

WHY RESPONDING IS LOSING:

The Plays We Run (and the Plays We Don't) to Defeat Disinformation

By Alan Kelly

ABSTRACT. Why are bad guys so good at spreading disinformation and good guys so bad at stopping it? Through the lens of a patented and tested framework, the Taxonomy of Influence Strategies, the author illustrates how policies and practices of response do more to accelerate than slow the deceptive and mistaken messages hostile actors sow. This essay is recommended reading for practitioners of strategic communications, public diplomacy, information operations, psyops and related fields of influence management.

With France's recent [report](#) that it engages in disinformation, media and think tanks have been quick to wag a finger. *The Washington Post* [urged](#) President Biden to avoid the slippery slope of offensive rhetorical warfare and The Aspen Institute [called](#) for a national response strategy to counter it. These were the echoes of repeating and principled pleas to take the high road in a low road game.¹

From the Pentagon to the CIA snickers might have been heard. Information after all is an essential munition in any state's arsenal, particularly today with the reach and resources of online media and the playing field it flattens. To join in games of perception without deception is like competing with half a playbook. Literally, as I'll explain.

Whether such things draw shock or stifled laughter the proliferation of disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, etc. renews questions of how democracies influence ethically. Should information and the certain guns that fire it be remade and muted to suit free society?

Should its uses be banned outright or at least limited for educational and defensive purposes? It's a tough sell because the weaponization of information can compromise principles of transparency and fair play.ⁱⁱ

When it comes to information the U.S. strategy and indeed that of most developed democratic countries has been to promote its power to protect a position than of its power to prosecute it. Consider the U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) whose [stated purpose](#) is "to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation." Whether at the hands of domestic or global actors the American script is that it shall respond to, not aggress, deceptive information and campaigns.

France, however, appears ready to play. It sees the advantages of information's inherent asymmetry and for its curiosity it will develop skills that meet bad actors on their asymmetric terms and understanding of how to enlist what in France's case is a celebrated and notably peaceable citizenry.

Used as a defensive function, can information win wars of words? In my experience, no. Not without an offensive component. We are fooling only ourselves to think so. Here is why:

From my perches in Silicon Valley and Washington, D.C., and through a score of global engagements in business, government and academia, I've systematically [researched and curated](#) a complete, practice-based taxonomy of the fundamental strategies that underlie influence (see figure 1). Details of its conception and evolution are detailed in my book, *The Elements of Influence*, and subsequent white papers.^{iii-iv}

Like chemistry's table of elements or biology's [phylogenetic tree](#) the ambition of the taxonomy is to identify, organize and characterize the most basic strategies of communications, marketing, media, military and government intelligence, politics, sales and other members of the influence industry.^v Its value is to give analysts, strategists, managers and commanders of information programming an objective and precise view of the typically invisible moves and motives that underly persuasion-based campaigns, not just the sentiment and messages we routinely mine to edify communicated content. For the purposes of stratcom and IO operatives, this model also reduces the plethora of [TTPs](#) (tactics, techniques and procedures) by distilling the strategies that underly non-kinetic conflict.

