

DRAFT PAPER/WORK IN PROGRESS

Narrative Stickiness or Narrative Resilience? Learning from the Clinton Administration’s Strategic Narratives and Varying Congruence in Multilateral Peace Operations

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ABSTRACT

Strategic narrative scholarship has advanced that a strategic narrative about a policy is convincing when it is aligned with wider state identity and system narratives. However, it is still unclear why some narratives are more *resilient* and indeed *stick* more than others. Cognitive psychology studies have addressed the “stickiness factor” as one of the reasons why “some ideas survive while others die (Heath and Heath, 2010). The present paper explores the innovative concepts of *narrative stickiness* and *narrative resilience* through the lens of the Clinton administration’s strategic narratives in 1990s’ multilateral peace operations. The ways in which US intervention narratives “stuck” at the domestic and at the multilateral levels varied, which had implications for mission coordination and coherence. My argument on narrative interaction and varying narrative resilience helps understand the processes through which narratives travel and affect state behavior in multilateral contexts. In light of recent findings on the spread and influence of fake news (Vosoughi et al, 2018), this is particularly pertinent for 21st century foreign policy. Fake or false news often aim to make strategic gains through destabilizing or derailing policy agendas through re-narration. They effectively test narrative resilience and target narrative consistency. Yet it is useful to take a step back from the digital era and go back to the essence of what makes some strategic narratives more resilient than others.

I. Introduction: narrative stickiness and resilience

Leading strategic narratives scholars have advanced the idea that in order to be “convincing,” a strategic narrative about a particular policy must be aligned with wider *state identity* and *system* narratives.² Other works on strategic narratives have argued that strong strategic narratives combine a range of elements such as coherence, consistency, prospects of success and the absence of competing narratives.³ Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle’s seminal theoretical framework has established a research program for the study of strategic narratives, conceptualizing how narratives are distinct from other related concepts such as *ideas* and

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² Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, eds., *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017); Ben O’Loughlin, “Strategic Narratives (Personal Communication),” November 8, 2014.

³ Graaf, Dimitriu, and Ringsmose, *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War*, 8–11.

discourses and demonstrating why they deserve further investigation, especially in the field of international relations in the digital age.⁴

Indeed, narratives are first and foremost *stories*, which are told and can be retold, revisited, re-narrated. But why do some of these stories stick more than others? The “stickiness factor” emerged in cognitive psychology studies as one of the reasons why “some ideas survive while others die.”⁵ Some narratives may thereby “stick” more than others,⁶ which means for instance, that they are more resilient to re-narration attempts. Recent cutting-edge work in cognitive psychology literature has started addressing the issue, identifying six main principles for “sticky” ideas: They are “simple,” “unexpected,” “concrete,” “credible,” “emotionally appealing” and indeed, “they tell a story.”⁷

This leads us to our main question as to *what makes some strategic narratives more resilient or sticky than others?* Why, for instance did the “Global War On Terror,” with all its flaws, *stuck*? By contrast, why did George H. Bush’s “New World Order” narrative struggled to stick? Even more strikingly, why did a high-level document published in 2011 by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars that was actually named “A National Strategic Narrative,” *fail to stick*? Lawrence Freedman has argued that the article hardly offered a narrative, even though it was humorously signed by a “Mr. Y” as a reference to George Kennan’s Mr. X article and that its content was both sensible and valuable.⁸ On the other hand, one may wonder why conspiracy-based and factually inaccurate narratives become viral on social networks in the matter of seconds.

One way to address our proposed research question is to look at the impact of strategic narratives on policy behavior. Strategic narratives scholars may therefore attempt to trace policy trends or changes back to specific strategic narratives and demonstrate narrative stickiness

⁴ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, Routledge Studies in Global Information, Politics and Society (New York ; London: Routledge, 2013); Laura J. Shepherd, “Ideas/Matter: Conceptualising Foreign Policy Practice,” *Critical Studies on Security* 3, no. 3 (September 2, 2015): 334.

⁵ Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (New York: Random House, 2010), 11–18; Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, 1st Back Bay pbk. ed (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2002), chap. 3.

⁶ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, eds., *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 14.

⁷ Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*, 14–19.

⁸ Freedman, “The Possibilities and Limits of Strategic Narratives,” 17–18.

through empirical evidence about policy behavior. This echoes Castells' definition of power (which formed the basis of his work on communication) as "the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actor(s) in ways that favor the empowered actor's will, interests and values."⁹

II. Strategic narratives & fake news

The present paper seeks to conceptualize the notion of *narrative resilience*. Reflecting on NATO's experience in the Balkans, Jamie Shea linked the consistent evidence-base of a narrative to the relative credibility of the actor projecting that narrative and indeed to the narrative's resilience/stickiness:

I think if there are lessons to learn from the Balkans, is that a narrative first and foremost should be based on true facts. You cannot lie to the public. And you need to be honest and come forward when you make mistakes and admit them. Because then, when you come out and say something, you will be credible and people will be more inclined to believe you...¹⁰

Therefore, those strategic narratives that lack a strong "evidence-base" amount to little more than manipulative or re-narrated communication. One negative outcome of the advent of digital communications and the New Media ecology in the post-2000 era has arguably been a decrease in that evidence-base. This trend is best symbolized by the rise and viral spread of conspiracy theories and so-called fake news. They may represent the most challenging and dangerous form of competing narratives to state-articulated strategic narratives. They feed on public opinion's worst fears and affect governmental actors' internal narrative consistency by derailing their messages. Worst of all, they contribute to making citizens warier of their representatives, more disillusioned about politics, and thereby more reluctant to be engaged in the political debate. Such a vicious cycle inevitably presents the danger of a less informed, less critical and more vulnerable population. Conspiracy theories and fake news make it impossible for governments to explain in good faith, for instance, their justifications for involving troops abroad.

