



# Revisiting strategic narrative through the world expo

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## Abstract

This essay reflects on the study of Expo Shanghai 2010 with an explanation of how the strategic narrative framework was defined and operationalized in the analysis. The discussion extends the work by clarifying the role of narrative in nation branding by examining why narratives matter and how they function in this case study. It also discusses two broader conceptual issues in applying narrative analysis to public diplomacy: the interplay between fictional and nonfictional modes of storytelling, and the coexistence of competition and convergence in global narrative spaces. The study underscores the analytical value of narrative as both a structure of meaning and a mode of persuasion in the practice of public diplomacy.

**Keywords** Nation branding · Strategic communication · Strategic narrative · Public diplomacy

The World Expo (historically known as the “World’s Fair”) has long served as a grand stage where nations come together to share culture and their visions for the future. Organized by national governments and coordinated through the Bureau International des Expositions, the event is a platform for nations to engage in public diplomacy. Expo Shanghai 2010, the largest in history with more than 73 million visitors, offered a valuable vantage point for observing how countries construct and communicate their national image and identity. For host China, the Expo was a milestone in its soft power ambitions. For participating nations, it was a rare chance to engage vast numbers of Chinese visitors, most of whom had never traveled abroad.

As a mega-event, the World Expo is multi-layered, with multiple stakeholders and agendas. Yet at its heart are the national pavilions, where countries seek to embody their identities and values in physical and cultural form. The Expo grounds, crowded with hundreds of such pavilions, constitute a comparative and competitive arena. Each nation faces the central challenge of how to make its presence distinctive and to strike a chord with visitors, thereby strengthening its image and reputation.

In my study, I approached the Shanghai Expo through the lens of nation branding, the application of branding principles to a country’s communication efforts in shaping international perception. I examined the Expo as a site of nation branding understood not simply as the projection of appealing images but as the construction of strategic narratives (Wang 2013). The Expo provides an especially vivid case of place branding—place being not only the object of branding but also its medium. As historian Jill Lepore (2012, p. 3) reminds us, “All nations are places, but they are also acts of imagination.” National pavilions embody this duality: they are spatial and cultural constructs designed to convey larger stories about a nation and invite interpretation by foreign publics. The Expo thus served as an ideal setting for studying how nations define their brands, communicate them through narratives, and engage audiences whose interpretations are shaped by their own contexts and predispositions. In this sense, the Expo can be viewed as a particular genre of international engagement, akin to participation in other mega-events such as the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup that mobilize symbolic power and convening capacity to create global communal moments (Roche 2000). It is a site of “low politics” in global affairs, characterized more by cooperation than by coercion. Examining how nations perform and are perceived in this setting provides broader implications for public diplomacy practice and analysis.

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Not all nation brands were created equal at the Shanghai World Expo. What, then, made certain national presentations more compelling than others? I approached the question through a comparative analysis of national pavilions at the Expo. The comparison illuminated the essence of strategic narrative as balancing credibility and novelty—being both believable and distinctive—in a crowded symbolic marketplace. This essay reflects on that earlier study, with an explanation of how the strategic narrative framework was defined and operationalized in the analysis. The discussion extends the work by clarifying the role of narrative in nation branding, drawing on Viktor Shklovsky’s theory of de-familiarization to explain why narratives matter and how they function in this case study of the Shanghai Expo. It also discusses two broader conceptual issues in applying narrative analysis to public diplomacy: the interplay between fictional and nonfictional modes of storytelling, and the coexistence of competition and convergence in global narrative spaces.

## Narrative as a strategic form

Narrative is a fundamental mode of meaning-making; a way of organizing experience, connecting events, and giving them significance. As H. Porter Abbott (2008) maintains, “narrative is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time” (p. 3). In Kent Puckett’s (2016) conceptualization, narrative is the “effort to make real or imagined events and objects meaningful in relation to one another, whether the effort is fictional, historical, political, financial, psychological, scientific” (p. 2). Narrative theory therefore constitutes a study of these relations. A central distinction in narrative theory lies between story and discourse: story refers to the event or a series of events (what), while discourse describes how the event is represented (how) (Abbott 2008, p. 15). In the World Expo, the story is a nation’s self-conception and aspirations; the discourse is realized through the pavilion’s architecture, displays, multisensory design, and other expressive components.<sup>1</sup>

As symbolic actions, narratives operate through structure and effect (e.g., Chatman 1978). Their power lies not only in what they say or do but in how they arrange and connect elements to produce meaning and emotion, as well as allowing the audience to rearrange them anew. Through ordering and arrangement, narratives establish relationships that invite audiences to interpret and evaluate. In the context of the Expo, the organization

of exhibits embodies a narrative arc that positions the visitor as both audience and participant in a nation’s self-presentation. The story is thus experienced through choreographed encounters that guide visitors toward certain impressions or conclusions about the country.