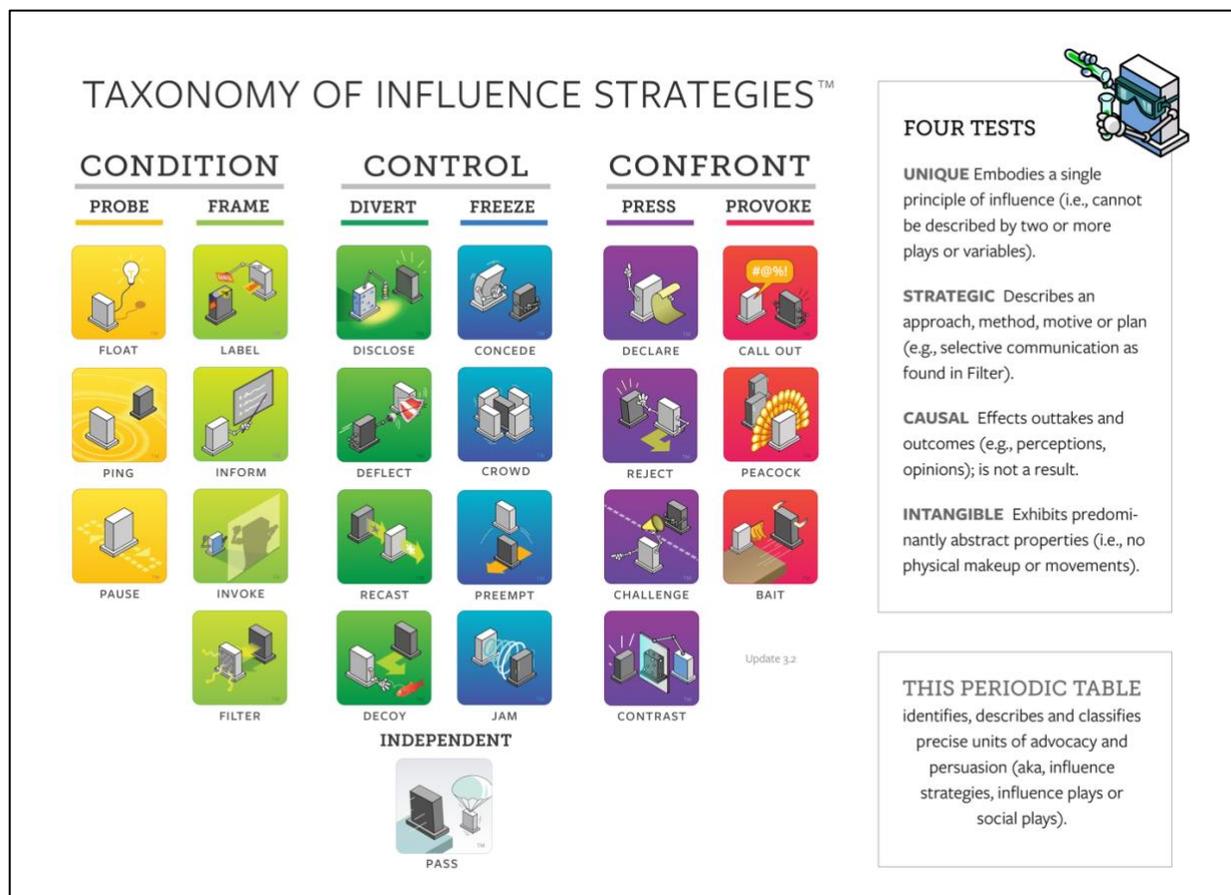


Figure 1. Developed with Fortune 100 companies, military units, and leading universities, the Taxonomy of Influence Strategies, above, is a first-of-a-kind ontology featuring 23 strategies observed in communications, finance, marketing, media, military and government intelligence, politics and sales across professions, governments, regions, customs and cultures. Shown is a revision (update 3.2) to the original framework.

There are myriad breeds of actors, inside and outside our borders, whose rhetoric and strategies aim to disinform. But there is one overarching characteristic these persuaders have in common: Their *plays* as described in figure 1 are designed to destabilize the agendas of others as much as to defend their own. Their game and mindset is offense. They are activists, exploring and employing all corners of the table.

For Democrats one such actor is former U.S. President Donald Trump whose frenetic use of influence plays *relies* on their participation of his rivals. His narratives are designed not simply to excite a restive political base but to infuriate and deliberately activate his opposition. My [blogs and essays](#), which detail Trump’s handiwork, suggest that counter-intuitive strategies of encouragement, not mainstream strategies of mitigation, could have and can still accelerate and suffocate his provocative



campaigns.^{vi} As such, Trump is an expert practitioner of the [Label](#), [Decoy](#), [Preempt](#), [Call Out](#), [Peacock](#) and [Bait](#)—plays from my taxonomy that are not usually run with the intent to respond to or counter pesky opponents.

