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Narrative strategies in action – text, form, and context

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Abstract

The major changes in the global security environment that took place at the end of the last millennium continue to deeply mark the first quarter of the 21st century, characterized by substantial changes in the classical instruments used in conducting a conflict. Also, the transformation of the informational environment has led to the emergence, development, adaptation, and contextualization of the use of strategic narratives with the aim of influencing people's perceptions of the actions of power states and producing effects in the sense desired by them.

The purpose of this article is to subject strategic narratives to attention, as part of contemporary hybrid confrontations, aiming to bring a better understanding of this subject, observing how they are used and with what effects, depending on the form in which they appear.

Moreover, the article proposes a multilevel conceptual delimitation, approaching strategic narratives from the perspectives of text, context, and form, as highlighted in the most recent research in the specialized field.

We will also consider their use in an allied context, with reference to working documents that NATO uses in strategic communication to influence target groups and audiences, both internal and external.

Keywords:

narrative strategies; strategic communication; cognitive warfare.

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The beginning of the 21st century has brought into the spotlight little expected changes, with various effects, starting from the individual level and continuing to the societal one, in which both the great power states and numerous organizations are involved, having interests in directions such as industry, economy or other important fields with an impact on the population.

Moreover, if during the Cold War, we could talk about a certain symmetry in the relations between the two great political-military blocs, the USSR and the USA, today we are witnessing the emergence of multiple forms of asymmetry in contemporary conflicts, as a result of the differentiation between conventional war and new types of conflicts.

It can be said that the present is characterized by risks, opportunities, uncertainties, and threats, and all these elements can take various forms, depending on the rapid social, scientific, technological, geopolitical, or even climatic changes, in a time when globalization produces effects that are continuous and spread in unexpected directions.

If in the past we could categorize military action as land, air, sea, space, or cyber, each representing different domains, recently we have seen discussions about a cognitive dimension of warfare. This dimension involves influencing people's perceptions through various methods and means of manipulation, with the aim of achieving desired outcomes, such as altering perceptions of certain values.

At the same time, against the background of high interest in the research of new types of conflict, in a report published on the website of NATO's Allied Command Transformation (ACT), cognitive warfare is defined as *"the totality of activities carried out in close connection with other instruments of power with the aim of affecting attitudes and behaviors by influencing, protecting and/or disrupting individual and group knowledge in order to gain an advantage"* (NATO-ACT 2023).

In the same direction, in a report published on the *Innovation Hub* platform, Bernard Claverie and François du Cluzel put forward the following idea: *"The cognitive war is with us. The main challenge is given by the fact that it is invisible; all that can be seen is its impact, but by then...it is often too late"*. In other words, in conflicts where the battles are fought in people's minds, the effects of the actors' actions are visible as soon as the intentions have already reached their goal (Claverie and Du Cluzel 2022).

An approach that complements the above belongs to the current president of the Romanian Academy, Ioan Aurel Pop, who, as early as 2017, stated that *"information and communication are of enormous importance for historical research. It was said, until recently, that whoever controls the information controls the world. Today, something else is added - whoever masters communication can rule the world or can rule even wider communities. Much of the distortions at work in the world today had their theoretical foundations in history. In order to be able to compare and respond to*

these challenges, we need to cultivate our best-performing computer, the human brain” (Pop 2017).

If we are to debate about this new dimension, the informational one, in which the largest share is held by the cognitive side, then it is imperative to subject attention to the tools that are used for this purpose, to be able to wage war on such a territory. Undoubtedly, *strategic narratives* play a decisive role in generating and coordinating such hybrid confrontations.

From a methodological perspective, in order to achieve the objectives we propose in this article, we will approach the analysis of documents and specialized research, trying to deepen the concept of strategic narratives and that of narrative strategies, as well as the effects they have on the target audiences when they are implemented.

Regarding the structure of the article, it covers the theoretical approaches of strategic narratives, develops narrative strategies in terms of form, structure, and levels of action, and also presents their use in an allied context. All these elements aim to highlight the importance of strategic narratives and narrative strategies in a period characterized by major changes in the current security environment.

At the same time, by approaching these concepts, the work contributes to a better understanding of the cognitive dimension of current conflicts and identifies elements that can be found in the act of disinformation and manipulation of audiences, aspects that are increasingly present in hybrid confrontations.

