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Losing the Narrative:
Communication Tempo, Expectation Asymmetry, and Perception Effects in the First Week of the 2026 U.S.–Israel–Iran War

Author: Shaoyuan Wu

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0660-8232

Affiliation: Global AI Governance and Policy Research Center, EPINOVA LLC

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Abstract

This working paper examines why the United States appeared to underperform in the information environment during the first week of the 2026 U.S.–Israel–Iran war, even though battlefield outcomes remained contested. The paper argues that perceptions of narrative momentum were shaped less by kinetic developments alone than by structural differences in official disclosure tempo, narrative continuity, media-format compatibility, and expectation asymmetry across the principal actors.

To explore these dynamics, the paper employs a best-effort cross-channel estimate of visible official communication outputs published between February 28, 2026, 00:00 and March 6, 2026, 22:00. Under this estimate, Iran generated approximately 342 official or officially attributed outputs, the United States approximately 200, and Israel approximately 165, for a combined total of roughly 707 items. These figures are used analytically as indicators of visible communication tempo rather than as a fully audited URL-level census.

The analysis suggests that differences in communication rhythm and narrative architecture significantly shaped perception effects during the conflict's first week. Actors whose messaging appeared more continuous, serially structured, and adapted to feed-based media environments were better positioned to influence how audiences interpreted the trajectory of the conflict. In conflicts characterized by strong asymmetries of capability, expectation asymmetry can further amplify these dynamics, as losses by the materially stronger side often receive disproportionate attention in the information environment.

The United States did not necessarily lose militarily in the war's first week. However, its official communication appeared less continuous, less serially structured, and less adapted to high-tempo digital information environments than that of Iran and Israel, contributing to the perception that it had lost narrative initiative during the early phase of the conflict.

Keywords: information environment, strategic communication, narrative competition, wartime messaging, disclosure tempo, narrative continuity, expectation asymmetry

1. Introduction

Modern conflicts unfold simultaneously across physical battlefields and information environments. Military operations generate immediate communication demands, and public perceptions of momentum or initiative can develop rapidly in response to visible messaging patterns (Nye, 2011). In high-velocity digital information environments, audiences often rely on the visible rhythm of communication as a heuristic indicator of initiative and momentum. In highly networked media ecosystems, the rhythm, format, and continuity of official communication can shape how audiences interpret unfolding events, often before battlefield outcomes become clear.

During the first week of the 2026 U.S.–Israel–Iran war, the United States appeared to underperform in the information environment despite substantial operational activity. Official U.S. channels released multiple war-related communications associated with Operation Epic Fury, including policy statements, operational updates, and multimedia content published through White House and Department of Defense platforms (The White House, 2026a, 2026b; U.S. Department of Defense, 2026a). These outputs indicate that the United States maintained a visible communication presence during the early phase of the conflict.

However, communication activity alone does not necessarily translate into narrative dominance. The central analytical puzzle is therefore not whether the United States communicated, but why its messaging appeared less effective in shaping perceptions of initiative and momentum in the information environment.

This paper argues that the answer lies in four interrelated structural variables: official disclosure tempo, narrative continuity, media-format compatibility, and expectation asymmetry. Differences in these factors influenced how audiences interpreted the trajectory of the conflict during its first week.

Expectation asymmetry played an additional role in shaping perception dynamics. In conflicts where a materially stronger coalition confronts a weaker opponent, public expectations often assume rapid and decisive outcomes. Under such conditions, even limited losses or successful retaliation by the weaker side can generate disproportionate narrative attention. As a result, individual incidents may be amplified in the information environment and interpreted as evidence that the stronger side is failing to impose control over the conflict.

2. Analytical Scope and Method

This paper does not attempt to construct a fully audited archival census of wartime communication. Building such a dataset would require comprehensive web crawling, canonicalization, de-duplication, and cross-platform verification across multiple government domains and languages. Instead, the analysis employs a best-effort cross-channel estimate designed to capture the relative tempo of visible official communication during the first week of the conflict.

The observation window covers **February 28, 2026, 00:00 to March 6, 2026, 22:00**, corresponding to the first week of the war.