Equally important to the narrative process is its temporal and spatial logic. Narratives unfold over time and space, creating movement and progression. National pavilions embody this dynamic: they are spatialized narratives that must communicate temporally through visitors’ journeys, from entrance to exit. Each pavilion translates abstract ideas, such as innovation or tradition, in spatial forms. Visitors’ movement through the pavilion produces the temporal dimension of the narrative. Accordingly, the arrangement of displays in this physical environment becomes a form of storytelling, shaping how the nation’s image and identity is encountered and understood.

Furthermore, nation branding is a strategic and deliberate act through communicative practices. At the World Expo, the purposeful constructions of the national pavilions seek to stand out in a crowded arena and to influence how audiences perceive a nation and its place in the world. Yet such a process is also inherently contingent. That is how these branding efforts are received and interpreted by audiences cannot be fully scripted or controlled. The deliberate crafting of messages and images inevitably meets the interpretive agency of audiences, whose perceptions are shaped by their own contexts and predispositions. In these terms, strategy and contingency are not opposing forces per se but part and parcel of the nation-branding process.<sup>2</sup>

To understand how national pavilions conveyed their messages and why some presentations resonated more than others, the analysis draws on the concept of strategic narrative, rooted in the literary theory of Viktor Shklovsky (as expounded in his 1929 book *On the Theory of Prose*) and extended to organizational strategy by Barry and Elmes (1997). This theoretical lineage offers a productive lens for examining how nations construct and project meaning in the context of the World Expo. Shklovsky’s original formulation emerged from his reflections on narrative in art, in particular literature. He argued that habitual perception dulls human experience, and that the function of art is to “recover the sensation of life, in order to feel things” by disrupting familiarity (Shklovsky 2021, p. 12). His concept of *ostranenie*

<sup>1</sup> In mega sporting events such as the Olympics, for instance, the most visible expressions of national identity are conveyed through the symbolic representation of athletes in competition.

<sup>2</sup> In this context, contingency refers specifically to the dynamics and tensions between narrative projection and audience reception. While the nation’s narrative construction is inherently selective, the process is also shaped by multiple constraints, including financial, operational, bureaucratic, and political factors.



(“estrangement”) or defamiliarization directs attention to form—how a story is arranged and represented—so that audiences encounter it as fresh rather than routine. By foregrounding form, art slows down perception and compels active engagement, encouraging audiences to step outside familiar cognitive frames and to see the world differently.

Barry and Elmes extended this literary concept into the study of organizational strategy as narrative. They argued that strategy can be understood not merely as a plan or position, but as a constructed story that seeks to mobilize meaning and coordinate action. In their framework, effective strategic narratives depend on how actors manage the relationship between credibility and defamiliarization. Credibility requires convincing the audience that the story is plausible, whereas defamiliarization requires getting them to view things in new, different ways. As Barry and Elmes (1997) explained, “these arenas form a kind of dialectic: extremely credible narratives tend toward the mundanely familiar, whereas highly defamiliarizing narratives often lack credibility (or at least when first introduced)” (p. 434). Strategic efficacy therefore lies in crafting narratives that balance the familiar and the unfamiliar in compelling ways.