Strategic narratives – theoretical approaches

The definition of the term *narration*, in general, starts from the neologism borrowed from the French language – *narration*, previously taken from the Latin language – *narratio* with the meaning of *storytelling*. This term is, in fact, the mode of exposition by which facts and events are related, in a temporal sequence. Moreover, it is part of a discourse and presupposes the existence of the following elements: narrator, action, and characters, with an emphasis on the sequence and dynamism of events. In other words, as stated by Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle in 2014, “*narratives are formed and projected in a communication environment*” (Miskimmon, O’loughlin and Roselle 2014b).

Taking into account the fact that any narrative follows a grammatical line, then we must also bring into discussion the term *narratology*, proposed in 1969 by the French theorist Tzvetan Todorov, who speaks in his works about *thematic narratology*, in which the narrative contents are debated and the stories are delivered by the character or the narrator, and the formal one, which analyzes the narrative representation of the speech, the relationship between the narrator and the characters, as well as their positioning in relation to the narrative act (Todorov 1971). He also established, in the

work "*Categories of literary narrative*", the two components of the narrative, viewed as a story – the logic of the actions and the relationships between the characters (Todorov 1966). From his perspective, the narration is entrusted directly to the characters or the narrator, both of which are difficult to identify in their pure state. Such an approach supports those who want to decode stories and who analyze how messages are presented by those involved in the narration, using the narrative act to nuance or direct the message in the desired meaning.

In the same line, in her work from 1999, entitled "*Semiotics, society, culture*", Daniela Roventă-Frumușani talks about the creation of narratives and narrative structures as "*the strategy that allows us to make the world intelligible, being an essential model of data organization*" (Roventă-Frumușani 1999). In other words, by creating logical and well-structured narratives, effects can be obtained that can lead to the deciphering of the initial intentions and their interpretation, until the understanding of the meaning of the transmitted information. Moreover, she reviews and analyzes narrative structures, starting from Aristotle's *Poetica*, which talks about characters and actions, and following Propp's model, where narrative actions become fundamental, referring to introduction, realization, and conclusion. Such an approach is useful in realizing that narratives are consciously created, applied with a certain purpose, and adapted to the context so that the results obtained can be interpreted as clearly as possible.

Chronologically approached, numerous researchers, theorists, and communication experts have studied the narratives used by major social actors to identify their roles, the forms they can take, and the effects they have when they are used. For example, Oliver Schmitt highlighted how the narrative strategies used during political speeches are perceived and what is the connection between them and political people, also considering the typology of political myths (Schmitt 2018). In this sense, he highlighted how important it is that, in their speeches, intellectuals adapt their messages so that they are understandable to the public.

Strategic narratives, on the other hand, refer to the concept of power, the balance of power between states, international relations, and security studies, as is also evident from one of Barry Buzan's works, which also induces the idea that political discourses must be adapted and explained in order to achieve security by introducing the term *securitization* (Buzan 2008). By using narrative strategies, states manage to position themselves against each other, or even against certain values that are shared or not by masses of individuals.

Undoubtedly, we could not discuss the term strategy, put in a military, diplomatic or geopolitical context, without referring to Sun Tzu's *The Art of the War*, which highlights the importance of planning and adaptability, as well as a deep understanding of the environment in which military actions are carried out in order to achieve victory and advantage in battle, not only through force, but especially

through intelligence, understanding the characteristics of the adversaries and anticipating their movements ([Tzu 1994](#)).

Equally, Henry Mintzberg presents the strategies in a more complex manner by classifying them into five distinct categories ([McCarthy 2000](#)):

- *Strategy as a plan* presupposes a pre-establishment of an action, drawing guidelines to reach the proposed objectives, prior to the situation, with implications developed in the knowledge of the case and with a well-defined purpose;
- *Strategy as a tactic* is mainly applied to counter the intentions of opponents;
- *Strategy as a model* tries to establish a pattern of behavior, because strategy results from the actions that people take;
- *Strategy as a position* identifies the actor's place both internally and externally, becoming a mediating force;
- *Strategy as a perspective* represents a unique way of perceiving the external environment.

Viewed from the five angles, it can be concluded that strategies are essential when the objectives are to be designed, and the narratives used, having behind them a very well-defined strategy, are defining tools for taking strategic advantage during any type of conflict.

Returning to the phrase of *strategic narratives*, it is increasingly used in contemporary confrontations. Trying to correlate this phrase with the classification of strategies presented previously, it can be concluded that strategic-type narratives include a certain plan when they are conceived, have clearly defined objectives in order to apply them effectively, follow a pattern according to the feedbacks resulting in following their use, they are formulated according to the target groups they aim at and anticipate the reactions of those involved.

