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BRITAIN'S PUBLIC WAR STORIES: PUNCHING ABOVE ITS WEIGHT OR VANISHING FORCE?

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Abstract

Communications practitioners continue to see strategic narrative as vital to securing domestic support or opposition to war. Yet despite an extensive literature on the narratives states construct, the stories domestic citizens tell about war are rarely examined. Consequently, the formation of strategic narratives is only informed by the stories governments think citizens tell, rather than those they actually tell.

This paper presents a qualitative analysis of the stories the British public tell about their country's role in war. Focusing on genre—the general pattern of a given story— it reveals five narratives citizens use to interpret Britain's military role. These portray Britain as Punching Above its Weight; a Vanishing Force; Learning from its Mistakes; being Led Astray, or a Selfish Imperialist. At a time of uncertainty about Britain's international role following the 'Brexit' vote, it provides an in-depth perspective on a state where military intervention is commonplace but understanding of public interpretations of war remains limited.

Keywords: strategic narratives, stories, military interventionism, British imperialism, Islamic State

About the author

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Introduction

Over a decade has passed since the strategic studies literature embraced the concept of narrative. In that time, research on the subject has grown considerably. At its peak, narrative has been venerated as the 'foundation of all strategy', considered as important if not more important than physical actions.[1] Authors have theorised enthusiastically that the right strategic narrative might win wars, sustain alliances, prevent radicalisation, project soft power, secure domestic support, shape the identity, and alter the behaviour of other international actors.[2] The appeal of narrative as supposedly the most natural form of human communication has made it seem the ideal solution to the West's strategic challenges.[3] This has spawned a growing literature trying to discern the ideal strategic narratives for states to project.[4]

Optimism at the supposedly 'startling power of story' has since been tempered in several ways.[5] Critics have questioned whether some theorists have overstepped the mark in assuming that a compelling narrative can be a substitute for actual strategy.[6] Also, as coalition strategic communication efforts in Afghanistan showed, coordinating multiple actors with diverse constituencies has proven exceptionally difficult unless the overall message is so vague as to have little meaning.[7] A combination of cynical Western publics and an intricately networked media ecology make coherence and consistency hard to achieve.[8] Furthermore, the prevailing assumption in the West of the need to be 'first with the truth' now struggles against a formidable communications challenge from Russia.[9] It seeks to undermine the notion

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[1] Nissen, Thomas Elkjer, 'Narrative Led Operations: Put the Narrative First', *Small Wars Journal,* 2012; Simpson, Emile, *War from the Ground up: Twenty-First Century Combat as Politics,* (London: Hurst, 2012); Vlahos, Michael, 'The Long War: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Protracted Conflict and Defeat'.

[2] Archetti, Cristina, *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media: A Communication Approach*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); De Graaf, Beatrice, George Dimitriu, and Jens Ringsmose (eds.), *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War: Winning Domestic Support for the Afghan War,* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015); Freedman, Lawrence, 'The Transformation of Strategic Affairs', *Adelphi Papers,* No. 379, (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2006); Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, (New York: Routledge, 2013); Ringsmose, Jens and Berit Kaja Børgesen, 'Shaping Public Attitudes towards the Deployment of Military Power: NATO, Afghanistan and the Use of Strategic Narratives', *European Security* 20, no. 4 (2011): 505–28; Roselle, Laura, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, 'Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power', *Media, War and Conflict* 7, no. 1 (2014): 70–84.

[3] Fisher, Walter, 'Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument', *Communications Monographs* 51, no. 1 (1984): 1–22.

[4] For early examples, see Kaldor, Mary et al., 'Human Security: A New Strategic Narrative for Europe', *International Affairs* 83: no. 2 (2007): 273–288; Porter, Wayne and Mykleby, Mark [Mr. Y], *A National Strategic Narrative*, (Woodrow Wilson Centre for International Scholars, 2011).

[5] Haven, Kendall, *Story Proof: The Science Behind The Startling Power Of Story*, (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007).

[6] Cawkwell, Thomas, *UK Communication Strategies for Afghanistan, 2001–2014,* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2015); Porter, Patrick, 'Why Britain Doesn't Do Grand Strategy', *The Royal United Services Institute Journal* 155, no. 4 (2010): 6–12.

[7] Betz, David, 'Searching for El Dorado: the legendary golden narrative of the Afghanistan War', in De Graaf et al., *Strategic Narratives.*

[8] Betz, David, *Carnage and Connectivity: Landmarks in the Decline of Conventional Military Power*, (London: Hurst & Co, 2015); Miskimmon et al., Strategic Narratives.

[9] Petraeus, David, 'Counterinsurgency Concepts: What We Learned in Iraq', *Global Policy* 1, no. 1 (2010): 116–17.

of truth by saturating the information environment with multiple claims of varying levels of veracity, understanding quite accurately that sceptical Western publics increasingly distrust anything political elites tell them, and cannot pick out what is plausible from what is not.[10] This approach simultaneously suggests the power of story over rational argument, while showing how hard it is for the West to get its narratives to resonate with its citizens.

Throughout the rise and fall of strategic narratives, one area has been persistently under-researched: the narratives of the citizens governments are trying to persuade. Theoretically, strategic narratives persuade through 'resonance' with audience understandings of the world; their individual and collective beliefs, values, history, and culture.[11] Since it is currently assumed that humans understand the world through stories, effective strategic communication should logically require a comprehensive grasp of the existing narratives within a given culture, ideally down to the individual level.[12]

Nevertheless, the stories citizens tell about war are rarely examined. Scarcely any research has investigated how publics interpret the stories governments tell them, or how they construct their own. Studies of strategic narrative reception have attempted to correlate a given narrative with its effects on public opinion polls over time.[13] However, rarely do researchers study the war stories actually told by 'ordinary people'.[14] Moreover, these have not yet been used to inform the initial process of strategic narrative construction when a new conflict arises. Consequently, when explaining why the country should or should not go to war, governments are only informed by the stories they think citizens tell, rather than detailed analysis of those they actually tell.

This paper seeks to address the void by providing a ground-up perspective on how a diverse range of British citizens use narratives to interpret Britain's role in war. In doing so it complements Steve Tatham's argument that strategic communication requires a shift to bottom-up approaches to better understand target audiences.[15] Narrative can be analysed at different levels. Here the focus is on genre: the general patterns of the stories British people tell. In doing so, it provides an in-depth, qualitative perspective on a state where military intervention is commonplace, but understanding of public interpretations of war remains relatively limited.[16]

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[10] Betz, David, 'The Virtual Dimension of Contemporary Insurgency and Counterinsurgency', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19, no. 4 (2008): 510-540.

[11] Archetti, *Understanding Terrorism;* Freedman, 'The Transformation'.

[12] Archetti, Understanding Terrorism.

[13] De Graaf et al., *Strategic Narratives; Ringsmose and Børgesen*, "Shaping Public Attitudes".

[14] Smith, Philip, *Why War? The Cultural Logic of Iraq, the Gulf War, and Suez,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pg. 19.

[15] Mackay, Andrew and Steve Tatham, *Behavioural Conflict: Why Understanding People and Their Motives Will Prove Decisive in Future Conflict,* (Saffron Waldon, UK: Military Studies Press, 2011); Tatham, Steve, 'Target Audience Analysis', *Three Swords Magazine* 28 (2015): 50–53.

