

Perspectives of warfare: a journey with penguins

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Understanding the complexities of our modern information-based environment is now fundamental to the success in warfighting and navigating the fog of war. Conversely, the use of traditional information paradigms can lead to unwitting co-option of the adversaries' plan or world view. We must consider that concepts of reality, truth, and what is right inherently does not completely align amongst different actors and groups. With this understanding, we can build resilience and anti-fragility in our decision-making and analysis.

Through all levels of warfare from the tactical to strategic, we perform **actions** based on **decisions**, which are based on **knowledge**, which are based on the **information** at hand – all mixed in with prior experience. This can exist in a microcosm such as an air surveillance operator rapidly characterising an unknown track as a threat and all the way up to a star ranking officer making a well-considered decision. Agnostic of *how* these decisions are made; or *how* the battle space is understood – there are many hazards inherent in this information environment, which must be considered in order to gain the intellectual edge.

Think of a penguin. Do you realise that each of our understanding of penguins is unique, and differs wildly from other people? Recent research has shown that common nouns can 'invoke dozens of distinct concepts in individuals' mind' (Marti, et al, 2023) and Makin (2023) related this finding to discrepant views or concepts of penguins. With this notion, let us apply this concept to understand the infosphere, battlespace, and how to interpret information needed to make a decision or take action.

To help us navigate this process, let us first define the jargon, *epistemic relativism*. Simply put, *epistemology* refers to how we *know* or *understand*. On the other hand, *relativism* considers that this knowledge or understanding is ultimately subjective and that everyone has a different interpretation of the same "facts".¹ One must also be cautious to not conflate understanding with agreeing. Put less simply, *epistemic relativism* proposes that the normal way in which we think as individuals as to what constitutes knowledge, truth, (Factual Relativism, 2023) a legitimate thought, and therefore justification for your decision – is all subjective, different, therefore resulting in multiple versions of reality. This is exacerbated by our inherent cognitive biases, the context we find ourselves, and the environmental and genetic history of how our brains came to be wired in our own unique way (Baghramian & Cater, 2020).

Throughout this article, let us consider how *epistemic relativism* complicates our ability to

¹ To some degree, this article adopts a social constructivist/postmodernist lens, which by its nature lends to vagueness in interpretability. However, this article does not negate predominate interpretations of global affairs such as realism, but rather offers an alternate viewpoint on the matter.

understand our operating environment: to fight a war or win a war. Before we proceed, let us pause at idea that we, in Defence, are all cool headed-rational killing machines in our profession of arms; marching in lockstep and following command intent to the letter; and ultimately all fighting in pursuit of a common goal. Now, with our basic understanding of *epistemic relativism*, let us play around with this idea and go on a journey through multiple dimensions including explorations of space-time vectors, entropy and randomness, and the intersubjective.

Who controls the penguin?

The French philosopher Michel Foucault disagreed with some traditional occidental military doctrinal concepts of centralised command and control, with the requisite obsequious decentralised methods of execution through the employment of mission command (Australian Defence Force, 2021). Considering that 'knowledge is power' (Bacon, 1597), and that such knowledge gained from information is relative to another (that is subjective and different), Foucault argued that power is everywhere (diffuse) and pervasive in the style of Bentham's Panopticon (Foucault, 1991, pp. 201-202; Foucault, 1994, p. 58), and not the sole purview of our senior decision makers. More so, *effective* power could be conceived as bottom-up (Koopman, 2017), which is an idea that is well known in the concept of the strategic Corporal (Liddy, 2005) as having a larger degree to affective agency.

What does the penguin look like?

Both Eastern and Western warfare have long acknowledged the inherent 'Fog of War' (Clausewitz, 1909/2006), including the impact of the inherent confusion and chaos in warfare (Tzu, 221BCE/2009) on planning and decision-making. We can all agree then that these are not foreign concepts. However, as fallible humans, we seem to consistently be surprised by planned actions and unplanned events. This is exacerbated by the ability to correctly identify then orient towards any significant event. Nicholas Taleb's (2007) approach is to embrace this randomness, lay supine and allow for anti-fragility (Taleb, 2012) to protect us from threats and rapid exploitation of opportunities in order to gain the advantage. Perhaps this is an adequate response to the relativistic, random, and entropic nature of the information environment.