According to O'Loughlin, narratives are created and projected in the international environment, following three essential ideas ([Miskimmon, O'loughlin and Roselle 2014b](#)):

- they appear in human interactions, define the world, and affect human behaviors;
- they have as a central element the political actors who use the narratives in a strategic way;
- the environment of communication fundamentally affects the way narratives are communicated and how they influence the target audience.

According to the same author, narrative strategies are increasingly used in fields such as political science or international relations, and they represent a useful and effective tool for obtaining the results desired by the state and its leaders, with the aim of influencing the behaviors and attitudes of individuals or entire masses of citizens.

Summarizing, we can say that *“a narrative becomes strategic when it prescribes a type of order that serves particular interests. It must be said that any strategic narrative consists of two major ingredients: power and communication. The junction between the two constructs truths, i.e. it imposes on domestic and international events the meanings desired by the establishment, which means that strategic narratives generate perceptions, emotions, behaviors, i.e. social reality”* (Dumitrescu 2020). In other words, if we bring up the fact that through the application of strategic narratives, we aim to position the public in relation to a certain reality that we present, we can also refer to propaganda or persuasion of the target audience, a communication process in which *“the actors with the best arguments are the winners because they are the ones who manage to convince”* (Popescu 2022).

The strategic narrative can be seen as a firmly formulated and communicated story that appeals to the enduring values shared by the members of an organization, their origins as a collective, and what they want to achieve in the future and, very importantly, the steps that must be completed so that intentions become facts and certainties.

Diachronically, strategic narratives appeared and are increasingly used because of the evolution of the information environment and as a need to adapt to the changes occurring in the current international context. They can be seen as tools that are used in the battle that goes on in people’s minds, with the attempt to influence and obtain results in the desired directions. Changing the behaviors of the masses according to their own interests and influencing them to respect certain values are only some of the objectives that are considered when using narrative strategies. As these narratives are better structured and framed in certain patterns, they can create effects that can tip the balance towards a certain side of the hybrid confrontation taking place in the current period.

Therefore, the concept of strategic narratives will differ from the concept of narrative strategies as the first of them refers to the act of communication and the elements involved in this whole process. In contrast, narrative strategies follow the communicative behavior, the techniques used by those who initiate the process, with the aim of achieving pre-established objectives.

Strategic narratives – form, structure, and levels of action

Although it is not yet possible to discuss a clear delimitation or a standard structure that can be traced within them, strategic narratives have aroused the interest of several theorists and researchers, who have tried to identify the structure, form, and key elements that can be found when using such narrative constructions.

Starting from the approach of Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, through which they emphasize that *“strategic narratives are tools through which political*

actors try to build a common interpretation of the past, present and future of world politics with the intention of influencing the behavior of the internal and international actors” (Miskimmon, O’loughlin and Roselle 2014b), they also identified a set of characteristics of these strategic type narratives and presented their approach which includes *five key components* (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle 2017):

a) *they are oriented towards the future.* Although a strategic narrative may refer to the past and/or present, its applicability is connected to shaping policy in the future;

b) *they are closely related to identity.* They articulate a distinct (national/regional) position on a specific issue, policy area, or more generally on the state’s place in world politics or the international system;

c) *the content is not fixed,* but is a dynamic and always negotiated social product, based on the interactions of states, both with their societies and with other relevant external actors in the sphere of influence;

d) *they can derive from experiences in history,* calling on previous actions, previous experiences and historical reputation acquired over time;

e) *their audience is both internal and external.* They can be used for ensuring the loyalty of the domestic public, on the one hand, and on the other hand for its use in the delimitation and communication of collective perception in the international sphere.

Analyzing all these elements, it can be concluded that strategic narratives do not have a certain pattern, but can undergo changes depending on the initial intentions, the values that are shared by those who issue such narratives, the values that the audience respects, and the pattern of the target audience, be it internal or external.

In another analysis by the same authors, they present strategic narratives in three steps, tracing their formation, projection, and reception (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin și Roselle 2018). They are built, most of the time, by the governing parties and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, later they are made public through the speeches of political leaders so that in the end they will be received by the intended audience. Throughout this loop, narrative framers respond to audience interpretations and behavior of the messages delivered to them and adjust content to achieve maximum desired effects, ensuring that narratives are not only comprehensible but also compelling. All these steps are carried out consciously to counteract the new types of risks and hybrid threats that appear to security on the one hand, and on the other hand to pursue and promote their own goals related to the balance of power, spheres of influence, misinformation or weakening cohesion at the societal level.

