Understanding the Modern Battle for Influence

Cognitive warfare represents a powerful evolution in conflict, where the battlefield extends beyond physical spaces to the minds and perceptions of individuals and societies, says **Alex Bomberg**

Unlike conventional warfare, which relies on physical combat, cognitive warfare uses strategies to influence, deceive, and control the thoughts, beliefs, and behaviours of its targets. It exploits psychological vulnerabilities, capitalises on digital media, and manipulates narratives to destabilise societies and influence political outcomes.

Key tactics in this domain include influence operations, operational psychology, and deceptive imagery persuasion – each a calculated approach to subtly reshape reality in the minds of its targets.

Influence operations are central to cognitive warfare. They involve deploying strategic narratives, manipulating facts, and employing persuasive techniques to sway public opinion, reinforce divisions, and manipulate behavior. The goals can vary, from influencing electoral outcomes to creating public distrust in government institutions; influence operations aim to destabilise societies by targeting social cohesion and trust. Election interference is an influence tool.

Election interference is one of the most concerning forms of influence operations, used by state and non-state actors alike. Through disinformation, fake news, and the amplification of polarising content on social media, election interference manipulates the electorate to favour certain candidates or simply sows confusion. For example, tactics in election interference may include disinformation campaigns – false or misleading information is spread to undermine confidence in the electoral process. This can be seen through fake news stories, manipulated images, or rumours targeting specific parties or candidates. Another tool used is social media manipulation – bots and fake accounts amplify divisive content to influence public debate. By pushing inflammatory posts and comments, manipulators create a false perception of widespread support or opposition, which can influence real-life behaviours and beliefs.

On the other hand, operational psychology uses behavioural science to design and implement strategies

that influence emotions, perceptions, and actions. By understanding how people respond to certain stimuli, cognitive warriors use psychology to create emotional connections, exploit cognitive biases, and manipulate group dynamics. In cognitive warfare, operational psychology employs various psychological techniques:

■ **Emotion-Based Messaging:** Messaging that triggers fear, anger, or empathy can drive specific actions. For example, campaigns using images and stories that emphasise danger or victimisation often induce fear, making people more susceptible to influence.

■ **Exploitation of Cognitive Biases:** Cognitive biases, like confirmation bias, make people more likely to believe information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs. Influence campaigns exploit these biases by targeting audiences with content that reinforces their perspectives, deepening ideological divides and making it difficult for individuals to objectively assess information.

■ **Behavioural Conditioning:** Through repeated exposure to specific narratives, people become conditioned to believe certain viewpoints or accept particular behaviours. This is often achieved by steadily escalating rhetoric over time, leading individuals to accept progressively more radical ideas.

Meanwhile, Deceptive Imagery Persuasion (DIP) uses altered or misleading visuals to shape beliefs and perceptions. Visuals are particularly potent because they are often trusted more than text-based information and are shared widely on social media. In cognitive warfare, DIP manipulates audiences by crafting visuals that appear authentic but contain false or misleading information. There are several key techniques in DIP, including deepfake technology, such as videos that use AI to create hyper-realistic but entirely fake footage of individuals. These videos can depict people saying or doing things they never did, undermining their credibility or creating damaging narratives. Deepfakes are especially troubling because they can target political figures, public personalities, or even ordinary individuals, eroding trust in media authenticity.

False Context Imagery is another example of DIP. Occasionally, individuals utilise authentic images out of context to propagate a misleading message. For instance, a photo from a past protest may be presented as occurring in the present, suggesting that unrest is ongoing. This technique is especially common in protests or conflict zones, where it can quickly mislead and inflame audiences.

DIP also includes symbolic visual manipulation, where certain images evoke strong symbolic associations. For example, using national symbols in altered imagery can invoke patriotism, nostalgia, or anger. This tactic has been employed to inspire nationalist sentiments or rally public support around controversial policies.

The digital environment is a catalyst for cognitive warfare. The digital landscape has amplified the potential for cognitive warfare, making it more accessible and less costly. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube offer high visibility, wide reach, and the ability to segment audiences. Algorithms favour content that provokes strong reactions, often prioritising sensational or controversial information over balanced discussions. Echo chambers arise as a result, repeatedly exposing individuals to similar viewpoints, reinforcing their beliefs, and increasing their susceptibility to influence operations.

The influence of cognitive warfare is profound and far-reaching, affecting not only individual beliefs but also societal trust and cohesion. One significant consequence is the erosion of trust in institutions; repeated exposure to disinformation, conspiracy theories, and polarising content weakens trust in government institutions, media, and even scientific authorities. This erosion undermines the foundational structures of democracy, making it increasingly difficult for societies to function cohesively. Additionally, cognitive warfare promotes divisive narratives that foster distrust and hostility among groups, leading to heightened social polarisation. This division destabilises communities and can escalate to increased civil unrest, particularly when combined with economic or social stressors. Furthermore, cognitive warfare poses a direct threat to democratic processes by manipulating public opinion through disinformation. When individuals lose trust in information, they find it difficult to make informed decisions, participate in meaningful debates, or hold leaders accountable, which undermines the fundamental principles of democracy.

Addressing the threat of cognitive warfare requires comprehensive strategies that involve governments, technology companies, and civil society. One key measure is enhancing media literacy through programs that teach individuals to recognise disinformation, analyse sources, and verify information. By educating the public on how to identify manipulation and understand cognitive warfare tactics, these initiatives help reduce susceptibility to influence. Fact-checking and content moderation are also crucial, with social media platforms employing automated detection tools and manual review teams to flag false information and curb the spread of manipulated or divisive content. Since cognitive warfare is a transnational threat, international collaboration is essential; governments, cybersecurity agencies, and international bodies like NATO and the EU are working together to share intelligence, establish standards, and co-ordinate counter-cognitive warfare efforts. Additionally, some experts call for greater transparency in social media algorithms, advocating for public oversight of the content promotion mechanisms that drive influence operations.

Cognitive warfare signifies a significant transformation in conflict management, shifting the focus from physical environments to the minds and beliefs of individuals. Using techniques like influence operations, operational psychology, and deceptive imagery persuasion, cognitive warfare reshapes perceptions, destabilises societies, and undermines democratic processes. To counteract these tactics, societies must improve media literacy, regulate digital platforms, and promote international co-operation. As cognitive warfare evolves, identifying and countering its strategies will be essential for safeguarding open societies and maintaining the integrity of democratic institutions.

By acknowledging and addressing the insidious nature of cognitive warfare, nations can better prepare to defend against the manipulation of minds and preserve the resilience of democratic values.

Author

ALEX BOMBERG *is the Group CEO of Intelligent (UK Holdings) Limited group of companies. He is a Fellow of the Institute of Strategic Management and a Member of the Security Institute*