For Western allies another actor is Russian President Vladimir Putin. Increasingly more like Sun Tzu than Clausewitz, Putin's plays also use resistance to achieve his political purposes. As illustrated in figure 2, [my analysis](#) with Dr. Christopher Paul, "Decoding Crimea: Pinpointing the Influence Strategies of Modern Information Warfare," suggests that the Putin regime is an improving, dynamic practitioner of hybrid warfare, particularly in the realms of information and influence.^{vii}

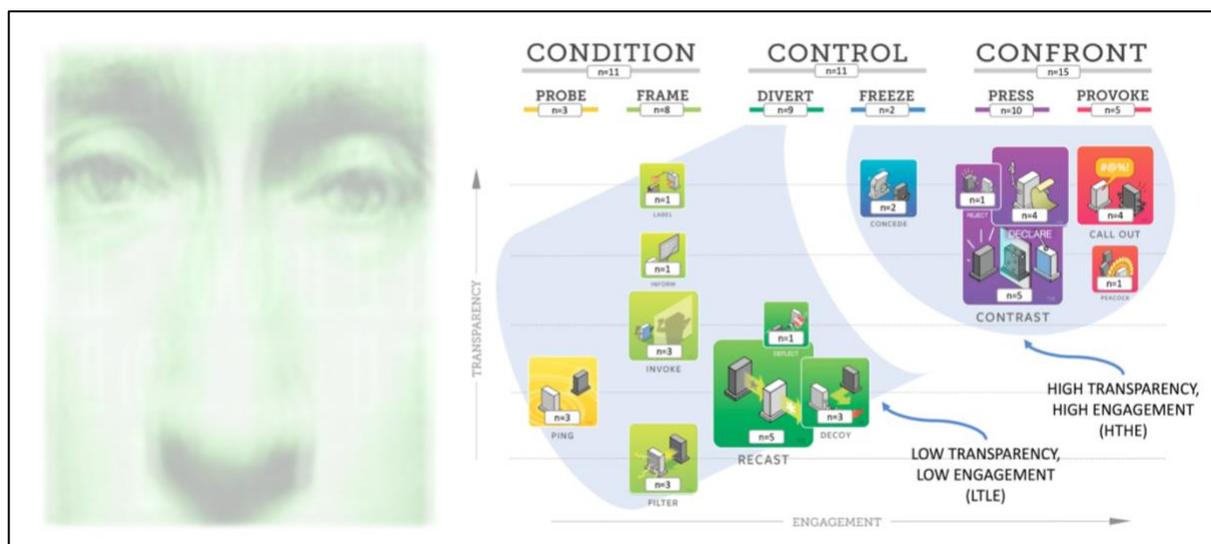


Figure 2. Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea was achieved in part through strategies of influence (aka "plays") that complemented a coordinated, conventional ground war. This analysis, published through the NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, reveals two constellations of plays by Russian planners—covert strategies that conditioned Western opponents (lower left) and, more predictably, others that confronted them with obvious intent (upper-right).

NINE PLAYS RESPONDERS RUN (SOMETIMES TOO MUCH)

Despite the rise of what might be called *managed information* or more colloquially *spinformation* there is in my experience a persistent preference to deal with it by reacting to it. In my private sector work this is due largely to the strength of lawyers whose obedience to case law and legal judgments deemphasizes public opinion and the comparatively weak communications and PR counterparts whose servitude to reputation tenets and social purpose deemphasize competitive advantage. In my more limited experience in the public sector I see similar behaviors. In any case, the result is what I observe to be a widely held and misguided instinct to disengage from or minimize competitive actors and their influence programs, particularly the activists and terrorists (foreign and domestic, state and non-state) that are keen to disrupt companies and governments.