[16] Hines, Lindsey, Rachael Gribble, Simon Wessely, Christopher Dandeker, and Nicola Fear, 'Are the Armed Forces Understood and Supported by the Public? A View from the United Kingdom', *Armed Forces & Society* 41, no. 4 (2014): 688-713.

The article first addresses conceptual issues regarding narrative and genre. Second, the methodology of investigation is briefly explained. Thereafter, a typology of five narratives is presented that represent a comprehensive spectrum of the general stories British citizens tell about war. Each casts Britain's national identity differently, based on shared memories of Britain's military past. Britain is portrayed respectively as Punching Above its Weight; a Vanishing Force; Learning from its Mistakes; being Led Astray, or a Selfish Imperialist. The stories offer competing visions of how Britain should act in the present and in the future, and are supported by different events, metaphors, and analogies. These narratives will then be validated by demonstrating their applicability to new conflicts as they arise, using the example of Britain's decision to extend airstrikes against the Islamic State (ISIL) into Syria in 2015. In the wake of the turbulence affecting Britain following the 'Brexit' vote, the article also considers what these narratives might reveal about Britain's future military role in the world. The paper will conclude by considering the benefit of directly seeking the narratives citizens tell, particularly at a time of concern over pollsters struggling to gauge public opinion, and when mainstream and social media are thought either too artificially balanced or too partisan to provide a reliable reflection of the views of a diverse and fragmented public.

Narrative, Genre, and War

Like the concept of strategic communication, definitions of narrative are heavily contested, particularly the distinction between narrative and story.[17] Authors such as Bal argue that story is a subordinate feature of narrative.[18] Conversely, Czarniawska and Selbin argue that stories are more complex than narratives.[19] In strategic communication, scale has often been used to differentiate the two, with narrative thought to represent a system of stories told and retold over time.[20]

This paper adopts a different position, consistent with authors such as Krebs, Snyder, and Riessman: it deliberately conflates story and narrative.[21] It does this because as a type of text, they contain the same fundamental features. Most crucially, these features distinguish both from argument or explanation. At a basic level, both story and narrative consist of a temporally and causally connected sequence of events, selected and evaluated as meaningful for a

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[17] The thorny issue of the difference between strategic communication and strategic communications is not addressed in this paper, since it is parenthetical to the overall argument, which concerns narrative. For convenience, it is referred to as strategic communication hereafter.

[18] Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

[19] Czarniawska, Barbara, *Narratives in Social Science Research*, (London: SAGE Publications, 2004); Selbin, Eric, *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance: The Power of Story*, (New York: Zed Books Ltd, 2010).

[20] Archetti, *Understanding Terrorism*; Halverson, Jeffry R., Steven R. Corman, and H. L. Goodall, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[21] Krebs, Ronald R., *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Riessman, Catherine Kohler, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, (London: Sage, 2008); Snyder, Jack, 'Dueling Security Stories: Wilson and Lodge Talk Strategy', *Security Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 171–97.

particular audience.[22] Their typical features include actors, setting, and plot.[23] Plots vary in complexity, typically consisting of a beginning, middle, and end based on representations of the past, present, and the future.[24] These often revolve around the resolution of conflict, starting with an initial situation, a problem that disrupts it, and a resolution that re-establishes order.[25] These features persist whether the storyteller (or narrator) is the state or the individual.

The distinction between narrative text and other modes of discourse, such as argumentation, is vital because it is the conceptual basis of the utility of strategic narrative in the first place: that persuasion through narrative is superior because humans understand the world through stories.[26] It is this assumption that has spawned the extensive literature on the purportedly unique power of storytelling, even though empirical evidence for this is not as clear cut as is often suggested.[27]

In strategic communication circles, however, narrative has evolved into something quite different. Theorists continue to emphasise that it is a superior way of communicating. However, it is less commonly treated as a particular mode of discourse, such as an argument or frame; it is taken to represent all discourse concerning a particular issue. Tatham, for example, explains that 'the narrative' encompasses 'not just the entire corpus of texts and speeches dealing with a specific event, but all the supporting symbolism and imagery'.[28] This blurs the distinction between narrative and discourse. 'Strategic narration' becomes about the projection of what could be described as an overarching 'mission statement' or 'vision' that ties all this discourse together, explaining what an actor is doing and why. Depending on how loosely one defines 'strategic', it also encompasses ongoing attempts to ensure that actions and words are congruent with the 'mission statement' at operational or tactical levels.

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[22] This section draws heavily from previous work in Colley, Thomas, 'Is Britain a Force for Good? Investigating British Citizens' Narrative Understanding of War', *Defence Studies* (2016): 1–22; See also Riessman, *Narrative Methods*, 3.

[23] Bernardi, Daniel et al., *Narrative Landmines: Rumors, Islamist Extremism, and the Struggle for Strategic Influence*, (Rutgers University Press, 2012); Burke, Kenneth, *A Grammar of Motives*, (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1969); Corman, Steven (ed.), *Narrating the Exit from Afghanistan*, (Center for Strategic Communication, 2013); Miskimmon et al., Strategic Narratives; ÓTuathail, Gearóid, 'Theorizing Practical Geopolitical Reasoning: The Case of the United States' Response to the War in Bosnia', *Political Geography* 21, no. 5 (2002): 601–28.

[24] Aristotle, *Poetics*, (New York: Penguin Classics, 1996); Davis, Joseph (ed.), *Stories of Change: Narrative and Social Movements*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

[25] Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*; Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Poetics of Prose*, (Paris: Ithaca, 1977).

[26] Bruner, Jerome, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986); Fisher, 'Narration'; Krebs, *Narrative and the Making*; Taleb, Nassim Nicholas, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, (London: Penguin, 2008).

[27] See Allen, Mike, and Raymond W. Preiss, 'Comparing the Persuasiveness of Narrative and Statistical Evidence Using Meta-Analysis', *Communication Research Reports* 14, no. 2 (1997): 125–131; Feeley, Thomas, Heather M. Marshall, and Amber M. Reinhart, 'Reactions to Narrative and Statistical Written Messages Promoting Organ Donation', *Communication Reports* 19, no. 2 (2006): 89–100.

[28] Tatham, Steve, *Strategic Communication: A Primer*, Advanced Research and Assessment Group Special Series 08/28, (UK Defence Academy, 2008), pg. 9.

It can be argued that because the 'mission statement' should still be structured in narrative form—in terms of past, present, and future—it is still a distinctly story-based mode of communication. However, there are two reasons to doubt that such a statement will be in any way uniquely persuasive because of this. Firstly, as Holmstrom explains in the previous issue of this journal, the emphasis in strategic communication is on making the strategic narrative as 'minimalist' and 'streamlined' as possible.[29] Clarity of purpose is the intent, but this eliminates the aspects of storytelling that are thought to make it more persuasive, such as developed characters with whom one can identify and a dramatic plot that engages the audience.[30] A statement that 'Britain should intervene against ISIL to reduce the future threat of terrorism' is a clear message, but it can hardly be said to contain the elements of narrative that are thought to make it particularly persuasive. Indeed some would consider it argument rather than narrative.