The analysis of nation branding at the World Expo builds on the concept of defamiliarization for several reasons. First, Shklovsky’s original idea presupposes the necessity of the economy of creative effort. Shklovsky cited Herbet Spencer’s argument on the importance of “economizing the reader’s or hearer’s attention” given our limited mental capacity (p. 9). When much of our perception becomes habitual and automatic, “life is lost in oblivion” (p. 11). Shklovsky hence emphasized narrative form to convey and experience the sensation. In the context of the World Expo, with hundreds of pavilions and activities on offer, visitors need to economize their effort within set amount of time they have. Form thus is critical to how pavilions communicate their messages through spatial and temporal design to their audiences. Second, Shklovsky’s concept underlines the focal role of the audience, whose perceptions through engagement and interpretation ultimately determine a narrative’s impact. And it also points to the transformative potential of narrative, which can interrupt familiar templates and stereotypes, a commonplace goal reflected in nations’ effort to present themselves at the Expo. The original narrative analysis mainly focused on literary texts, but the approach has “widened, deepened, and accelerated, encompassing a broad range of disciplinary forms of storied information” (Kreiwirth 2000, pp. 296–7). The study exemplifies the narrative migration across disciplines and in different organizational settings, which

has been called the “narrative turn” (e.g., Bleiker 2001; Krebs 2015; Miskimmon et al. 2013; Roberts 2006). It focuses on the national identity aspect among the three levels of strategic narratives in international relations as conceptualized by Miskimmon et al. (2017).

## National storytelling at the Shanghai expo

To analyze the nation branding process at the Shanghai World Expo, we proposed an explanatory framework consisting of three interrelated components: nation-brand definition, nation-brand communication, and the orienting context in which both occur. Nation-brand definition refers to the substantive content of a country’s narrative: what the nation stands for and seeks to project. Drawing from Kevin Lane Keller’s (2013) criteria for effective brand positioning and from the specific conditions of nation branding, four qualities are essential: aspirational, distinctive, believable, and emotionally resonant (p. 65). An aspirational brand links current realities to a sense of potential and progress. Distinctiveness ensures visibility and recognition amid competing representations. Believability grounds the narrative in credibility, while emotional appeal allows it to connect with audiences on a human level. To understand how a nation brand is defined and enacted through the pavilion, we examined the pavilion’s theme and its overarching discourse, which together revealed the narrative the country sought to communicate.

Nation-brand communication concerns how this brand identity is expressed and experienced. In the Expo context, the communication devices ranged from architecture and exhibits to cultural performances and human interaction to translate the narrative into visitor experience. Two dimensions are particularly noted: coverage and coherence. Coverage refers to how fully and effectively visitors are exposed to a pavilion’s message. It depends on how the visit is structured: for example, a self-directed experience allows freedom of movement but can result in uneven exposure, whereas a pre-set experience through films, timed presentations, or guided sequences ensures consistent message delivery to a captive audience. Coherence describes how various communicative elements reinforce one another to produce an integrated narrative. To assess coherence, we viewed the pavilion as a form of dramatic production, evaluating whether a narrative thread links its elements into a cohesive and memorable experience.

The orienting context sets limits on both nation-brand definition and communication. It encompasses visitors’ prior knowledge, perceptions, and expectations, as well as the situational conditions surrounding the Expo itself. This



context conditions how messages are received, interpreted, and remembered. The Shanghai Expo unfolded against the backdrop of China's accelerating global rise. For most Chinese visitors, it was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to "travel the world" without leaving home. The vast majority had never been abroad, and their impressions of foreign nations were largely shaped by official discourse, state-controlled media, and occasional exposure to imported culture. In this setting, the national pavilions assumed an outsized role in constructing or confirming visitors' mental images of the world beyond China's borders.

Visitors also carried a strong sense of national pride. By 2010, China was widely acknowledged as an emerging global power, and the Expo itself was heralded domestically as a symbol of that ascent following the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Attending the event was not merely a leisure activity but a participatory affirmation of China's modernity and international stature. Within this frame, many visitors viewed other countries through a comparative lens, asking, implicitly or explicitly, how these nations measured up against China's own development trajectory and achievements.

The situational conditions of the Expo reinforced certain tendencies in experience and interpretation. With more than 70 million visitors, the fairgrounds were perpetually crowded. Given summer heat, long queues, and limited time, most visitors spent only a few minutes inside many of the pavilions before moving on. The experience became one of rapid consumption. Under such conditions, complex or subtle messages often failed to register, while pavilions that offered clear, visually striking, and emotionally engaging narratives tended to leave stronger impressions. These dynamics underscore why the Expo provides such an informative setting for the study of nation branding. As immersive storytelling environments, pavilions were compelled to compress national narrative into brief yet impactful encounters—balancing credibility with novelty in order to connect with audiences who were at once curious, impatient, and deeply self-aware of China's global moment.

