ivanova, 2018).

How was Putin able to pull off such a successful change in Russian sentiment toward his government in 2014? It was possible due to a combination of addressing a pressing need for significance in the Russian population, building a narrative that successfully offered a way for Russians to regain their lost significance, and his proffering of this narrative through trusted networks.

- **Networks:** Putin's control over much of the media in Russia, and his government's adept use of that media, created the environment that made his government credible and trusted to many Russians (Kovalev, 2017).

None of these factors (needs, networks, or narratives) were, on their own, sufficient conditions for the success of Putin's attempt to regain popularity. But, in combination, these three factors were crucial to his ability to build a huge reservoir of support in Russia.

China: China is Rising and the US Seeks to Block it. China has seen growth of government control over its population in the last several years that is breathtaking in its scope. Few countries in the world have such tightly controlled populations as does China (Freedom House, 2020). However, there is relatively little pushback from the Chinese people in spite of their loss of individual freedoms. Part of this lack of resistance may be due to the inability to mobilize in the face of such pervasive government control and the certainty of harsh punishment (Human Rights Watch, 2019). But part of the lack of resistance to the

Chinese government's growing control over society is due to many, if not most, Chinese people believing that the Chinese government is making them better off—and the restrictions on societal freedoms are a necessary part of the government's efforts (Harsha, 2020).

- **Needs:** One can argue that the Chinese Communist Party has focused on meeting two important needs of the Chinese populace. The first need is the desire for material improvements in living standards. This is important in a country that has had a large rural, impoverished population. As China urbanizes, the need for affordable, quality housing in its cities has given rise to a major demand on the government (Bloomberg News, 2021). The population's perception that the Chinese government is meeting that need is crucial for its legitimacy (BBC, 2013). It shows that the government cares about its people, which in turn increases their sense that they matter and are significant.

  The second major need of the Chinese population is to believe that China is respected in the world. This is a common attribute of countries that experience growth in wealth. It has long been a narrative in China that the West has humiliated Chinese people for the last few centuries (China's narratives regarding national security policy, 2011). Chinese governments have long stressed how the West has never respected China—from taking Hong Kong and Macau as colonies, to foreign concessions in China, to the way the Chinese were treated by foreigners within China. Now, as Chinese President Xi Jinping seeks to justify an increasingly authoritarian grip on the country, the threat of the West trying to infiltrate Chinese politics to hold China down is frequently evoked (Deng & Lin, 2020).

- **Narratives:** One of the most pervasive and important narratives to come from Xi Jinping's government is that China is rising in the world, and the United States is intent on blocking this rise (Erickson, 2019). This narrative has a dual purpose. One goal is to convince the Chinese population that the government is making China respected in the world. This narrative clearly goes beyond focusing solely on rising living standards for the Chinese people. It is also very much about China taking a position of global power and prominence. As with the Russian case, the Chinese government has focused on how it is restoring the sense of significance among its people, while a foreign entity (viz., the United States) is seeking to reduce it (Ma, 2002).

- **Networks:** The networks that forward the narrative of China's rise and the West trying to block it are completely controlled by the Chinese government (Xu & Albert, 2017). Alternative networks that could offer information at odds with the Chinese government's narrative are effectively blocked. The technological sophistication of the "Great Firewall" keeping the Chinese people from hearing alternative narratives gives the Chinese government a large advantage in controlling what the Chinese population hears (Bloomberg News, 2018).

Shaping Successful Information Operations

The steps to creating successful influence operations follow the same logic as those for understanding the relative success of influence operations.

1.) The target audience of the influence operation must be identified. Having set parameters of the target audience is a necessity because operations must be tailored to specific audiences in order to be successful.

2.) The influence operation must have an operationalizable definition of success prior to the launch of operations. In other words, it must be able to measure if it is working *before* the operation is executed. This means that the measures of success need to be explicitly detailed on the front end of planning. These measures must not simply be things that the operators would like to change in the target population; they must be things that can be measured in a real-world environment. The planners must ask if the data that enable such measurement will be available to them at the crucial stages of the operation—that is, before, during, and after the operation is executed.

3.) **Needs:** The course of action planned for the influence operation must identify the needs the target audience perceives it has. Most importantly, the operational planners must be able to pinpoint what is causing significance loss in the target population or what can be used to make them believe they will have significance gain. This sense of significance is what can give the influence operation its most important leverage over the target audience. This is because significance is the need that is likely to be most widely distributed and lasting in its importance to the target population.

4.) **Networks:** The planners must identify the networks that matter and are trusted by the target population. Networks have obviously broadened over time to include traditional sources of media, social media, and friends and family that one contacts face-to-face. There has been a tremendous effort among those tasked with US government influence operations to identify trusted sources of information among target populations. These efforts should continue, and new efforts should be encouraged to micro-target networks as efficiently and successfully as possible given resource constraints.

5.) **Narratives:** Building a narrative that fits the needs of the target population, will be understandable and attractive to the target population, and will be accessible through trusted networks are all key steps in creating a successful influence operation. The successful narrative must focus on one of two avenues of motivation. One avenue is to identify a culprit to mobilize changes in behavior or attitudes. The other is to identify an ally to mobilize behavioral or attitudinal changes. As stated above, most successful radicalization processes focus on narratives that identify nefarious culprits to change attitudes and behavior in the targets. This can certainly be a means to achieve the desired ends of attitudinal and behavioral change in the targets of US government influence operations. But US government influence operations can also identify friends that are portrayed as a means to increase the significance of targeted

populations. In other words, the process would be to identify how a good situation can be made better by working with the US government and its allies. While fear typically is a better mobilizer than satisfaction, at times playing on fears may actually be counterproductive, as such narratives may be perceived as threatening and hostile to the target population.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that influence comes from identifying the needs, networks, and narratives that are relevant to a given population. Successful influence operations come from correctly identifying needs, most commonly, a population's need for significance. Successful influence operations also come from credible and trusted networks offering narratives with the promise of increased significance. If any of these elements are missing from the design of influence operations, the chance of success is greatly reduced.

The most important take away from this piece is that the psychological need for significance is a key element of persuasion. US policy has paid great attention to the networks that target populations use for their information. This has been a central part of the groundwork laid before working on information operations, and that needs to continue. There has also been a great deal of focus on the material concerns of target populations (viz., security and sustenance). It is wise to continue with indicating to target populations that the US is striving to help deliver those things, as this is very important in order to convince these populations that the US cares about them. In other words, the perception that the US cares about a population bestows significance on them.

But a crucial aspect of feeling significant is believing that one, that one matters, one has dignity, and is respected. While showing respect to foreign populations has been part of US public diplomacy and information operations for years, there is a need to better understand how the need for significance drives so much of human behavior. By conceptualizing how the need for significance, networks, and narratives work together to influence behavior, information operations have a better chance of success.

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