Secondly, if all one has to do to make something 'narrative' is ensure reference to past, present, and future, one could reasonably consider all political discourse to be narrative in nature. Whatever the issue, political rhetoric typically involves identifying past failures, blaming opposition actors for them, and explaining what one is doing in the present or would do in future to make things better.[31] But if all discourse is narrative, it makes little sense to assume that narrative is uniquely persuasive; discourse cannot all be uniquely persuasive. The implication that there is something particularly compelling about 'strategic narrative' thus loses its value. It could be called 'strategic argument', 'strategic explanation', or 'strategic discourse' without any notable shift in what communicators are trying to do with the words, images, and actions they choose: to coordinate the communication of diverse actors involved in a political/military project and ensure attitudinal and behavioural support for it over time. This is undoubtedly a vital undertaking. It is simply argued here that that the importance of communication being structured as 'narrative' has become less significant in the practice of strategic communication.

To determine the utility of strategic narratives, it is necessary to focus on the features that distinguish narrative from other forms of communication. Practically this is a difficult task, because modes of communication overlap in everyday discourse. Indeed the very idea of strategic narrative is based on the notion that stories can support an argument about what a political actor should do.

There is a difference, though, between narrative and formal argumentation. Formal argument involves deductive inference from general principles; narrative uses plot to create a framework of meaning into which events make sense as a whole, populated by characters with which audiences can emotionally identify. Emplotment selects and orders events to create a coherent story around an overall message, moral, or endpoint.[32]

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[29] Holmstrom, Miranda, 'The Narrative and Social Media', *Defence Strategic Communications* 1, no. 1 (2015): 120.

[30] Green, Melanie C., and Timothy C. Brock, 'The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 5 (2000), 701-721; Haven, *Story Proof*.

[31] Stone, Deborah A., 'Causal Stories and the Formation of Policy Agendas', *Political Science Quarterly* 104, no. 2 (1989): 282.

[32] Polkinghorne, Donald, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

This unfolding of events over time is what differentiates narrative from other modes of communication. Studying it is, therefore, the key to understanding what narratives are and what they do.

Emplotment can be analysed at different levels. At the micro level, researchers can examine the building blocks of plot through studying the events, metaphors, and analogies used to construct narratives.[33] A more common approach has been to examine the general patterns or overall stories that the emplotment process creates. This is narrative genre. When people narrate the past to make sense of the present and visualise the future, they tend to do so in broad, culturally familiar patterns. These overall impressions can simplify entire epochs into formulaic narratives of progress, decline, or continuity.[34] In the process they pour 'the cascading and infinite detritus of history into generic forms', even though reality is invariably more complex.[35]

Classic examples include Frye's idea of four universal stories of romance, tragedy, comedy, or satire; Zerubavel's claim that all narrations of history are either stories of progress, decline, zigzags, or cycles; along with various authors who claim the existence of anything between seven and twenty universal plots.[36]

Whichever framework is preferred, studying narrative genre has important benefits for strategic communication, understood here as coordinated communication activities to advance an organisation's aims, which for a state can include the articulation of national strategy, the justification of a given military operation, or the tactical persuasion of individuals.[37] This is because generic understandings of patterns of history shape how governments communicate their intent and purpose, as well as shaping how target audiences interpret the present and anticipate the future. For example, Ringmar argues that international disagreements about the 2003 Iraq war were because the US told a romantic, heroic narrative about its motives; the EU narrated a comedy in which mishaps would be overcome through hard work; and opponents narrated tragedies and satires borne out of American hubris and neo-imperialism.[38] Using Zerubavel's framework, Corman advises that the key to a successful withdrawal from Afghanistan is to project a narrative of progress and concern for the future, rather than a cyclical narrative that would reinforce to Afghans that once again hostile foreign invaders had been defeated.[39]

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[33] See Colley, 'Is Britain'.

[34] Gergen, Kenneth, and Mary Gergen, 'Narratives of the Self', In Theodore Sarbin and Karl Scheibe, (eds.), *Studies in Social Identity*, (New York: Praeger, 1983), pp. 254–73; Zerubavel, Eviatar, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*, (London: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[35] Smith, *Why War,* 19.

[36] Booker, Christopher, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, (London: Continuum, 2004); Frye, Northrup, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Tobias, Ronald B., *20 Master Plots: And How to Build Them*, (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2012); White, Hayden, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

[37] Hallahan, Kirk et al., 'Defining Strategic Communication', *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 1, no. 1 (2007): 3–35; Tatham, *Strategic Communication*, 3.

[38] Ringmar, Erik, 'Inter-Textual Relations The Quarrel Over the Iraq War as a Conflict between Narrative Types', *Cooperation and Conflict* 41, no. 4 (2006): 403–21.

[39] Corman, *Narrating the Exit*.

Smith goes further, arguing that genres politicians choose can affect whether countries decide to go to war.[40] According to his framework, the more apocalyptic the genre used to describe a given situation, the more likely a country will see war as an appropriate response.[41]

The genres the British people use to describe their country's role in war are important because they reflect their interpretations of the utility of military force, their beliefs about Britain's international identity, and their memories of particular conflicts. A call to 'make a country great again', or to 'put the Great back into Great Britain' presupposes that an audience sees recent national history through the genre of decline. Part of this concerns the strength of the military and how they should be used. The question is, what general stories do individual citizens tell about Britain's military history, and how many variations of these shared stories are there?

Methodology

Public stories were derived from narrative interviews with a diverse sample of 67 British citizens resident in England from non-military families. The aim was to identify as fully as possible the range of stories citizens told about Britain's role in war. Sampling was therefore purposive, based on the core qualitative research principles of range and saturation.[42] In other words, the broadest possible variety of participants was interviewed, and interviews continued until it was clear that no new stories were emerging.[43]

Participants were recruited in rural and urban populations across England, including London, Birmingham, suburban Liverpool, a small market town in Dorset, and villages in rural Worcestershire and Oxfordshire. Having initially estimated that 40 to 50 participants might be enough to reach saturation, 66 participants were eventually interviewed, with two retrospectively omitted for being active servicemen.[44] The eventual sample was both extremely diverse (age range 18–92) but also representative in terms of gender (n = 33 male, 33 female) and socio-economic classification.[45]

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[40] Smith, *Why War*.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Miles, Matthew, and Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, 2nd ed., (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1994); Teddlie, Charles, and Fen Yu, 'Mixed Methods Sampling a Typology with Examples', *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 1, no. 1 (2007): 77–100.

[43] Glaser, Barney and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1967).

[44] For more detail on the sampling process, see Colley, 'Is Britain'.

[45] Note that the small sample size precluded statistical representativeness, but the sample was nevertheless proportional to the broader population in these areas. Socio-economic classification was obtained using National Readership Survey ABC1/C2DE criteria.

Amongst a range of open-ended questions designed to elicit storytelling, the main focus here concerns participant responses to questions which asked firstly 'What do you see as Britain's military role in the world and how far has this changed in your experience?' and secondly, 'If you were asked to tell the story of Britain's historical role in war and conflict, what story would you tell?'. Participants were then asked probe questions to encourage them to elaborate on areas where their accounts were more limited. This might have included asking them to expand on their views of the wars they had named, their memories of how a particular conflict began, or why a certain war was important to them. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, then coded inductively into categories using NVivo 10 software based on the overall pattern of each narrative and the way people characterised Britain and its military. Consistent with grounded theory, painstaking field notes were kept to record the thought process through which theory was generated, as well as noting the potential influence of the researcher and contemporaneous events. For this reason, interviews took place as quickly as possible, between mid-October 2014 and mid-January 2015.