William L. Swing – the Director-General of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) – has spoken of the need to re-establish the evidence base with regard to migrants in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis. That crisis highlighted the speed at which conspiracy theories can spread, as well as their potentially colossal impact on public opinion:

⁹ Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 10.

¹⁰ Shea, Interview with the author in Brussels.

... I'm right now trying to restore the historically accurate narrative on migration, that's been historically very positive. But right now it's very toxic and poisonous, because all they can do [is] link up [in] their minds migrants and refugees somehow with the terrorists, which is totally wrong. But to that you then have to give an evidence base...¹¹

In Swing's words, conspiracy theories are "toxic" and must be countered. Yet, many governments and their militaries have approached the issue the wrong way, thinking of strategic narratives as tools for manipulating their targeted audiences.¹² Cognitive-based approaches have thus generated "psy ops" and "hearts and minds" tactics.¹³ These approaches have also been particularly central to US and NATO war efforts in Afghanistan, attempting to secure locals' support and signal resolve to enemies. Such conceptualization of strategic narratives is misplaced and more often than not, ends up backfiring. Worse even, these approaches play the game of conspiracy theories because they too, attempt to manipulate and take advantage of various audiences. They only contribute to diminish the credibility of political discourse, thus endangering the authority of future potentially important narratives.

The debate around fake news and governments' attempts to find solutions¹⁴ to counter their power and influence have become front and center among others reasons because of fake news' considerable *narrative resilience*. In fact, one study that tried to understand how false news spreads Vosoughi *et al* used a data set of rumor cascades on Twitter from 2006 to 2017 and looked at how 126,000 rumors were spread by ~3 million people. Their findings are striking, as they found that, "...false news reached more people than the truth; the top 1% of

¹¹ William Lacy Swing (Amb.), Interview with the author in Geneva, December 21, 2015.

¹² See Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, eds., *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 26 the authors list "studying strategic narrative in order to critique how political leaders use narratives to manipulate publics and obfuscate an underlying reality" as one of the four basic positions being taken" in scholarship on strategic narratives.

¹³ Cristina Gallach, Interview with the author, Skype, March 1, 2016; See Betz, "Searching for El Dorado: The Legendary Golden Narrative of the Afghanistan War," 45–51; See also Freedman's discussion of information operations in Freedman, "The Possibilities and Limits of Strategic Narratives," 25–28.

¹⁴ Interestingly, recent concrete measures have been taken by some governments to train citizens from an early age to interpret, debunk and analyze the news and information that circulate online. This includes the French Government's measure to include a mandatory class to train all students to better understand medias and news (*Education aux Médias et à l'Information*).¹⁴ Such measures aspire to ensure that a given population is provided with the necessary tools to distinguish conspiracy theories from factual information, hence enabling them to make their own minds. While ridding the world of conspiracy theories is utopian, combatting it should go through evidence-base strategic narratives and education, not discursive manipulation.

false news cascades diffused to between 1000 and 100,000 people, whereas the truth rarely diffused to more than 1000 people.”¹⁵

III. Taking a step back from narrative resilience in the digital era

It is as a result difficult to study strategic narratives today in isolation of the digital era in which we are living, which has influenced and sometimes blurred the processes through which strategic narratives have been formed, projected and received. There is much to be said about strategic narrative stickiness in today’s media ecology and the role of technology, including those notorious algorithms, in feeding off individuals’ confirmation bias to influence which stories get attention and which do not. These aspects do deserve further investigation. Yet the current frenzy over algorithms and fakes news has tended to prevent us from observing, analyzing and understanding those key components that make some stories more resilient than others, which have little to do with technology. Indeed, the structuring power of stories or “myths” largely predates Facebook and Twitter; in fact, it goes back millions of years.¹⁶

I argue that understanding the essence of what makes some strategic narratives more resilient than others requires us to take a step back from our current media ecology. Therefore, the present paper takes some distance from the digital era and the current media ecology, examining strategic narrative processes in the context of the Clinton administration’s policy behavior following military interventions, focusing specifically on the case of Bosnia. My theoretical framework on *internal narrative consistency* and *multilateral narrative congruence* explains varying state behavior in transition periods but also varying public preparedness when faced with military setbacks and casualties. Furthermore, my argument offers insights on the processes that make narratives *resilient* in the context of multilateral policy efforts.

¹⁵ Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, “The Spread of True and False News Online,” *Science* 359, no. 6380 (March 9, 2018): 1146–51, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559>.

¹⁶ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Harper Collins, 2015).