Where is the penguin?

It is easy to conceive of knowledge as residing within the traditional spatial war fighting domains of the air, maritime, land, and space domains with some of degree of overlap when we throw in the term 'integrated' or 'joint'. However, it must be noted that the depth of this knowledge is limited by those who are not familiar with their own domain. Agnostic of these geographic domains, the understanding of an event becomes increasingly diffuse in proportion to the distance from the original source. To pursue the truth, think of the preference to go back to and interpret the primary, rather than the secondary or tertiary sources of information. Two adversary infantry fighters operating in an isolated battlefield may shoot and injure the other, but the broader impact to the overall fight may be minor. Conversely, chaos theory driven by our interconnected information environment creates a catalyst for rapid scalability, where actions or information may alter the outcome of a war.

How big is the penguin?

There are two interesting perspectives on the previous point. From one perspective, limited or isolated data points can morph in to a 'Wikipedia' type of information, which is akin to Frankenstein's monster, whereby piecemeal data is collected along the way from different sources resulting in something greater than (and deviant from) the original source. An example is illustrated in a novel by Evelyn Waugh (1938, pp. 226, 240), where a foreign correspondent sends a succinct and befuddled news report via telegram to the head news office, which then turns the story in to multiple pages of 'news'. Similarly, a single data point from a sole source

could constitute a multi-page intelligence report. This creates single or few coherent narratives and a greater sense of shared knowledge. From a converse perspective, our critical thinking skills could be bypassed by the deluge of information (Connell, 2014), which gets co-opted and distilled in to a simple headline or 30 second video leading to the creation of disconnected echo chambers (Brown, et al, 2022). Conversely, this creates multiple and individually curated loci of knowledge of limited utility beyond an atomised context.

We thought of the same penguin!

Scaling this concept up to the level of a group, we encounter the concept of intersubjective realities where a commonly agreed idea is meshed in with some sort of sociological construct such as a country, military force, or community (Anderson, 2016). Irrespective of the characteristics, location, or scale of knowledge, there are conceptual frameworks, which can be shared, shaped, and acted upon by groups of people (possibly most effective at ~150 people – the unit level (Dunbar, 1992)). Note, however, that as Freud (1922) succinctly identified, a group has no critical faculty,² and is highly pliant to biases and irrationality. Think here of the bond you feel and experiences you share with your local football team, political party, military unit, or family.

Transforming the penguin.

This is where propaganda enters the fore. Walter Lippmann (1921) was a proponent of *relativistic epistemology* and understood how subjective, complex, and mercurial is the world's information environment. His answer to such subjectivity was to create a pseudo-reality through mass media that could manufacture the consent of the masses in pursuit of the public interest in a democratic society (Lippman, 1921). In this way, the end of the World War 1 was celebrated after the arrival of the news five days before the real armistice – meanwhile, several thousands have died on the battlefields (Lippman, 1921). Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays (1923), elevated this theory in to the realm of action whereby the monopoly of knowledge through propaganda could shape collective thought and action, particularly in the engineering of consent (Bernays, 1928, p. 11) to garner public support in matters such as war.

Is my penguin real?

Propaganda could result in the inability for people to distinguish between what is real and what is fiction (or what has been manufactured by one of Bernays' 'Others'). People in a collective shared consciousness can now conceive of a reality more real than reality itself – a hyper-reality (Baudrillard, 1981), where people are confused between what is real, what people agree is real, and what is a mere representation of such pseudo-reality. We've just encountered the spectre of military disinformation and misinformation (false information spread with or without intent respectively). Peeking down the rabbit hole further, this hyper-reality doesn't necessarily have to be based on a real event or information (Wright, 2004; Eco, 1986). Furthermore, this *manufactured* reality can end up being more real and truthful than what was originally conceived especially if it is acted upon and decisions are made. In a military context, think of reactions to deception jamming such as when Hitler believed in Operation Mincemeat or alliances being forged on constructed and "shared" ideologies or national interests.