Two further points warrant consideration. First, the narratives presented below are simplifications. As Frank notes, typologies are rough theoretical constructions 'designed to describe some empirical tendency'.[46] Reality is invariably more nuanced and crossover between narrative types is inevitable.[47] Secondly, due to the limits of a single article, some of the stories have involved stitching together narrative fragments from different points during an interview. These exemplars have been selected to reflect the broader sample of which they are a part, carefully constructed to ensure that their meaning is as close to the original representation as possible.

A Typology of Narratives of Britain and War

Inductive analysis revealed that there are five narratives which capture a comprehensive range of public interpretations of Britain's past, present, and future role in war. Each characterises Britain, as the protagonist of the story, differently. Each also incorporates multiple storylines, depending on whether the focus is, for example, moral, military, or economic. However, it was also observed that two underlying storylines provided a shared foundation for each narrative in the typology. These story threads were almost universal across the sample; a base of common-sense assumptions about Britain's tendency and capability of going to war. The first is that Britain's history is a story of Continuous War, and the second is that Britain is undergoing Material Decline.

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[46] Frank, Arthur, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, (London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), pg. 29 [Frank's emphasis].

[47] Ibid.

Continuous War

There was almost total agreement that the overall pattern of British history is one of Continuous War. This generalised understanding is patently a simplification, since Britain has at certain times been involved in more wars than others. Its level of participation has also varied, from the 'total wars' of the First and Second World Wars to recent conflicts such as Ukraine, where Britain has merely sent a few dozen military advisors. Nevertheless, given that since 1914 there has not been a single year when the British military has not seen combat,[48] and only one year since 1660 without a British military casualty,[49] it is unsurprising that public accounts of Britain's military role are narrated as a story of continuous war.

> Dennis (55-64, Worcsestershire): I think that Britain has taken on the role that comes from history of being involved in all the conflicts and major events, and I still think that whenever something happens Britain expects to be involved.

> Nigel (35-44, Yorkshire): We've been there. Where have we not been? In every… most conflicts throughout time we've had a role to play in it, rightly or wrongly. But in most instances we've been there.

> Isobel (45-54, Wales): I think, worryingly, that we seem to have been involved in so many conflicts. Thinking of trying to build a British Empire, as it were, and that again involves going into other people's countries, like in India and other places over the years. I think that's the worrying thing about British history. We seem to have been involved in a lot of conflicts over so many years, you know. We always do seem to be involved. And I don't know whether that's good or bad.

People's views clearly vary on whether Britain should participate in war so much, but across the sample it was almost universally taken for granted that military intervention is just 'something Britain does'. So however positively or negatively people judge Britain's wars, they take for granted that Britain always seems to be fighting them.

> Dennis (55-64, Worcsestershire): I think the truth of the matter is, you know, in my lifetime it's been what Britain does, and I've never really questioned it. You just expect Britain to be involved in all sorts of things that are happening.

Material Decline

The second underlying narrative shared across the sample is that Britain is declining materially over time, as reflected in the reduced size and strength of its armed forces. The essential plot is that since the peak of its imperial power, Britain has become economically weaker, lost its empire, and with this decline has come a reduced ability to sustain a global military presence. Today, Britain's ability to fight wars effectively has diminished to the extent that it is reliant on allies.

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[48] 'Britain's 100 Years of Conflict', *Guardian*, 11 February 2014.

[49] Forster, Anthony, *Armed Forces and Society in Europe*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

In most cases participants narrated a linear story, in which Britain starts from a position of world dominance and declines progressively over time. This is again a simplification of British history: decline was far from linear, considering that Britain was more active in its colonies in the decade after the Second World War, saw unprecedented economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s, and became more militarily prominent under the Thatcher government in the 1980s than the decade before.[50] But as mentioned previously, people tend to reduce the past to simplified plotlines rather than complex narratives.[51] Moreover, these simplified public stories appear to be grounded more in myth than detailed historical analysis. They are often short on detail, with general statements describing Britain as 'not the force we were', 'almost insignificant now', with powers that are 'fading', 'sadly reduced', leaving the country 'emasculated' or as 'weaklings' who are 'not big players' with 'not a lot of say', who are 'not listened to' any more. What Britain has actually lost was often similarly vague, including 'power', 'prestige', 'influence', 'clout', 'weight', 'force', 'dominance', 'credibility', and 'respect'. Taken together, these terms reflect the common-sense assumption that Britain is weaker than in the past and consequently less able to get other international actors to do what it wants them to do. Whether this is true or not is less important than the widespread public perception that it is.

> Mary (35-44, Dorset): I think we think we're important. I don't know how important we are. Obviously we have been important once. You know, we ruled the Empire. I think we're probably a country with fading powers. We're a tiny little island. I don't know economically how important we are on the world stage.

> Sebastian (65+, Worcestershire): The prevailing view from the government in power at the moment is that we are a formative influence on world policy, and you know, we can stand up in the United Nations and say 'Great Britain thinks this' and people take notice… but I'm not sure many people do these days.
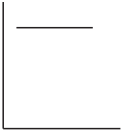
Five British War Stories

While people across the sample agreed on Britain's tendency and capability of going to war, they disagreed on their moral evaluations of Britain's wars, and who they saw Britain as being in the international system. These disagreements coalesced into five different stories, summarised in Figure 1 on the next page.

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[50] Sanders, David, *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role: British Foreign Policy Since 1945*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990); Reynolds, David, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2000); Tomlinson, Jim, 'The Decline of the Empire and the Economic "Decline" of Britain', *Twentieth Century British History* 14, no. 3 (2003): 201–21.

[51] Zerubavel, *Time Maps*.

Table 1: Typology of Narrative Genres British Citizens Use to Describe its Role in War

Britain's Identity	Punching above its weight	Vanishing Force	Learning from its mistakes	Led Astray	Selfish Imperialist
Frequency* (out of 67)	23 (34%)	14 (21%)	26 (39%)	8 (12%)	9 (13%)
Narrative trajectory					
Plot	Continuous	Decline	Progress	Interrupted Progress	Continuous
Moral Evaluation	Force for Good	Force for Good	Becoming a force for good	Becoming a force for good then led astray	Force for Ill
Tendency to go to war	Continuously at war				
Capability of going to war	Material Decline				

* These figures add up to more than the total number of participants (n=67) because some told more than one story.

1. Britain Punching Above its Weight

The first narrative portrays Britain as Punching Above its Weight. Since the metaphor was coined by former foreign secretary Douglas Hurd in 1993,[52] it has become the basis of one of the most common British defence policy narratives told by politicians, the media, and academics.[53] Imbued with nationalist sentiment, it is a story of continuity in which Britain is portrayed as exceptional for achieving significantly more than other countries of equivalent physical size or economic strength. The plot begins with Britain at the height of Empire, with unparalleled influence on world affairs. A series of unavoidable events then causes Britain's relative material decline, as other states inevitably catch up with its early technological advantages. Despite this decline, Britain always manages to exert disproportionate influence on world affairs due to

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[52] See 'UK's World Role: Punching Above Our Weight', *BBC News*, 2001.