The estimate includes public-facing outputs in multiple formats, including official statements, press releases, operational updates, briefings and transcripts, communiqués, multimedia pages, and timeline-style updates. These outputs were collected across several principal official communication channels, such as White House official publications, U.S. Department of Defense releases, Israel Defense Forces operational pages, and Iranian ministry-linked and state-affiliated communication channels.

Official materials from the White House and the Israel Defense Forces confirm that all actors maintained dedicated wartime information channels during the period under review (Israel Defense Forces, 2026a, 2026b; The White House, 2026a).

Because these communication systems differ structurally—with some relying on rolling live-update pages and others on discrete standalone releases—the totals reported in this paper should be interpreted as indicators of relative communication tempo rather than precise documentary totals.

The analysis focuses primarily on the tempo and structural characteristics of visible official communication, rather than on the substantive quality or credibility of individual messages. Differences in informational accuracy, narrative framing, or propaganda intensity may also influence perception dynamics in wartime information environments. However, the purpose of this paper is narrower: to examine how the frequency, continuity, and structural presentation of official communication shape perceived narrative momentum during the early phase of a conflict.

3. Estimated Output Tempo Across Actors

A best-effort cross-channel estimate of visible official communication outputs during the first week of the conflict is presented in **Table 1**.

Official communication architectures differed substantially across actors. Some systems relied on rolling live-update pages, while others used discrete standalone releases. For this reason, the counts reported here should be interpreted as approximate indicators of visible disclosure tempo rather than exact archival totals.

Table 1. Estimated Official Communication Outputs During the First Week of the 2026 U.S.–Israel–Iran War (February 28–March 6, 2026)

Actor	Estimated Outputs	Primary Channels	Notes
Iran	~342	Ministry statements, IRGC-linked communiqués, IRNA releases, and other state-affiliated channels	Serial retaliation framing likely increased visible communication tempo
United States	~200	White House publications, Department of Defense releases, official remarks, and press briefings	Output dispersed across multiple institutions
Israel	~165	Israel Defense Forces operational pages and government updates	Strong continuity through rolling timeline-style updates
Total	~707	—	Used as an indicator of relative communication tempo

The daily fluctuations in visible official communication tempo are illustrated in **Figure 1**. These daily patterns illustrate how communication tempo varied across the observation window and highlight several periods of intensified messaging activity corresponding to major operational or political developments.