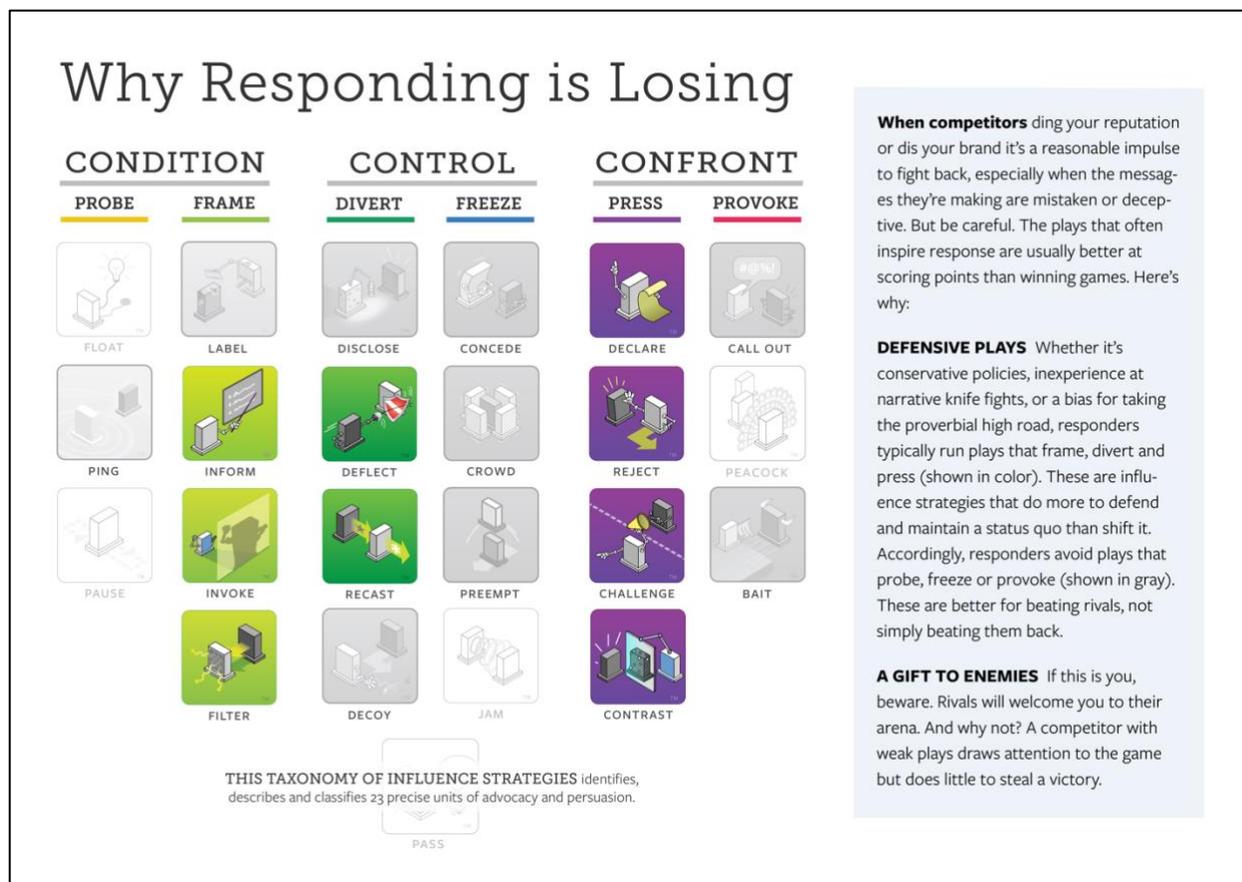


Figure 3. Shown in color against the Taxonomy of Influence Strategies are nine of 23 plays that are typically employed to meet and mitigate competitive influence programs and operations. Despite their popularity, this subset is notably defensive and often helpful to rival actors. Shown in gray are nine other plays that are often ignored by responding players but more capable of creating and maintaining strategic advantage in narrative conflicts.

As shown in figure 3, there are nine plays that responders and prone to run. Each has its merits, but as a group they constitute a conservative playbook that in my view *increases* risk. Because they are cautious, they only bend and blunt a hostile operation and, sometimes worse, provide enough resistance to stoke instead of starve an enemy's agenda. In short, responsive players are an enemy's best friend because they serve as a useful foil.

Below are brief summaries of these influence strategies with insights and examples to illustrate their downsides. Further insight into each of these influence plays can be found in *Standard Guidance*, a resource of options and expert tips distributed across the online information cards of each of the 23 plays of the [online](#) taxonomy. These include risks, rewards, profiles of actors that employ each play, conditions for running, decoding, countering or complementing them, and case examples.