[53] For a small sample of this, see Assinder, Nick, 'British Forces: Still Punching Above Their Weight?', *Time*, 19 October 2010; Cockburn, Patrick, 'Why must Britain always try to 'punch above her weight'?', *Independent*, 17 July 2011; 'David Cameron: EU helps Britain punch above its weight', 25 July 2014; For academic examples see Cornish, Paul, 'United Kingdom', in Biehl, Heiko, Bastian Giegerich, and Alexandra Jonas, (eds.), *Strategic Cultures in Europe: Security and Defence Policies Across the Continent*, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), pp. 371-386.; Edgerton, David, 'Tony Blair's Warfare State', *New Left Review* 1 (1998): 123-130.; Krahmann, Elke, 'United Kingdom: Punching Above its Weight', in Kirchner, Emil and James Sperling, (eds.), *Global Security Governance: Competing Perceptions of Security in the Twenty-First Century*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 93-112.

its superior historical experience, liberal democratic values, culture, and the inherent ingenuity and moral fortitude of its people. One way it does this is by maintaining a disproportionately strong military and being seen as more willing to use it to uphold the international order than others. This is one reason it is continually at war.

> Nathan (45-54, Dorset): I think we probably punch above our weight, because with the cuts that have happened recently we don't have that many soldiers, in all honesty. But we do go hand in hand with normally America, the superpowers, the NATOs, the UN, we're always there. We're not hanging back, we're always there. I like that. Our role in the world… I think maybe because of the Empire, a lot of the developing world does look to Britain, and I think they maybe give us more importance than we necessarily deserve these days. But what we do have is a 100 per cent volunteer, professionally trained and mostly well-equipped army, professional army, which an awful lot of these other countries don't have. They have conscription, or they're just bands of bandits, banded together loosely under an idea.

> I think we still perceive ourselves as having a voice militarily in the world certainly. Economically, if America wants to do a trade deal with Japan and China that doesn't involve us, they're not interested. We're not relevant. But militarily if America wants to do something it will consult with us. Firstly, because we've got a better army than them, be it vastly smaller, and secondly because they know it gives them international credibility. Because out of the UN it's pretty much always in my lifetime been America, it's been us, the French send a few nurses… I'm joking, but you know what I mean. We'll go and do it, and we'll do it well, as a rule.

Morally, the Punching Above its Weight narrative is underpinned by the idea that Britain has always been a Force for Good in the world in the way that others are not. Britain's material strength may have waned, but it nonetheless retains 'enormous residual respect', is 'highly regarded' as a 'role model… for democracy', a 'voice of reason', with a 'patriarchal role' through its 'incredible legacy', 'extraordinary history' and 'amazing heritage'. Militarily, Britain's forces are assumed to be both technically and ethically superior to others. By implication, it is vital that Britain spearheads any military intervention deemed in the interests of the international community. This need not necessarily involve ground troops though; more limited deployments of special forces, air power, and military advisors might be preferable.

> Felicity (45-54, Dorset): I think the only way that we can have an effective role is to specialise, to become the advisors more than the fighters. Our military is very well trained, very well disciplined, in comparison to everyone else's. It still has its faults, but in comparison I think the discipline shown by our military is exceptionally good. And we would be best to be the advisors I think.

2. Britain the Vanishing Force

The Punching Above its Weight narrative is attractive because it perpetuates the belief that Britain remains special despite decline. Nonetheless, more strongly militaristic citizens dismiss this as rhetoric rather than reality. For them, Britain's military story is one of a Vanishing Force. This is a tragedian, nostalgic tale of moral and material decline. Of the 14 participants telling this story, all but one was over 55. The story again begins with the Empire, which is portrayed as fundamentally liberal and benevolent. After the Second World War however, it has unnecessarily surrendered its dominant position due to inept political leadership, societal malaise, and, for some, mass immigration. Due to these villains of the story, Britain is steadily vanishing into international obscurity. Whereas the Punching Above its Weight narrative minimises Britain's decline, the Vanishing Force narrative exaggerates it, emphasising how great the country once was and the parlous state into which it has apparently fallen.

Britain's continuous involvement in war is once more seen as natural and positive, based on the self-perception that heroic Britain, above all others, has the resilience and trustworthiness to counter the illiberal powers of the world. The underlying assumption is that Britain is inherently a Force for Good, but this is tied to its material strength. In other words, the less force Britain has, the less good it can do. Not being the force it once was, it is unable to exert moral leadership on world affairs, to its detriment and that of humanity in general.

> Daisy (65+, Worcsestershire): I think we've lost an awful lot in the last 30 years. When you think what we achieved after the wars, and we were a force to be reckoned with, but I don't think we are any more. I think we've been too complacent. I think we're pushed around quite a bit as a country. We are just a little island and we've got to learn that we aren't the big players any more.

> Beatrice (65+, Lancashire): Well [Britain] used to be great didn't it. I think the great has been taken out of Great Britain now. It's erm… multicultural.

> Terry (55-64, Worcestershire): If the Falklands kicked off again we would need massive help. We wouldn't be able to do it on our own any more. We haven't got enough firepower.

> Samuel (65+, Dorset): Well I think in the back of most people's minds we will say upfront we know Britain's not a major world power any more, you know, it's all over, the Commonwealth's gone, our powers are gone, you know, we're not what we were, but at the back of your mind you probably haven't given up completely on that idea.

According to this narrative, in future Britain's decline is not to be accepted or managed. Instead what is needed is a return to greatness through an increase in hard power to match the inherent superiority of the British people. Economically, Eurosceptics assume this could be done through leaving the European Union and returning to being a dominant global trader, as Britain was during Empire. But military reinvestment is particularly vital to ensure that once more Britain has

'real power' to influence world affairs, based on the realist assumption that military strength confers influence, 'weight', and 'clout'. Otherwise it risks becoming nothing more than 'Belgium with nukes'.[54]

> Vincent (65+, Lancashire): I think we should get out of Europe, and I think we should go back to what we were… global traders. You know, God almighty, we're a nation full of inventiveness, we're industrious. The ideas socially and industrially, technological-wise, we really are, we're leaders.

> Shaun (55-64, Dorset): I think we've become too small. And the trouble is, because we're so small, at NATO we're not being listened to because we can't put our money where our mouth is. And that goes back again to what I said, we need to have a strong military presence because if there is a time where conflict is there, if we've got the power and the strength and the weight to do it, I think we would be listened to more.

3. Britain Learning from Its Mistakes

If the first two narratives might be described as nationalist and militarist, the third and fourth might be described as liberal, in that they focus on Britain's progress in building a more civilised and peaceful world after its violent imperial past. The third narrative, and the most common across the sample, portrays Britain as Learning from its Mistakes. The plot is simple. Britain continuously participates in wars throughout its history, but the nature of those wars changes. Starting with the Empire, Britain's wars are exploitative and oppressive, fought for the wrong reasons. Imperial Britain is described as 'arrogant', 'aggressive', 'dominating', 'subjugating', 'bullying', and 'exploiting' others in pursuit of material gain and cultural domination. Over time though, Britain learns from these mistakes and becomes more circumspect, increasingly using its military for the wider benefit of humanity. Rather than only seeking to advance selfish national interests, the country has moved towards working for the good of the world and those in need. The story is grounded in liberal internationalist ideology, set in a world in which liberal values are assumed to be universally desirable. It portrays a future of ever-increasing freedom, peace, and prosperity.

