



The Asymmetric Battlefield Where No Shots Are Fired: How a Hoax Becomes “Truth” by Inertia

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We might call it the "sixth domain": Air, Land, Sea, Space, Cyber, and... **Perception.**

A battlefield where weapons are not needed, but **continuous narratives**. Where territory is not conquered, but **attention**. Where the aim is not to destroy the enemy, but to **confuse them**.

And it is precisely today, in an informational ecosystem made up of **social networks, quick scrolls, sensational headlines**, and minimal context, that this strategy finds fertile ground and multiplies its effects.

Welcome to cognitive warfare.

From disinformation to “truth by inertia”

A false news story, considered in isolation, rarely passes a fact check. The problem arises when the information is **partial, distorted, or simplified**, but constructed to appear plausible and

especially **repeatable**. It is a technique that works on the fine line between “false” and “not true”, making the latter progressively acceptable and, over time, perceived as plausible.

If the same message is reiterated over time, crosses different platforms, and gradually loses its context, its status changes. **It does not become true in an objective sense, but it becomes, indeed, accepted.**

Repetition generates **familiarity**, familiarity reduces the **critical threshold**, and what is no longer questioned ends up being perceived as an **acquired fact**. It is not a demonstrated truth, but rather a **truth by inertia**, which asserts itself not by argumentative force, but by simple persistence.

This mechanism is well known to communication and social psychology scholars, and increasingly relevant in the military field, where controlling the narrative can produce effects comparable to those of a kinetic action.

When numbers without context become narrative

In contemporary public debate, the **quantity of messages** has often replaced the **quality of information**. The simplest, most emotional, and repeated content tends to prevail over the more accurate but complex one. It is not about convincing in the classic sense of the term, but rather about **wearing down**: wearing down those who verify, those who argue, those who try to introduce numbers, proportions, and context.

In the long run, **noise becomes louder than data**, and the discussion shifts from the level of facts to that of perceptions. It is a dynamic that closely resembles the principles of saturation: not every message needs to be correct, it is enough for the informational environment to be filled to the point of marginalizing any attempt at rational analysis.

One of the most effective tools of cognitive warfare is the selective use of numbers. **Real data, but decontextualized**, can support deeply misleading theses. An absolute value, if presented without comparative or operational references, can appear as a scandal, suggest an anomaly, or fuel indignation. Placed in the correct context, it often tells a completely different story.

Another weapon, amplified by social media, is the use of “credible” visual content to build unfounded conclusions: true image, false narrative. **Maps, screenshots, graphs, or satellite images** can be real and technically plausible, but cropped, altered, or presented without

explanation, to the point of suggesting causalities that do not exist. The advantage is always the same: **perception is formed in seconds, while verification takes time**. When content goes viral, the denial almost always comes later, and with a much weaker impact.

The problem is that **context takes time**, while the narrative is immediate. In an informational ecosystem that rewards speed and simplification, the isolated data becomes a narrative weapon, capable of guiding collective judgment before a thorough evaluation is possible.

The battlefield where no shots are fired: when a hoax alters collective perception and becomes “truth”

True images, false narrative: after Hurricane Helene, altered or decontextualized radar/satellite images circulated on social media, used to claim that HAARP (High-frequency Active Auroral Research Program, research program in Alaska) had “modified” the weather and manipulated the hurricane. Messages of this type exploit fear and uncertainty to shape perception before explanations based on verified data and established scientific assessments emerge.

The target is not reality, but perception

In this scenario, **it is not about establishing what is true**, but **what is perceived as such**. It is a crucial distinction because perception drives consensus, trust in institutions, the credibility of expertise, and, by reflection, political and strategic choices.

A famous phrase effectively summarizes it: *“in times of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.”* But in the contemporary informational environment, this **is no longer enough**: the truth must also manage to be heard, emerge from the noise, and navigate through fragmented communication, often dominated by simplifications and emotional reactions.

The phenomenon is not new. **Hannah Arendt**, one of the most influential philosophers and political theorists of the twentieth century, observed while analyzing the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century that the effectiveness of propaganda did not lie so much in the lie itself, but in making the distinction between true and false irrelevant. When everything appears debatable, **reality loses authority and truth ceases to be a shared reference**.

Umberto Eco, on the occasion of receiving an honorary degree from the University of Turin in 2015, described a similar dynamic, drawing attention to the disappearance of filters between competence and visibility in the public space. Not ignorance itself, but its **indiscriminate amplification** contributes to an informational context where noise prevails over knowledge, reinforcing the effects of cognitive warfare.

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Hannah Arendt (in the background) analyzed power not only as a coercive force but as a construction of consensus, showing how totalitarian regimes do not just lie, but tend to make the distinction between true and false irrelevant, to the point of weakening the very authority of reality - Copyright The Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities

When perception becomes an operational factor

According to NATO's framework, the starting point is the **Information Environment**, understood as the entirety of information, actors, individuals, organizations, and systems that produce, receive, and disseminate it, as well as the **physical, virtual, and cognitive** spaces in which these interactions occur, as defined in the allied doctrine on Information Operations ([AJP-3.10](#)).

In this framework, **Strategic Communications (StratCom)** does not coincide with “communication” in the media sense, but represents an **integrated approach** aimed at ensuring coherence and alignment between narratives, messages, and actions, fully integrating them into the planning process and effect evaluation, in line with NATO's approach to strategic communication and the “effects-based approach.”

Information Operations (Info Ops) instead operate as a **staff function**, ensuring the coordination and synchronization of informational activities in support of the commander's objectives, within the Information Environment, as provided by [AJP-3.10.1](#).

It is in this context that the **cognitive dimension** assumes a decisive role: not because it replaces action in traditional domains, but because it directly influences the outcomes, as highlighted by the most recent debate developed in the **Strategic Communications NATO-affiliated** field, which emphasizes the relationship between perception, legitimacy, and the production of effects in the long term ([Defence Strategic Communications, Vol. 16, Autumn 2025](#)).

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Structured Analytic Techniques (ADAPT): scheme used in NATO to support the analysis of the Information Environment, with particular attention to the cognitive dimension and effects on perception and decision-making process - Source: Defence Strategic Communications, NATO

A structurally asymmetric "domain"

Cognitive warfare is by nature **asymmetric**. **Those who simplify enjoy an immediate advantage; those who verify are slower; those who explain lose attention; those who shout gain visibility.**

Defending oneself requires a constant effort of **mental discipline, critical spirit, and the ability to accept complexity.**

Essential qualities in the military field, but little rewarded in the attention economy.

Action in this scenario **does not produce visible rubble**, but **erosion**. It erodes trust in facts, the distinction between opinion and data, the collective ability to evaluate reality rationally. When a hoax becomes “truth” by inertia, it no longer needs to be defended: **it self-sustains, circulates, and normalizes.**

At that point, the battle is no longer fought on the information plane, but on the much more fragile one of **collective perception.**

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