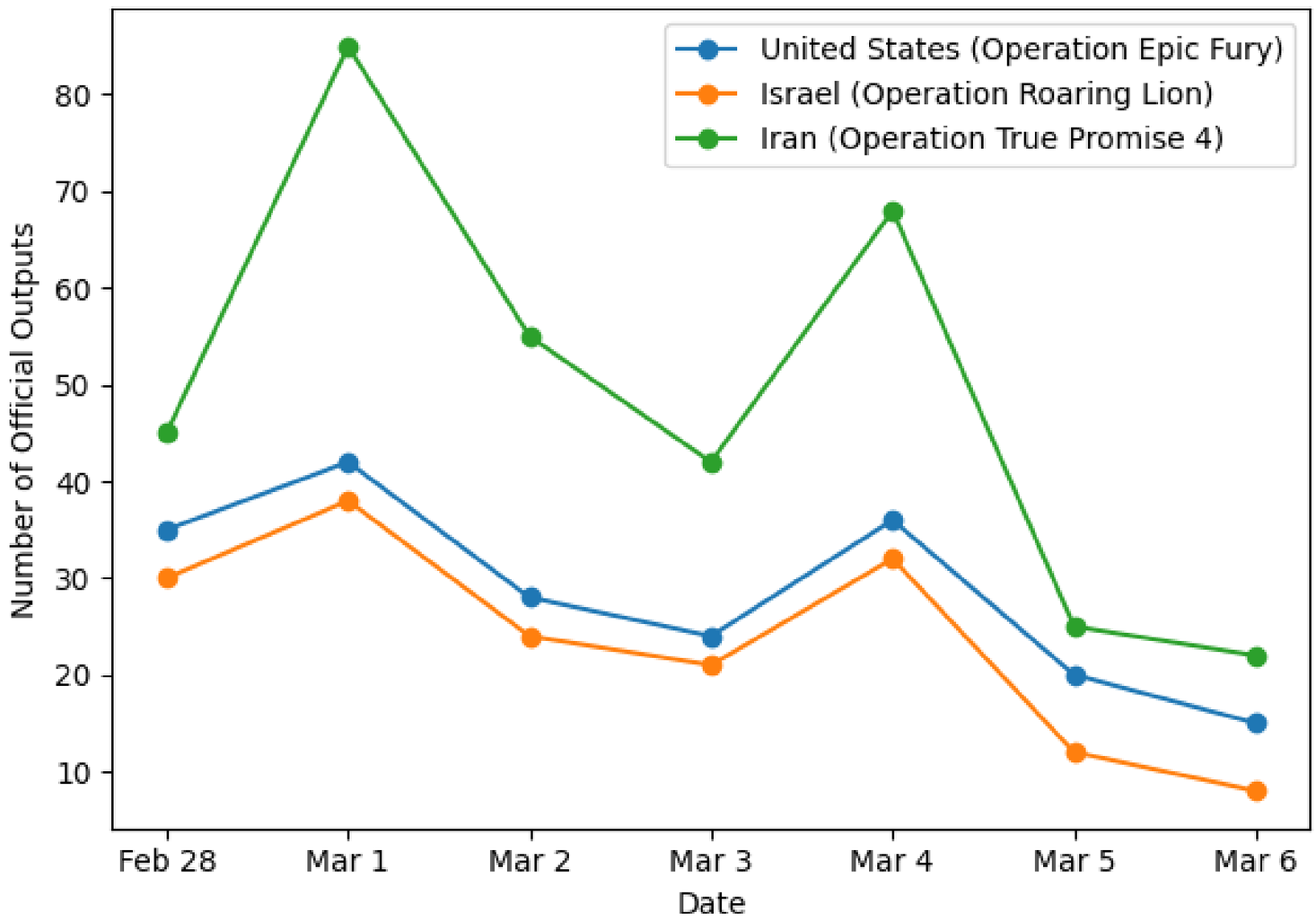

Figure 1. Daily Official Communication Outputs During the First Week of the 2026 U.S.–Israel–Iran War

As shown in **Figure 2**, Iran accounted for nearly half of visible official communication outputs during the conflict's first week, while the United States and Israel together accounted for slightly more than half.