When you hear government officials reciting the benefits of COVID vaccinations you're witnessing a straight-faced framing strategy called Inform. And you know it's not working, certainly not for a large segment of resisters and vaccine deniers because the play is too easy to counter. It neither positions, re-positions nor de-positions. It relies on a target's willingness to be educated...and we know how that's going lately. See details of the Inform strategy [here](#).



Another member of the framing family is Invoke, the strategy most favored by advertisers, publicists and other storytellers because it attaches symbols, idols and emotions to the people and things they're selling. Think of the images of freedom that American truck brands "invoke" to communicate power and independence. It's usually a low-risk strategy, but when cited issues or ideas are too extreme the result can backfire. Consider how activists have attached all manner of peril to the problem of global warming and yet are failing to mobilize the masses. Their analogies are so out-sized as to be unrelatable. See details of the Invoke strategy [here](#).



As a response strategy, Filters are ever-present, mostly for the fact that the instinct to edit, consciously or otherwise, is endemic to advocacy. But this conditioning play is fraught with risk because it empowers a player to frame not simply state a truth. Unless the omission is inconsequential the play can do far more to damage the playcaller's credibility. Think of the fallen soldier who is honored for battlefield heroics but later found to have died by friendly fire. However tragic, the soldier's story is the victim of filtering. See details of the Filter strategy [here](#).

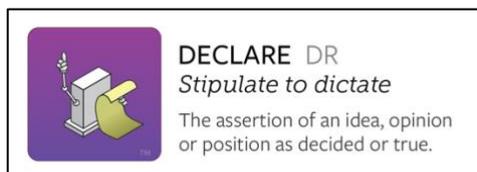


From teenagers to press secretaries, the diverting strategy called Deflect is also instinctive. And while it might buy a player time it commits them to an avenue whose return to truth can be circuitous at best. Imagine the embattled politico or celebrity whose rival has revealed their misdeed. It may be embarrassing, perhaps worth turning from, at least for a while. But imagine, too, the liberating, offensive potential of a confession. *Here's what actually happened* has far more power than *I can't recall*. See details of the Deflect strategy [here](#).



Another diverting play, the Recast, is similarly reflexive. When the point or agenda of an opponent needs to be repositioned it's a tempting play to run...and it's always a good look to the bosses. But Recasts can also promote a tit-for-tat that often produces rhetorical gridlock. More

important, Recasts can reek of spin. When an Eastern country eyes a western neighbor allies might warn of a wanton land grab. The Eastern story would be different of course. It would *recast* any annexation of a once-loyal proxy as reclamation of a native motherland. See details of the Recast strategy [here](#).



When a rival is effective yet inferior it's tempting for the bigger player to ignore it, perhaps by way of the play called [Pass](#). But when the punch lands, the pressing play called Declare often emerges principally because it has the patina of engagement but preserves a player's

authority, or tries to. Consider a government whose hate crime laws have been called into question by insignificant but vocal voters. The dictated response might be, *We have no tolerance for any acts of hate. We unequivocally respect all people, regardless of race, creed, color...* See details of the Declare strategy [here](#).



In as much as the play called Invoke joins two players, the strategy called Reject serves to separate them. When politicians sidle up to famous figures, they're borrowing notoriety to build their own. But if the object of their affection falls from grace, they'll be subject to the Reject,

the play that puts distance between what one player once thought was what or where they wanted to be. See details of the Reject strategy [here](#).



The play called Challenge is another strategy that confronts, though more polite and usually inclusive of player and playee. Religious leaders are given to this strategy when, for instance, they beseech their flocks, *Let us love one another*. Most Challenge plays are low risk but

suffer for that very fact: They are often carried out more for optics than results. See details of the Challenge strategy [here](#).

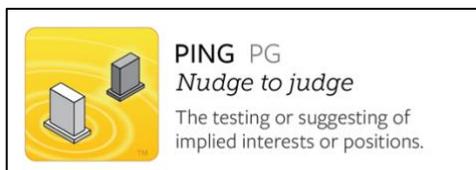


A fourth strategy that confronts, the Contrast, puts a premium on logic and history. Where it fails responders, however, is that the settings in which it's played can be driven more by emotion and the moment than facts and figures. Think of the pharmaceutical company whose

research requires the testing of dogs and rabbits; they are sure to be the target of animal rights activists. The Contrast is often the play of those who think they know better. It puts what's empirically true ahead of what's emotionally touchy. Though seemingly safe, it's the strategy that can do more to activate disinformation than diminish it. See details of the Contrast strategy [here](#).