Considering the previously listed aspects, we cannot continue the analysis of narratives or stories without also acceding to Hanna Merejota’s idea that storytelling is the aspect of narrative that shapes our cognitive understanding of the world, our affective orientations, and our senses (Meretoja 2018). So, from here we can extract the idea that narratives are used considering not only the rational part of the target

audience but also their emotions and the elements that can be shaped, appealing to the affective and sensory side, aspects with a complexity of much larger and longer-lasting decoding and interpretation. Therefore, the use of narratives and the achievement of effects may undergo changes depending on the reactions provoked, which implies a continuous adaptation of the messages conveyed.

Also, when we discuss their *form*, narratives can be transmitted through various channels or can be found in various forms. In this sense, one can distinguish narratives in the form of texts, audio, images (photos, maps), multimedia, and these can be distributed either through traditional media or with the help of social media, which is increasingly present in the life of each individual, with the aim of winning people's minds and their perceptions towards the intentions of political actors ([Bjola, Cassidy și Manor 2019](#)).

All of these can be disseminated to activate *three levels of action* where narratives can be framed: international, national and at issue level. At the international level, narratives are used to describe how the world is structured, what international interests are, and why not, what the world order is. At the national level, they highlight the status of the state actor, what are its goals and values, and how it seeks to be perceived by other state actors. At the issue level, narratives create the framework for the use of certain government policies and explain why certain policies are needed and how they will be implemented effectively. The three levels are, most of the time, interdependent. They interfere so that the originally set goal is achieved within the estimated time frame ([Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2014a](#)).

In addition to all the previously highlighted aspects, it should also be stated that strategic narratives are used in the current context not only to position ourselves towards certain aspects and values but also to attract image capital and sympathy from the audience that we educate through each narrative act that we consciously cultivate ([Saliu 2023](#)). Precisely for this reason, RL Boyd paid attention in one of his works to the concept of *narrative arch*. In his view, there are similarities and differences between narrative structures depending on their construction processes, the variables involved, and the phases they go through until they end up affecting the intended human behaviors ([Boyd, Blackburn and Pennebaker 2020](#)).

Narrative strategies used in allied context

Trying to identify the *context* in which the need to analyze strategic narratives arose, Oliver Schmitt believes that it is based on the interest to examine the importance of persuasion in contemporary conflicts, the way in which current military campaigns are presented to international or national audiences and the way in which a political community debates strategic issues. Therefore, this interest arises as a result of the need to align with the new methods of action used in conflict management, so that

all involved act, as far as possible, in an informed manner in order to achieve the results estimated in the initial planning ([Schmitt 2018](#)).

To be fully understood and to identify the factors involved and their actions, any conflict must be studied from political, diplomatic, international relations, economic, or military perspectives. Following any of these branches, we can observe how each of the actors involved in the confrontation uses a series of strategic narratives to position themselves according to the objectives they have and to create situations of strategic advantage in hybrid confrontations, following the influence of society in the targeted directions.

In the last three decades, NATO has been involved in various operations and missions, and for this it has always had to communicate why and how it does this, primarily to achieve its proposed strategic objectives, but also to counterbalance the narratives of its adversaries ([Nissen 2014](#)). For this, the Alliance has had to continuously adjust its own narrative strategies, both to create a common understanding among Allies about its actions and to maintain its legitimacy and defensiveness in the face of challenges, while at the same time trying to eliminate the fear to communicate these actions and to rather focus on what the actions themselves communicate ([Mullen 2009](#)).

For example, in order to increase the confidence of the young public in the ability of the Alliance structures to protect the population and Allied territory, as well as to explain the involvement in multinational exercises or international missions, in 2017, NATO started, supported and developed one of the largest strategic communication campaigns, entitled #WeAreNATO, through which it facilitated the access of young people to information about NATO over various events. For this, the strategic narratives used took various forms (images, texts, video) and were used in several contexts and on several channels (press conferences, public events, interviews) by NATO leaders who explained the main mission of the Alliance ([NATO-ACT 2017](#)).

Moreover, through the Strategic Concept published in 2022 in Madrid, the Alliance aims to make public its common interests, reiterating, once more, its defensive nature and firm intentions to discourage the escalation of any type of conflict. The content of the document includes, in text form, the narratives pursued by NATO and the responsibilities it assigns to the allied states ([NATO 2022](#)). The implementation of this document, like all recent actions carried out by the Allies, also calls for strategic communication used to achieve the proposed common objectives, considering concepts that refer to public diplomacy, public affairs, or military public affairs ([Johnsson 2011](#)).

Analyzing all these aspects, we can conclude that through strategic narratives, NATO not only communicates or informs, but also aims to educate the audience with the aim of producing emotions that can be translated into support from the masses and sharing of common values.