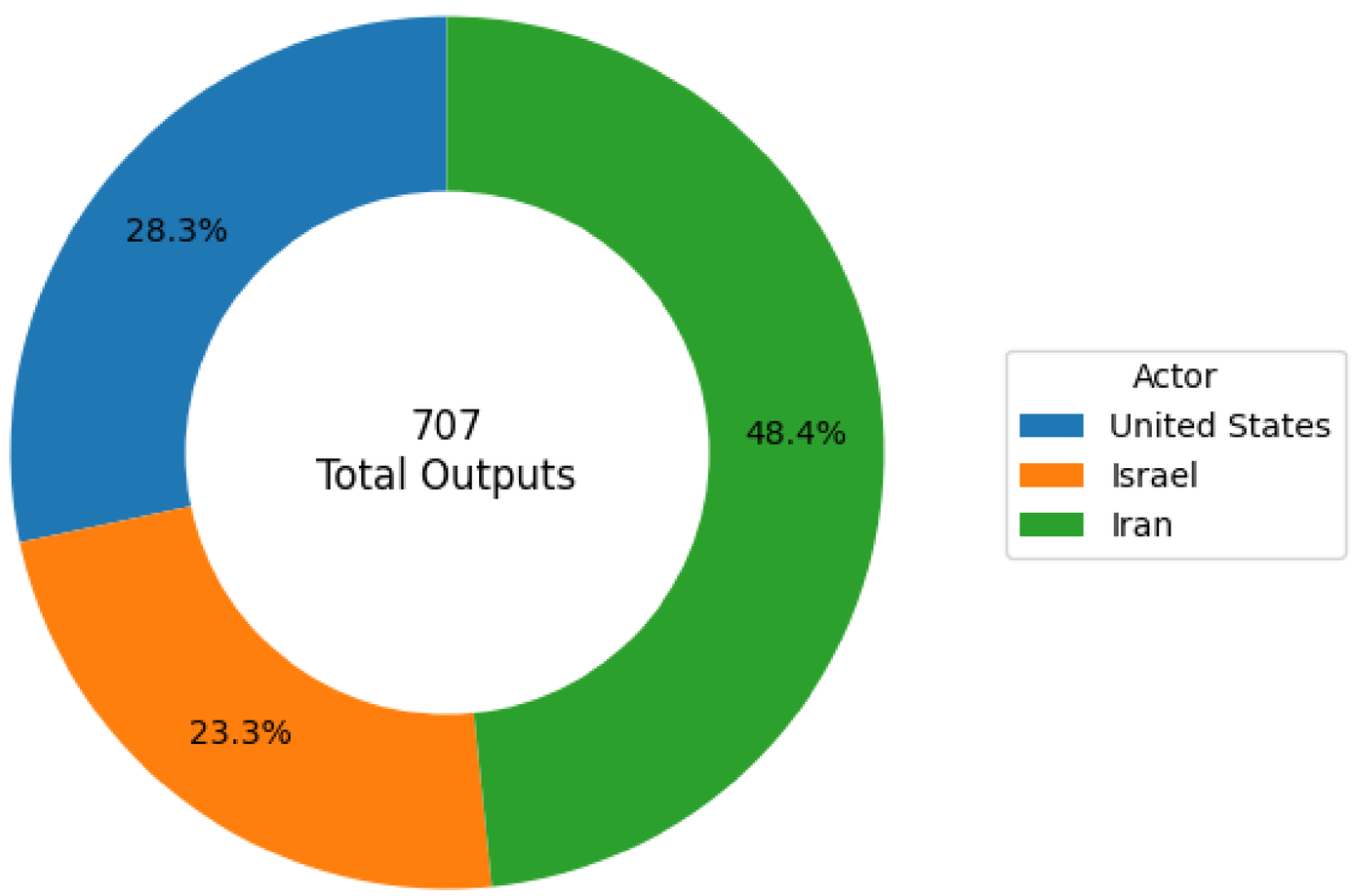

Figure 2. Estimated Share of Official Communication Outputs (February 28–March 6, 2026)

Taken together, these differences in communication tempo and distribution provide the empirical basis for examining why U.S. narrative performance appeared weaker during the early phase of the conflict.

4. Explaining the Perceived Weakness of U.S. Narrative Performance

The differences in visible communication tempo identified in Section 3 help explain why U.S. narrative performance appeared weaker in the information environment during the conflict's first week. Several structural factors contributed to this perception, including communication dispersion, seriality asymmetry, continuity asymmetry, media-format asymmetry, and expectation asymmetry.

4.1 Communication Dispersion

U.S. wartime communication was distributed across multiple institutions, including the White House, the Department of Defense, and other government channels (The White House, 2026a; U.S. Department of Defense, 2026a). While this structure generated substantial communication volume, it also fragmented the visible narrative.

Different institutions emphasized distinct messaging priorities. White House outputs highlighted strategic justification and presidential leadership, while Department of Defense releases focused primarily on operational updates and casualty reporting. Additional statements from diplomatic and security agencies further diversified the communication landscape.

The result was a large quantity of official information without a single dominant narrative structure. In high-velocity information environments, such institutional dispersion can weaken perceived narrative coherence even when overall communication activity remains substantial.

4.2 Seriality Asymmetry

Iranian wartime messaging appears to have benefited from greater serial structure. Sequential retaliation announcements and wave-based framing created a visible narrative of continuing response.

Serial messaging generates an inherent sense of progression and momentum, even when battlefield outcomes remain uncertain. Numbered retaliation waves, repeated communiqués, and consistent rhetorical framing reinforce the perception that an actor remains active and responsive. Even when the underlying military situation is ambiguous, serial messaging creates an easily interpretable storyline for audiences following the conflict in real time.

4.3 Continuity Asymmetry

Israel's official communication architecture demonstrated strong continuity. Israel Defense Forces operational pages were structured as rolling timelines of updates, producing a steady stream of information resembling a live operational feed (Israel Defense Forces, 2026a).

Continuous update structures reinforce the perception that events are unfolding in real time. In feed-based information environments, such rolling communication architectures may appear more responsive and immediate than periodic institutional releases.

4.4 Media-format Asymmetry

Communication format also shaped perception effects. Timeline entries, short updates, and sequential operational notices circulate more effectively in digital media environments than longer institutional documents.