On the one hand, Britain's material decline is evaluated negatively as it means Britain cannot so easily perform a global humanitarian role. It is also perceived positively though, since it has required Britain to consider how to use its military more judiciously. Having not been a force for good during its aggressive imperial past, the two world wars were formative experiences where Britain learnt to use its military to benefit the world. In future, it is hoped that Britain will use its historical experience to mediate or arbitrate international conflict and be a 'peacemaker', rather than intervene aggressively for its own interests.

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[54] Lindley-French, Julian, *Little Britain? Twenty-First Century Strategy for a Middling European Power*, (Marston Gate: Amazon, 2015), pg. 7.

Irene (55-64, Worcsestershire): I suppose [Britain was] a bit of an aggressor for a very long period of time. A nation who didn't really consider other nations to have any rights or… powers. And then perhaps that did change to a nation who was trying to do what was right in the twentieth century, as well as protecting itself, and not always getting that right but… well definitely not always getting that right, but trying to improve things. And I'd like to see it now as working for… world peace and a world that people can live in safely for the future.

Kyle (18-24, London): [Britain has changed] from the pillaging outlaw and highwayman of the past to possibly the silver knight. We've made our fair share from war in the past, we've solidified our place at the table as it is. I'd say we still are a superpower now, because of what we've done in the past. We've made our influence known, the way we used to be the power. But now we don't have that, and I'm glad of that. We're not an enforcer any more. We're just mainly there to defend, I hope. I hope that's the case. Sometimes we're a little bit misguided, but generally we're trying our best, I hope.

The causal logic of this narrative is that the protagonist, Britain, is portrayed as always having good intentions in going to war, even though its interventions sometimes have destructive consequences. Framing British military history in this way has obvious appeal. It renders Britain less accountable for its past wars, which are seen as 'blunders' rather than being 'calculated' (Lily, 18-24, London).

In future, it is hoped that Britain will continue to be more cautious and humanitarian in its approach to war. However, military intervention remains a viable policy option, but it should be used to 'make things better'; although this seems idealistic to some telling this story:

Danielle (35-44, London): I would like to think we remain very important … even in mediation. I'd like to see us less of a ground troops going in there bombing left, right and centre. I'd like to think of us more as a kind of… protection rather than attacking, so being in an unstable country and trying to protect citizens. It's very airy-fairy, silly, unachievable I'm sure.

4. Britain Led Astray

The plot of the fourth narrative, in which Britain is Led Astray, begins the same as the third. Britain follows a violent imperial past by steadily learning to use military force more discriminately, to help others rather than just itself. But rather than a narrative of moral progress, this story involves a moral rise and fall. Empire, once more, is evaluated negatively. The Second World War is the peak of Britain's global moral role as a 'defender of freedom'. Thereafter, Britain is led astray, interfering in conflicts it shouldn't and doing more harm than good. This is most powerfully exemplified by the twenty-first century wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Britain being led astray is partly a function of material decline, which has forced it to ally closely with America, a more gung-ho, selfish power that is allegedly less

discriminate than Britain in using military force. America is a villain in the story, while Britain is characterised as an overly passive, dependent ally that is 'dragged into things that maybe we shouldn't be' (Olive, 65+, Oxfordshire). These wars have been ineffective militarily, offered little humanitarian benefit, and damaged Britain's credibility as an ethical international actor. This leaves Britain less willing and able to play a leading role in international conflict, whether as a combatant, peacekeeper or mediator.

> Deborah (35-44, Wales): I'd probably tell a story of how we did the right thing twice, how in the First World War we, you know, joined in to help, and in the Second World War we fiercely defended people's human rights and borders and countries, and how good triumphed over evil. And then I think in the story Britain would lose its way slightly. We've tried to help people on other occasions but the people didn't really want our help or didn't need our help, and perhaps we left things worse than we found them.

> Robert (35-44, Dorset): I think we've got a fairly proud history from back to the Second World War, and First World War. Maybe not so much before that, with the likes of Crimea and obviously building the Empire. I don't totally think we were great… doing those things. But again it's money, power, and wealth. But after the Second World War, and in my time, we seem to be constantly getting into squabbles and wars that don't seem to really finish and tend to go anywhere. They don't tend to achieve anything.

Those that see Britain as being Led Astray take no issue with Britain's continuous military interventionism per se. Instead they express concern that following the US into conflicts undermines Britain's moral credibility, even if the 'special relationship' is a useful source of influence. They consider the US to be morally inferior, a country that hasn't 'got everybody's interests at heart' (Fatima 35-44, Oxfordshire), is 'very self-interested and looks after number one' (Samuel, 65+, Dorset). Britain, in comparison, possesses 'a better understanding of the world' (Stuart, 35-44, London), is more 'sensible' and less 'aggressive', and its credibility is undermined by following the US into war. The hope for the future is that Britain will distance itself from America and become more of a mediator and peacekeeper than an aggressor. This would provide resolution to the narrative and return Britain to the liberal path of using military force for the good of the world. Once more though, this does not mean an end to military intervention. Indeed Grace expresses the opposite concern: that Britain's damaged credibility may mean it fails to intervene when it should:

> Grace (55-64, Worcsestershire): I think we've… to some extent at least learnt from our mistakes. I think my biggest concern now is that the pendulum has swung again. Because we made a complete mess of the Iraq situation, and that and Afghanistan have really sickened public opinion, I think now that we're possibly in a situation where we won't do something where maybe we ought to.

5. Britain the Selfish Imperialist

The previous four stories are based on the assumptions that military force can be positive, and that Britain has always been a Force for Good at least in its intentions. However, a small minority (9 out of 67) told a different story: that of Britain the Selfish Imperialist: a violent, exploitative Force for Ill, using its military for selfish, typically economic purposes. This narrative combines elements of Marxist economic logic with a rejection of the civilising narrative of the White Man's Burden. Britain is characterised as colonial oppressor, plundering the wealth of other countries for the benefit of its capitalist system. Claims that its interventions protect human rights are just a new form of 'humanitarian imperialism' to impose putatively universal Western values on others.[55] These combine in an anti-imperialist story that applies to Britain's military past, present, and future.

As with the Punching Above its Weight narrative, it is a story of continuity, but this time all Britain's actions are assumed to be morally wrong. The plot is a continuous stream of imperialist violence throughout British history that is likely to continue as long as vested economic interests underpin decisions to use military force. Perhaps with the exception of the world wars, Britain's conflicts are fought for ulterior motives, be it land, money, oil, or the perpetuation of the arms trade.

> Dan (45-54, Dorset): When you actually look at the detail of it, [war is] about controlling situations in terms of oil, mineral resources, etcetera, etcetera. You see the whole argument for, say, Afghanistan, it's [apparently] about fighting against oppression of the people in that country… when we all know the routes for oil through Afghanistan are crucial for the West. … So yes, this idea that military intervention is all about freedom, it's not. It's not in my mind.