Eight pavilions were selected for examination—Brazil, India, Israel, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States—based on considerations of geographic diversity, their roles in global affairs, and the significance of their relationships with China.<sup>3</sup> The analysis draws on extensive fieldwork

<sup>3</sup> The selection was necessarily shaped by access and feasibility and does not claim to represent the full range of pavilions at the Expo. Each of the chosen countries constructed its own free-standing pavilion rather than participating in a shared facility. Their pavilions were generally more elaborate in design and presentation than most others. Nonetheless, the sample offered sufficient breadth, encompassing countries of varying status and influence in the international system

conducted in Shanghai during and after the Expo. To examine the official discourse and practice of nation branding, we relied on familiarization tours of the eight pavilions and interviews with pavilion representatives. To capture the audience perspective, we conducted exit surveys with visitors at each pavilion to collect their immediate impressions, using the concept of "brand experience" as the analytical guide (Brakus et al. 2009). We also held a series of post-Expo focus groups to explore how visitors remembered and interpreted the pavilions after the event. The author's own multiple visits to the Expo as a regular attendee further provided contextual insight into the experiential dimensions of the pavilions. The study was complemented by extensive desk research, including media coverage, books, and research reports (with many in Chinese) to situate the findings within broader discourses surrounding the Expo and national representation.

The comparative analysis, for example, identified the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Spain as the most effective cases of strategic narrative in nation-brand storytelling. Both achieved a delicate balance between "credibility" and "novelty" that creates narrative engagement. Each also demonstrated a sophisticated grasp of the Expo's contextual dynamics. For the UAE, the Chinese public held few fixed images of the country: a near *tabula rasa* that probably made it easier to shape perceptions. Spain faced the opposite challenge: a familiar brand seeking renewal. Its pavilion invited visitors to rediscover Spain through a sensory and emotional journey that felt both recognizable and reimagined. In both cases, the storytelling was spatially and temporally calibrated, with layout, sequencing, and visitor flow reinforcing a coherent narrative arc. By contrast, other pavilions struggled to strike this balance—some were too familiar to intrigue, others too different to be credible.<sup>4</sup> Their lack of distinction often stemmed from a tendency to form an argument rather than telling a story. This challenge was particularly evident among nations seeking to counter stereotypes or reframe perceptions.

The broader lesson from the analysis is that effective nation branding requires more than displaying cultural artifacts or economic achievements. It requires crafting a story that is both believable and distinctive and that accounts for audience predispositions and situational constraints. At the Shanghai Expo, where attention was scarce and impressions fleeting, pavilions that offered

—great, middle, emerging, and regional powers—and differing bilateral relations with China. In this respect, the cases were chosen not strictly for their typicality but for their potential to maximize what we can learn about the phenomenon under study (Stake 1995).

<sup>4</sup> See Wang (2013) for case illustrations and discussions.



coherent and emotionally resonant narratives through high-impact presentation stood out. Moreover, revisiting this earlier study highlights two conceptual dimensions of strategic narrative in public diplomacy and nation branding that deserve further discussion and reflection: the interplay between fictional and nonfictional modes of storytelling in these efforts, and the patterns of narrative convergence that emerge within the otherwise competitive arena of national representation.

### Strategic storytelling at the intersection of fiction and nonfiction

The narratives staged through national pavilions exist along a continuum between the factual and the emotional. Many stories are grounded in empirical claims, such as country data or historical facts; while others inhabit the imaginative realm, where nations dramatize and stylize themselves through fictionalized storytelling. As H. Porter Abbott (2008) maintains, audiences approach fictional narratives with the assumption that “the fictional world is a simulacrum of the world we actually live in” (p. 151). The effectiveness of such storytelling lies not in literal accuracy but in symbolic coherence. That is the ability to make imagined representations feel emotionally and culturally true. In nation branding, this distinction matters. The communication of a nation’s image needs to be anchored in its historical, cultural, and policy realities, while its persuasive power derives from emotional and symbolic authenticity. The association between a nation and a given idea can be “amplified” but not “fabricated” (Gilmore 2002). Ensuring congruence between brand projection and lived reality is a perennial concern. In today’s communication environment where audiences are simultaneously communicators, narratives are easily scrutinized and contested. When self-presentation drifts too far from reality, the resulting loss of credibility can be profound and difficult to repair. So effective national storytelling offers dramatized experiences that must remain referentially anchored.