Many U.S. communications retained a formal institutional format, including extended statements, policy explanations, and official press materials. While substantively informative, such formats are less easily integrated into high-velocity information streams. As a result, differences in format compatibility may have contributed to differences in perceived narrative visibility.

4.5 Expectation Asymmetry and the Amplification of Strong-actor Losses

A further factor shaping perception during the conflict's first week was expectation asymmetry. In conflicts where a materially stronger coalition confronts a weaker opponent, public expectations often assume rapid and decisive outcomes.

Under such conditions, even limited setbacks or visible losses by the stronger actor can receive disproportionate attention in the information environment. In the U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict, the United States and Israel entered the war with clear technological and military advantages. However, this asymmetry also created a higher perception threshold for operational success.

Any successful Iranian retaliation, interception failure, or localized damage could therefore be interpreted as evidence that the stronger side was not achieving expected dominance. These perception dynamics amplified individual incidents and contributed to the narrative that the United States and its partners were struggling to impose control over the conflict.

In other words, the information environment did not evaluate battlefield events symmetrically. Losses by the weaker actor were often interpreted as expected costs of resistance, while losses by the stronger actor were more likely to be interpreted as evidence of underperformance. This expectation asymmetry likely reinforced the perception that the United States was losing narrative momentum during the conflict's first week.

5. Implications for Wartime Strategic Communication

The analysis presented in this paper suggests several implications for wartime strategic communication in contemporary information environments. In highly networked media ecosystems, the **tempo, structure, and format of official communication** can significantly influence how audiences perceive initiative and momentum during a conflict.

First, narrative tempo should be treated as a strategic variable in modern conflict. The frequency and rhythm of official communication shape how audiences interpret the progression of events in real time. Actors that maintain visible and continuous communication streams are more likely to appear active and in control of developments, even when battlefield outcomes remain uncertain.

Second, cross-agency communication requires deliberate narrative integration. Multiple institutional voices can increase the overall volume of official communication, but dispersion across agencies may weaken narrative coherence if messaging priorities are not aligned. Effective wartime communication strategies may therefore require stronger coordination across executive, military, and diplomatic channels in order to maintain a consistent narrative framework.

Third, communication design must account for digital media ecosystems. Feed-based information environments tend to favor communication formats that are cumulative, sequential, and easily repeatable. Timeline-style updates, short operational notices, and serial announcements are more easily integrated into real-time information flows than longer institutional documents. Consequently, the structural design of communication outputs can significantly influence how widely and rapidly official messages circulate.

Taken together, these observations suggest that wartime communication effectiveness depends not only on the content or credibility of official messaging, but also on the tempo, continuity, and structural design through which information is publicly released.

Conclusion

This paper examined information competition during the first week of the 2026 U.S.–Israel–Iran war and explored why the United States appeared to lose narrative momentum in the information environment despite contested battlefield outcomes. The analysis suggests that shifts in perceived narrative initiative were shaped less by kinetic developments alone than by structural differences in communication tempo, narrative continuity, media-format compatibility, and expectation asymmetry across the principal actors.

Using a best-effort cross-channel estimate, the relative tempo of visible official communication can be approximated at roughly 1.2 : 1 : 2.1 (United States : Israel : Iran). In practical terms, Iran’s visible communication tempo during the conflict’s first week was roughly twice that of Israel and substantially higher than that of the United States.

The United States did not necessarily lose militarily during this period. However, its official communication appeared less continuous, less serially structured, and less adapted to feed-based media environments than that of Iran and Israel. These structural differences likely contributed to the perception that the United States was losing narrative initiative in the information environment. At the same time, expectation asymmetry further amplified perception effects, as audiences tended to interpret successful retaliation or localized damage by the weaker actor as evidence that the stronger side was failing to achieve expected dominance.

More broadly, the findings suggest that wartime communication effectiveness cannot be understood solely in terms of message content or operational outcomes. In contemporary digital information ecosystems, the tempo, continuity, structural design, and expectation dynamics of official communication shape how audiences interpret the trajectory of a conflict. Actors that sustain visible and continuous communication, organize messaging in serial form, and manage expectation dynamics effectively may therefore gain a significant advantage in shaping perceptions of momentum and initiative during the early stages of war.

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