> Mary (35-44, Dorset): I think Britain's selectivity in where it intervenes is economic. We're probably strategically looking at where there are conflicts bubbling up all around the world and which ones do we actually want to keep a lid on and suppress, because they benefit us economically. I know everyone bangs on about it all the time but I do think we're interested in the Middle East because of oil.

> Lily (18-24, London): The things not to be proud of? The British Empire I suppose. I read something recently that there's 22 countries in the world that Britain's never invaded apparently. It's like they were given a massive handicap because we went there, colonised them, took natural resources, slaves at one point, financial resources. The consequences are that certain parts of the world are obviously incredibly disadvantaged. So we've got a lot to answer for I think, but none of it particularly good.

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[55] Bricmont, Jean, *Humanitarian Imperialism: Using Human Rights to Sell War*, translated by Diana Johnstone, (New York: NYU Press, 2007); Tomlinson, John, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction*, (London: A&C Black, 2001).

> Bethany (18-24, London): Too often in British foreign policy we turn a blind eye, we make friends with dictators and human rights abusers because it suits us, and because it's easier for us, and it protects our economic interest in those areas. But actually we also spout about being in favour of democracy and human rights. It's just completely at odds with one another.

This narrative is significant because it is commonly used as a counter-narrative to any government claims that its military interventions are humanitarian.[56] When considering the future, narrators of this story tend to juxtapose an ideal world without war with reality in which war is human nature. Thus even if narrators of this story fundamentally oppose Britain's wars, they can acknowledge that a militarily active Britain may be unfortunately necessary. Still, the hope is that Britain uses its military minimally and for humanitarian purposes. Yet they anticipate no progress in this regard, particularly while a supposedly militarist and nationalist British political establishment values military force as a source of power and influence.

Discussion: The Significance of these Narratives

Both these narratives, and the methods used to collect them, are potentially useful for strategic communicators. Firstly, they are valuable because they provide the frames of reference domestic citizens use to interpret new conflicts as they arise. At this stage it is not possible to statistically generalise the prevalence of each one to the general population. However, they can be validated by showing their 'transferability' to subsequent conflicts that had not taken place when the research was conducted.[57] This is demonstrated by showing how each story provides an intuitive explanation for the British government's decision to extend British airstrikes against ISIL into Syria in December 2015; almost a year after data collection ended. This decision, supported by a majority of 397 to 223 MPs, engaged the public in a prolonged and emotive debate on whether the country should expand its existing intervention in Iraq.[58]

The Syria intervention and the language used to argue for it fits the underlying Continuous War and Material Decline narratives particularly well. The opposition's formal questions to the Prime Minister during the ten-hour parliamentary debate focused almost solely on the efficacy of the intervention rather than the principle of military intervention itself. Questions asked whether intervention would 'make a significant military impact'; 'be successful without ground forces'; lead to 'mission creep' or increase the 'threat of terrorist attacks in the UK'.[59] The general principle of whether Britain should use military force to achieve political objectives was not questioned. The debate thus reflected continuity in military force being a legitimate and natural policy instrument. The smaller size of the intervention compared to past wars also strongly reflected the Material Decline narrative.

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[56] See Colley, Thomas, 'What's in It for Us', *The Royal United Services Institute Journal* 160, no. 4 (2015): 64.

[57] Lincoln, Yvonna, and Egon Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, (Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE, 1985), pg. 40.

[58] Wintour, Patrick, 'Britain carries out first Syria airstrikes after MPs approve action against ISIS', *The Guardian*, 3 December 2015.

[59] 'David Cameron's full statement calling for UK involvement in Syria air strikes', *The Telegraph*, 26 November 2015.

The government's justification for extending airstrikes contained strong echoes of the Punching Above its Weight narrative. It specifically emphasised that Britain's allies had requested Britain's help because it possessed the Brimstone missile system, which is apparently technologically superior to any of their own. Cameron's memorandum to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee emphasised that the precision of the missile system was a capability 'even the US do not possess'.[60] Meanwhile, he described Britain's intelligence and surveillance as 'second to none'. Together these would give Britain an 'important and distinct role' in coalition efforts against ISIL.[61]

The other pillar of Cameron's argument was Britain's moral obligation to support its allies, particularly in the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks in November 2015.[62] By playing the role of 'reliable ally' there is also continuity in Britain being willing to step in when others might lack the same self-sacrificing attitude.[63] Taken together, the government's argument emphasised Britain's technological superiority in matters of war and moral fortitude in being more willing to help others. In other words, it was Punching Above its Weight.

The rhetorical trick in this narrative is that in focusing on Britain's apparent technological superiority, it obscures the remarkably small material contribution Britain actually made. After a month of the operation, only four sorties had been flown in Syria by British forces, and one of those was an unmanned drone strike.[64] As a result, the Syria intervention also fits the Vanishing Force narrative. It seems to be an obvious example of a country vanishing further from the world stage, especially when compared to the mythical days when Britain only needed to send a gunboat to get its way. Now though, it can only send a pathetic quantity of its decimated forces to a conflict upon which is has no real influence.

The smaller scale and more cautious targeting in the Syrian air campaign also fits the Learning from its Mistakes narrative though. From this perspective the use of more accurate Brimstone missiles and the limited scope of British military action fit into a story where Britain is learning to become more discriminate in the use of military force and more cautious about civilian casualties. Britain's warfighting, even if more limited in scope, has become more humanitarian. Again, the impression that Britain is more concerned about this than others further reinforces British moral exceptionalism.

The Syria intervention can also be framed to fit the Britain Led Astray narrative. For once more Britain is following the US into a conflict in the Middle East with no long term political objective; or at least no explicit roadmap for a political solution, and with the potential for mission creep to expand the scale of the operation. The intervention can actually fit both of these liberal interpretations simultaneously.

[60] 'Prime Minister's Response to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee's Second Report of Session 2015-2016: The Extension of Offensive British Military Operations to Syria', *The Guardian*, 26 November 2015.

[61] Ibid.

[62] 'David Cameron's full statement'.

[63] Gaskarth, Jamie, 'Strategizing Britain's Role in the World', *International Affairs* 90, no. 3 (2014): 559–581.

[64] Gilligan, Andrew, 'RAF bomb raids in Syria dismissed as 'non-event'', *The Telegraph*, 2 January 2016.

Britain could be perceived as Learning from its Mistakes in minimising civilian casualties, but despite this is still being Led Astray into wars it should keep out of.

Finally, the Syrian intervention also fits the story of Britain the Selfish Imperialist. Through this interpretive lens, Syria is just another example of a Middle Eastern country that either has oil, or is next to Iraq that does, and so Britain's involvement is just a continuation of Western attempts to control strategic resources for its own ends. Moreover, the government's emphasis on Brimstone could be interpreted as reflecting the desire to perpetuate the arms trade. As with all these interpretations, whether this corresponds to reality is irrelevant; the idea that war is 'fought for oil' provides many with a common-sense explanation for Britain's involvement whether notable resources are at stake or not.