Let the penguins fight

Let us now scale up this concept one last time, and put multiple intersubjective conceptions

² "A group is extraordinarily credulous and open to influence, it has no critical faculty, and the improbable does not exist for it. It thinks in images, which call one another up by association (just as they arise with individuals in states of free imagination), and whose agreement with reality is never checked by any reasonable function" (Freud, 1922, p. 15) .

of reality against one another using the slogan of the previous Defence white paper (Australian Defence Force, 2020): *shape, deter, and respond*.

Shape

We have already explored how our knowledge and understanding of an operating environment can be shaped. This phase can be largely placed in the context of peacetime operations, whereby multiple intersubjective penguins are tussling for influence in the realm of competing narratives (Sohail, 2022). Here, it is not just good enough to convince your own group of your cause, such as through historical education or appeals to ethno-cultural homogeneity. The ability to grow the size of your intersubjective reality enables one to gain legitimacy and motivation for a certain cause. Think in this instance of support for normative international behaviour such as in the maritime space; the forging of security alliances; and votes supporting proposals at the United Nations.

Deter

The issues emerging of dissimilar penguins (intersubjective realities) begin to manifest in some encounters between these versions of reality, often based on completely different motives. For example, the realm of intelligence is characterised by high degrees of uncertainty and active attempts to conceal and obfuscate the truth for its protection. Therefore, attempts of deterrence by all parties may be predicated on false premises, leading to inadequate courses of action, and poor planning. This is difficult to test in reality if you have an adequate conception of your own penguin, and a partial or fabricated conception of the other. These cognitive 'unknowns' are often filled in with readily-available conceptions of our own familiar penguin, or simply fabricated entirely. Then we prepare to act on this. As is evident, this results in multiple truths where we behave in pursuit of a version, with reciprocally act based on another. This is most evident in territorial claims within the South China Sea. Is legitimacy relevant if the major threat actor ignores it?

Respond

Once the balloon goes up, the more relevant question is: are we even fighting the same war? Against the same opponent? Or in pursuit of the same end state for the same incentives? The much repeated aphorism that 'no plan survives first contact with the enemy' (Quoteresearch, 2021) is indicative of how realities can instantly be fractured and altered. It is worth noting that a response, which may be in one's own national interest or military objectives, may also be manufactured to be in the interest of the other. Moreover, using a quantum and chaos-theory lens, once a reality is observed, a decision or action may change which again recursively changes the nature of reality itself; morphing it into something new and affecting the systems that it resides in.

All of the above makes one wonder what control an actor really has on their environment, and may make one feel a bit nihilistic. On the contrary, this should not form an excuse to enjoy lazy river water theme park ride buy letting the current float us down to the gift shop – that is be led down to some deterministic end-state. Recall, if this objective is not crafted by us, it can be co-opted by another.

Time to break up the war of the penguins.

In conclusion, it is time to propose some solutions to the dilemma of multiple truths, our strategic Corporal, and the disorienting information environment.

Firstly, the ability to capture and then control a given narrative, movement, or ideology is a powerful mechanism to control and subsume multiple realities in the direction of a chosen objective. In the West, we have explored how there are well-established mechanisms through which to achieves this, including the modern leveraging of behavioural economic science in

advertising. The East may have an advantage of a more controlled and coherent version of reality, due to an emphasis on a relational rather than individualistic-minded culture. However, note that this again may be another example of a hyper-reality manufactured by the West (Said, 1978, p. 3).

Secondly, it is imperative that there is an increased understanding of other realities, which will reduce the likelihood of miscalculation or inadvertent escalation. This includes empathetic education on other world-views to increase perspective and understand culture, which could drive incentives. Simply put, this entails being able to step in to someone else's shoes and understand (but not always agree with) why someone may want to undertake a certain course of action.

Finally, the application of *Bayesian epistemology* (Lin, 2022) in reaction to the fog of war, uncertainty, and competing narratives can potentially mitigate the quantum observer effect, whereby our predictions and actions are constantly updated to ensure that plans, decisions, and courses of action are ever-mutating and evolving in direct responses to changes in the operating environment. The latter solution is at odds with contemporary military planning where ideas often sit on the shelf and rapidly atrophy in relevance; or whereby decision makers make predictable actions based on entrenched thought processes.

Thus, agility in thought and understanding of multiple realities is essential to success at all phases of war. Opportunities must be rapidly identified and exploited in order to gain the most fleeting of realities in so these can be shaped and controlled to a defined outcome.

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