NINE PLAYS RESPONDERS AVOID RUNNING (BUT SHOULDN'T)

So, what's the answer? Is it that we should abandon what I call *high-fit* strategies and take up those that are *high-friction*? Should we loosen our collective ethical belts and be more aggressive? Or endorse the plays that compete, not just comply? The downsides are withering, but consider what operators forego by ignoring so many neglected plays. The plays below (shown in gray in figure 3) are in my experience effective strategies for defeating competitive influencers, particularly those that wage campaigns of disinformation (i.e., that lie).



Sitting at the far left of the Condition-Control-Confront strategy spectrum, the play called Ping it used to probe. Like its neighbor the Float (aka, trial balloon) it has the advantage of subtly nudging targets in a preferred direction and gauging their reaction. It's a low-engagement strategy

that can budge what's sometimes immovable, a safe way to feel out a hostile environment. See details and examples of the Ping strategy [here](#).



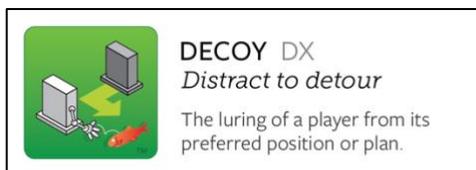
The fashionable framing play called Label is useful for positioning and figuratively pasting to a bad actor's forehead an ill-gotten motive (e.g., *Fake news!*). To the responsive mindset, this play often seems more capable of provoking a competitor than simply de-positioning them.

Indeed, a well-applied sound bite can incur the wrath of enemies, but if the Label is apt and accurate it's hard to peel off. See details and examples of the Label strategy [here](#).



A strategy of diversion, the Disclose, can be a powerful inoculant to negative accusations. Yes, it often forces an actor to play a hand they might rather not play but getting the bad news out first can control the time and place of a rhetorical bomb's detonation. Lawyers hate it because it

establishes culpability. Communicators love it because it builds credibility. See details and examples of the Disclose strategy [here](#).



Another strategy that diverts, the Decoy, (aka, red herring or ruse), is clever, asymmetric and often unethical. After all, Decoys are typically employed for less than mutual benefit. When set and minded well, they send rivals down blind alleys and waste resources they'd otherwise heap

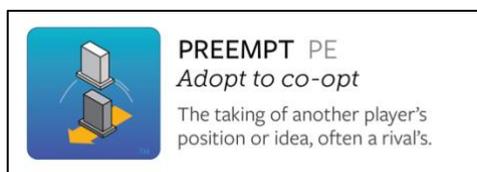
upon the decoy-setter. See details and examples of the Decoy strategy [here](#).



Like Disclose, the play called Concede limits the harm of an accusation or wrongdoing. It takes away the oxygen that bad actors require to verbally or symbolically damage a player's brand or reputation. It's another play that lawyers and communicators are bound to debate because it can generate both guilt and accountability. See details and examples of the Concede strategy [here](#).



The play called Crowd is for copycats, not leaders. But when you need the company of others to mask your own shortcomings, or just hide behind, it can be handy. The Crowd forces rivals to attack your associates, too, not just you. See details and examples of the Crowd strategy [here](#).



The Preempt is a strategy that boy scout types might frown upon. But to co-opt, i.e., *preempt*, an idea, especially when it's about to be used to hurt *you*, can be crucially advantageous. It offers the double reward of debiting your enemy's influence accounts while crediting your own. See

details and examples of the Preempt strategy [here](#).



Provoking plays like the Call Out might seem impolitic and in violation of the fashion to go high when others go low.^{viii} But to categorically rule it out is limiting, especially when a bad actor's spin merits a public tongue lashing. See details and examples of the Call Out strategy [here](#).



More than any of the taxonomy's 23 strategies the Bait requires deep understanding of how the play will be countered by a target and countered back by the baiting player. It is also ethically packed. As its definition states, Baits compels a targeted player to work against their self-

interest. Though mean it may seem, this provoking strategy should not be mothballed; its ability to draw out and confront competitors is like no other. See details and examples of the Bait strategy [here](#).