A clear example of this interplay of the narrative devices could be found in the UAE pavilion. The exhibition was structured around the nation’s remarkable transformation since its founding in 1971, dramatized through a short film titled “In the Blink of an Eye.” The film features a fatherly figure recounting to an Emirati boy the story of the country’s journey—from the Bedouin days of pearl diving and trade to the discovery of oil and the rise of the UAE as a global metropolis. The use of black-and-white imagery to depict the past, contrasted with vibrant

color scenes of the modern skyline, offered a symbolic dramatization of progress.

The next segment of the film showed the Emirati boy taking a Chinese girl on a journey through the UAE, rendered in a hybrid of animation and live-action cinematography. The two fictional characters explore iconic sites such as the Dubai Mall’s massive aquarium and the soaring Burj Khalifa. The visual spectacle culminates in a holographic display of the characters on stage, underscoring the fusion of tradition and modern technology. The soundtrack featuring contemporary Middle Eastern rhythm was exuberant and joyful. In between the two film segments, visitors were presented with video vignettes projected on to multiple rectangular columns of Emiratis from various walks of life sharing their stories about life in the UAE.

A similar narrative approach was evident in the USA pavilion, which combined factual and imaginative modes to convey themes of innovation and community. Its main presentation, “The Garden,” was an eight-minute film about a young girl mobilizing her community to transform an abandoned urban lot into a thriving garden. Although fictional, the story conveyed American values of optimism, creativity, and civic engagement. The multisensory elements included five split screens of varying shapes, dramatic sound design, and even water and air effects to simulate storm scenes in the story, all in service of immersing visitors in a symbolic experience of America. The presentation preceding the film also featured testimonials from real-world representatives of U.S. companies and nonprofit organizations on the same themes.

These examples illustrate that nation branding at the Expo operates not solely in the realm of factual communication but also in that of fictional performance. This affirms Walter Fisher’s contention (1989, p. 57) that “reasoning can be discovered in all sorts of symbolic actions—nondiscursive as well as discursive.” It is also a reflection of the communicative situation of the Expo that is defined by curiosity and spectacle, not merely by information seeking. As philosopher Bernard Williams (2002, p. 251) noted, audiences “may not want to be told various things that they find irrelevant or uninteresting or unhelpful.” At the Expo, there is a tendency for countries to make efforts to inform and educate the visitors about their nation through facts and figures. Evaluating narrative effectiveness through the lenses of credibility and novelty suggests that successful nation-brand storytelling often operates in a space where information and emotion are woven together through both fictional and non-fictional devices.



## Common ground in competitive narratives

The Shanghai Expo also revealed another dynamic of global storytelling from the vantage point of public diplomacy: the coexistence of competition and commonality. As a site of “low politics,” the Expo is by design celebratory rather than conflictual. It is a curated space that privileges optimism, progress, and harmony. As part of the opening ceremony, there was the ritual of a parade of nations to symbolize coexistence and unity, like in the Olympic Games. Nations compete for attention and recognition in a cosmopolitan context.

While each pavilion is a communicative performance vying for visibility amid a spectacle, viewed from a broader narrative lens, this competition also produces surprising convergence. Across the Expo grounds, pavilions repeatedly return to similar themes: the harmony of tradition and modernity, sustainability, innovation, and the promise of a better future.<sup>5</sup> Despite their distinct national identities, countries tell strikingly parallel stories. This repetition suggests the emergence and formation of shared global narratives—stories about nations themselves and about the world they inhabit together. Such convergence points to an underexplored dimension of strategic narrative in that earlier study. While the analysis emphasizes differentiation in the nation-branding framework, there is equal value in examining how these narratives overlap and intersect. As the Expo brings national stories into proximity and co-presence, the fair-ground becomes a microcosm of global discourse, where the same or similar narrative arcs circulate under different flags.