Despite the ease with which these narratives enable citizens to make sense of the Syrian intervention, it is not claimed that these stories are universally applicable to all wars Britain has ever fought. Like all narratives, they are a product of a particular time and place. The Led Astray narrative is particularly applicable to the conflicts related to the War on Terror. It is clearly less relevant to conflicts such as the Falklands, where Britain acted independently. Still, national stories rarely experience dramatic shifts. They can do in moments of crisis, but it is more likely that new events are incorporated into existing narratives rather than new ones being created from scratch.[65]

Brexit, Britain, and future war

The 'Brexit' vote is a sufficiently historic occurrence that it might engender a new narrative about Britain's role in the world, with direct implications for defence policy. Again though, the general stories identified here can help make sense of how British citizens interpret the past and anticipate the future. The rationale for Brexit is strongly underpinned by the exceptionalist assumption that Britain is better off alone, as evidenced by the fact that it has always Punched Above its Weight in comparison to others. Consequently, this is likely to remain a prominent lens through which British defence policy is understood. For those who see the EU as the cause of Britain becoming a Vanishing Force, leaving may well be seen as the country Learning from its Mistakes, particularly if it is accompanied by increased military investment. Conversely, those who currently see Britain as Learning from its Mistakes in leading the world towards peace may shift their perspective to that of the Vanishing Force narrative if diminished economic and diplomatic clout undermines Britain's ability to fulfil a peace-making role. If leaving the EU leads Britain closer to the US to compensate for an inevitable reduction in influence in Europe, then the Led Astray narrative may remain prominent. Meanwhile the Selfish Imperialist narrative is likely to persist whenever the government embarks on subsequent military interventions, not least because it is hard to prove that there are not ulterior economic motives for doing so.

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[65] Subotić, Jelena, 'Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12 (2015): 610-627.

Overall, military interventionism has been shown to be an important element of British national identity for both political elites and the public.[66] It would therefore be unsurprising if policymakers sought to compensate for any diminution in economic and diplomatic position with increased military activism. This suggests the enduring rhetorical appeal of the Punching Above its Weight narrative, even as the gap widens between Britain's intent and military capabilities.[67] As King suggests, Britain may no longer be able to punch above its weight, but it can still maintain its sense of identity by talking above it, however strategically unsound this may be.[68] Whatever happens, with British citizens still viewing the military as the country's greatest source of international influence,[69] it is a crucial element in Britain's future international role. Studying the stories the public tell about the military potentially provides valuable insights into the future that domestic citizens want or expect their country to have.

Qualitative narrative analysis: an additional Strategic Communications methodology

The second way this research is valuable for strategic communicators is that it demonstrates a ground-up, narrative-specific method to understand how different target audiences interpret war. Mackay and Tatham have recently emphasised the importance of Target Audience Analysis (TAA), which aims to provide a comprehensive, bottom-up understanding of specific population groups.[70] It does so using three levels: a third tier of remote, open source research on the target population; a second tier of primary research but which is 'scientifically unverified'; and a primary tier of deductive, hypothesis-tested research considered to be 'by far the most useful' aspect of the process.[71]

TAA's ground-up approach is undoubtedly a valuable means to understand audiences more directly. However, it is suggested here that its second tier of primary research may be more significant than its authors imply. This is particularly the case when dealing with narratives, which rest on interpretation and not verifiable fact. Hypotheses do not arise from nowhere; they rest on existing understanding derived inductively using more open-ended methods. The qualitative narrative analysis employed here may not, in Tatham's words, follow a 'scientifically verified deductive methodology'.[72] Nonetheless, it provides a systematic means to identify the range of stories told about a given issue across a certain population.

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[66] Ritchie, Nick, "A Citizen's View of 'National Interest", in Edmunds, Timothy, Jamie Gaskarth, and Robin Porter (eds.), *British Foreign Policy and the National Interest : Identity, Strategy and Security*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 85-101.

[67] Fry, Robert, 'Smart Power and the Strategic Deficit', *The Royal United Services Institute Journal* 159, no. 6 (2014): 28–32.

[68] King, Anthony, *Who Governs Britain?*, (London: Penguin, 2015).

[69] According to the 2015 Chatham House-YouGov survey, a plurality (38%) of the public saw the military as doing most to serve British interests abroad. See Raines, Thomas, *Internationalism or Isolationism? The Chatham House-YouGov Survey: British Attitudes Towards the UK's International Priorities*, (London: Chatham House, 2015), pg. 25.

[70] Mackay and Tatham, *Behavioural Conflict*.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Tatham, 'Target Audience Analysis', pg. 53.

Doing so provides a greater depth of understanding of how people interpret the world than closed surveys or polls do.[73]

Undertaking narrative interviews among a target population is undoubtedly labour-intensive. Nonetheless, since the aim at this stage is to grasp the full range of narratives rather than statistically determine their prevalence among the population, the number of interviews can be kept relatively small by interviewing until the point of data saturation. Having elicited these stories, they can then be deployed in quantitative research on a much larger scale to see how factors such as age, gender, ethnicity or socio-economic classification affect which stories are most significant to a given population. Extending this study, it would be particularly interesting to compare how English, Welsh, Scottish, and Northern Irish citizens interpret Britain's wars. More generally though, the method is applicable for research into both domestic and foreign audiences on a variety of issues. If strategic communicators are genuinely interested in narrative as a specific form of communication, rather than simply coordinating messaging in any format, then understanding the stories told by target audiences is crucial, whatever the issue.

Concluding Remarks

Finally, this paper has investigated the narrative genres British citizens use to explain their country's role in war. In the process it has sought to demonstrate the benefits a ground-up, narrative-specific approach can provide to researchers in strategic communication. Such methods reflect the need for strategic communicators not just to understand civilian audiences in conflict theatres, but domestic populations too. Moreover, if it is assumed that humans understand the world using stories, then attempts to persuade should begin with the stories they already use to interpret the world.

Studying individual citizens' narratives directly does not only deepen our understanding of how people interpret war; it reduces the likelihood that citizens' views will be misread. As Kull and Destler explain, policymakers have frequently assumed that a reasonable indication of the public mood can be derived from a combination of media representations and opinion polls.[74] However, the utility of both as indicators of the views of the population has been thrown into question by recent events. The 2015 British general election, the 'Brexit' vote and the US presidential election all confounded pollsters' predictions. Meanwhile, each campaign generated concerns that some mainstream media organisations in Britain such as the BBC were overly neutral, while social media fosters echo-chambers in which people experience increasingly biased media coverage, making it harder to access them with alternative, and in some cases more truthful, perspectives. These make direct attempts to understand public views seem more pressing than ever.

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[73] Herbst, Susan, *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View the Democratic Process*, (London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[74] Kull, Steven and Irving Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism*, (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

While the focus here has been on British public interpretations of war, useful insights would also be gained through comparisons with other countries. Stories are always likely to be culture-specific, particularly in the events, analogies, heroes, and villains people choose. Nevertheless, the discourses underpinning them, such as liberalism, Marxism, or nationalism, lend themselves to certain genres more than others. Different nations may therefore tell similar narratives, but the turning points in their plots may differ. A Learning from its Mistakes narrative in China might involve avoiding the 'century of humiliation' that the country suffered under imperialism. In Britain it may mean learning to use military force more judiciously; in Germany it might involve avoiding using military force at all.

This cross-cultural understanding is particularly important given that present and future military interventions are likely to be coalition based. As the ISAF campaign in Afghanistan showed, strategic narrative coordination across coalition members is exceptionally difficult. But as long as strategic communicators seek to use narratives to persuade, they will be better informed by direct study of the stories citizens already use to understand the world.

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