As a term, at the NATO level, the narrative was regulated by a document in 2014. It focused attention on the term narrative and how to develop it, step by step, with the aim of being used as a tool in the context of a future military information strategy. In its content appeared, for the first time, the concept of a *narrative arch*, in which the trajectory of the arch (action-effect) is made up of participants or actors who undertake actions that can take forms such as text products, video, audio, speeches, all of which led to the favorable results sought or the initiation of a certain desire. When a narrative comes to an end, causing satisfaction or dissatisfaction, then it is considered resolved. Also, in the same document, the phrase narrative landscape includes several variables (myths, stories, histories, religious or fictional stories) that interact, being an integrated part of the informational environment, that lead to the creation of a favorable context for the delivery of strategic narrative constructions ([MNIOE 2014](#)).

If we consider the use of narratives in the information environment, we must take into account the fact that they can be used for propaganda, in all its forms, with the aim of influencing the opinions, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals ([Reddi, Kuo and Kreiss 2023](#)). In other words, information intended to achieve effects uses multiple channels of information propagation, to influence, sometimes negatively, individuals' perceptions and affect credibility.

Currently, information is a key tool in relations between states. When used as a weapon in information warfare, strategic narratives rely on the mixing of truth and falsehood and the misrepresentation of facts to induce distorted and biased interpretations in the public, these reactions being the effects of propaganda, influence, and disinformation ([Barclay 2018](#)).

In the NATO Strategic Communication Handbook, narrative strategies are presented and how they should be approached for a better understanding of the information environment. According to this document, narratives represent the coherent communication of various actors involved in operations with the aim of generating perceptions of certain shared values. For this to happen, the narrative strategies, themes, messages used in the discourse, as well as the use of the vulnerabilities of certain audience segments are just some of the defining elements of this process. The identification of stories in different narratives allows a comprehensive understanding of the narrative landscape and the information environment, which is why other fields are involved in this whole endeavor, such as information operations (InfoOps), military public relations, psychological operations (PSYOPS), civilian-military cooperation (CIMIC), intelligence (J2), political counseling (POLAD) and cultural counseling (CULAD). These areas can support the communication and understanding approach and contribute to an integrated outcome. This aspect can be achieved through well-synchronized strategic organizational communication, which considers aspects specific to each previously mentioned area ([NATO 2017](#)).

According to NATO, strategic communication involves the coordinated and appropriate use of communication activities and capabilities in support of Alliance policies, operations, and activities with the aim of advancing NATO's objectives (NATO n.d.).

In the context of strategic communication, strategic narratives are part of information warfare to cause information disruption on the adversary's home front. When this happens, they can create alternative realities about facts and events, or even alter collective perception to the point of changing support for the leadership. As a result, strategic narratives, disinformation, and information warfare can also become tools of crisis communication during conflict situations and work towards manipulating the information environment.

Conclusions

In a period characterized primarily by uncertainty and continuous change, as well as by the battle for power and information, the role of narrative strategies becomes defining. It is increasingly difficult to separate narrative strategies from interests, risks, or threats. In all this confrontation in which the messages sent or received must be decoded and interpreted, it is necessary to identify methods and means to counteract the unwanted effects generated by all these new challenges.

Strategic narratives help both to formulate strategy and to communicate actions. Informing the strategy and its associated actions, for example, military operations, ensures consistency with the original intentions. In other words, it ensures the correlation between words and deeds, even though the strategic narrative is normally constructed as an integral part of the strategy formulation process. Thus, the basic characteristic of strategic narratives is that they provide a framework through which information activities can be structured to explain the past, present, and future of conflicts, with the aim of achieving the desired results.

The frequency with which information is disseminated recently creates an increasingly interconnected society, which makes the importance of narrative strategies even greater, their influencing role being defining.

Narrative strategies can be studied from the perspective of several dimensions. Approaching them through the prism of political discourse and by analyzing them according to the audiences they target and the values they bring to attention, are just a few aspects that will be detailed in a future article.

This approach is part of the author's doctoral research. Starting from these aspects, we propose that in the future we consider the correlation of how strategic narratives impact the cognitive dimension of conflicts and identify their models used by major state actors, looking for defining aspects that can change the estimated results within an influencing process.

We believe that at the moment no clearly defined and outlined uses of strategic narratives have been identified, and we also cannot precisely delineate the narrative strategies or techniques that lead to the achievement of superiority in current confrontations, which is why future research will focus on an in-depth analysis of the models used by major political actors that aim to steer audiences in the desired directions.

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