This perspective reframes the function of strategic narrative in public diplomacy. Instead of viewing narrative as a zero-sum tool for influence, it can be seen as a co-creative process through which nations jointly articulate visions of global order, identity, and coexistence. Indeed, emerging technologies open new opportunities for uncovering these shared stories. Artificial intelligence, for instance, could enable real-time semantic analysis of pavilion content, identifying recurring motifs, emotional tones, and narrative structures. Such analysis could illuminate how nations, intentionally and unintentionally, echo one another’s themes, uncovering a global storytelling commons beneath the surface of competition. For visitors, similar technologies could enrich the experience. An AI-assisted guide might demonstrate how multiple pavilions articulate similar aspirations for sustainability,

cultural continuity, or human progress, fostering a deeper sense of shared humanity.

Beyond the Expo, this insight has wider implications for public diplomacy. Global communication increasingly takes place in networked environments where narratives circulate, collide, and recombine. Previous studies have tended to focus on the “tensions, contestation, and plural competing narratives” in international relations (Miskimmon et al. 2017, p. 15). This focus is understandable given the narrative sites under examination. However, recognizing the patterns of convergence may be as important as understanding the narratives of differentiation. Public diplomacy that acknowledges both captures a more layered reality shaped by national competition and co-creation of meaning.

## Conclusion

The study of the Shanghai World Expo through the explanatory framework of strategic narrative sheds light on the essence and dynamics of national storytelling in public diplomacy. The Expo functions as a site of narrative performance within a shared communicative terrain. The comparative analysis demonstrates how the principles of narrative credibility and novelty help explain variations in communicative effectiveness. More broadly, the study underscores the analytical value of narrative as both a structure of meaning and a mode of persuasion in the practice of public diplomacy.

This account acknowledges the interplay between non-fictional and fictional narratives in public diplomacy communication. It illustrates how the credibility of national storytelling rests not only on factual accuracy but also on emotional and symbolic authenticity. From this perspective, strategic narrative analysis invites scholars to consider how fictional storytelling interacts with factual claims in shaping audience perceptions. Another insight emerging from this reflection concerns the relationship between competition and convergence in global narrative spaces. Even amid competition, nations participate in shared narrative forms that contribute to a collective imagination. Attending to these narrative convergences can deepen understanding of how global publics interpret the multiplicity of national stories and how these intersecting narratives may generate broader visions of world order and community. In times of tension and uncertainty—when economic and ecological challenges transcend national boundaries—the spirit of seeking harmony and hope amid global divisions remains as important and urgent as ever.

In sum, this discussion reaffirms the analytical value of strategic narrative as a framework for examining public

<sup>5</sup> This may partly reflect the overarching theme of each Expo. However, because these universal themes are typically broad, they require more specific interpretation and expression. Moreover, countries do not always adhere to them in their design and participation.



diplomacy. Strategic narrative operates through a balance between credibility and defamiliarization; its efficacy lies in the dynamic interplay between projection and interpretation. As a social phenomenon, nation branding must be understood within its specific spatial and temporal contexts. Future research could extend this inquiry by examining how such narrative structures shape perceptions and senses of belonging across different arenas of global public life beyond the Expo, and how these patterns and practices manifest in other mega-events. Further analytical attention should also be directed toward audience practices by exploring how publics, both as witnesses and participants in these activities, co-construct nation brands through acts of comparison, association, and interpretation grounded in prior experiences and national reference frames. As Gottschall (2012) aptly observes about human storytelling, “While your body is always fixed at a particular point in space–time, your mind is always free to ramble in lands of make-believe. And it does” (p. xiv). Likewise, Krebs (2015, p. 278) notes that “there is great public demand for meaning-making and interpretive order” in a world of rapid change. The meaning of a nation brand thus emerges from interlinked narrative threads and intertextual relationships that audiences bring to their encounters with it. In particular, the digital mediation of public diplomacy warrants closer scrutiny. The Expo begins as a place-based attraction, but advancements in digital technology are transforming how people experience the event and redefining the boundaries of participation. Indeed, live events today are increasingly hybrid in nature, integrating the physical and digital realms into a seamless whole (e.g., Wang & Tang 2023). In this regard, the Expo and many other arenas of public diplomacy are becoming open-ended in both spatial terms and narrative possibilities. Examining how narrative expressions are configured and reconfigured in such hybrid environments would illuminate how strategic narrative operates within this unfolding communication ecology.

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