The Taxonomy of Influence Strategies illustrates that engagement is not binary. Analysts, strategists, managers and commanders of information programming don't have to pick between defense or offense, passivity or aggression, high roads or low roads. The elements of influence are many and nuanced. They come in three modes and six families that are populated by 23 unique

plays that when smartly employed move minds and markets, ethically and in honor of democratic precepts. Perhaps most important, in the face of epidemic hyperbole and deception, this framework offers us a rational, objective and universal language for winning, not just managing the information wars that are here and that are coming.

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Alan Kelly is president and founder of Playmaker Systems, LLC, based in Bethesda, Maryland. He is the author of the landmark book, *The Elements of Influence: The New Essential Systems for Managing Competition, Reputation, Brand and Buzz*, and a charter member of the Information Professionals Association. Kelly can be contacted at akelly@playmakersystems.com and followed on twitter @playmakeralan. View his full biography [here](#).

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ⁱ Jessica Brandt, “How Democracies Can Win an Information Contest Without Undercutting Their Values,” PICO Policy Proposal, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Aug. 2, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/02/how-democracies-can-win-information-contest-without-undercutting-their-values-pub-85058/>

ⁱⁱ This point is a well-explained by [Rand Waltzman](#), a global expert in the application and understanding of propaganda, and [Matt Armstrong](#), an authority on the [Smith-Mundt Act](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ Alan Kelly, *The Elements of Influence: The New Essential System for Managing Competition, Reputation, Brand, and Buzz*, New York: Dutton, 2006 and Plume, 2007, <https://www.playmakersystems.com/playmaker-system/book-the-elements-of-influence/>

^{iv} Playmaker Systems, LLC, “White Paper: An Evolution in Influence—The Playmaker System 2.0,” white paper, Playmaker Systems, LLC, 2006, http://www.Playmakersystems.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/SSIS_2.0_Whitepaper_vZi.pdf

^v Simplified models such as the BEND, 4D and 5D frameworks, follow a similar decoding convention:

- a. BEND: Laurie Fenstermacher and Katie Larson, “Multi-Source Insights for Discernment of “Competition” Threat,” Proc. SPIE 11423, Signal Processing, Sensor/Information Fusion, and Target Recognition XXIX, 114230S (May 8, 2020); doi:10.1117/12.2564517, <https://doi.org/10.1117/12.2564517>
- b. 4D: Ben Nimmo, “Anatomy of an Info-War: How Russia’s Propaganda Machine Works, and How to Counter It,” StopFake.org, May 19, 2015, <https://www.stopfake.org/en/anatomy-of-an-info-war-how-russia-s-propaganda-machine-works-and-how-to-counter-it/>
- c. 5D: Larissa Doroshenko and Josephine Lukito, “Trollfare: How to Recognize and /fight Off Online Psyops: It starts by understanding common tactics: distort, distract, dismiss, deny and dismay,” Defense One, Dec. 15, 2021, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/12/trollfare-how-recognize-and-fight-online-psyops/359777/>

^{vi} Alan Kelly, “How to Beat The Donald: Encourage Him,” *Plays for the Presidency* (blog), Playmaker Systems, LLC, Nov. 30, 2015, <http://www.playmakersystems.com/playsforthepresidency/how-to-beat-the-donald-encourage-him/>

^{vii} Alan Kelly and Christopher E. Paul, “Decoding Crimea: Pinpointing the Influence Strategies of Modern Information Warfare,” NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, 31st January 2020, <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/decoding-crimea-pinpointing-influence-strategies-modern-information-warfare>

^{viii} Quotation: “Rising above is like walking *over* the playing field, staying irrelevant, and watching the marketplace go by.” “Taking the high road is like never driving on it at all.” Alan Kelly, *The Elements of Influence: The New Essential System for Managing Competition, Reputation, Brand, and Buzz*, New York: Dutton, 2006 and Plume, 2007, p. 289. <https://www.playmakersystems.com/playmaker-system/book-the-elements-of-influence/>