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RESEARCH

# Strategic narrative: its origins and evolution, its connection to public diplomacy, and some future paths

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The early development of our ideas began at the 2008 International Studies Association (ISA) Annual Convention in San Francisco where the two of us discussed Lawrence Freedman's (2006) ideas on strategic narrative. Freedman had drawn on the term to explain how political actors use narrative to exert influence in war and conflict. We wondered why so few scholars had used the concept to expand analysis of world politics, and that became our challenge. We shared our ideas with Andreas Antoniades, a scholar of international political economy, usually at the Eagle Ale House in south London, which led to our first strategic narrative working paper. From there we secured a grant to organise a pre-conference workshop at ISA 2009 in New York City, where we brought together some excellent scholars to explore strategic narrative across a range of issues. This event marked our first meeting with Laura Roselle, and after the workshop during a late-night darts game in Manhattan, the three of us hatched a plan to start developing our conception of strategic narrative in earnest. That effort to theorise strategic narrative took the form of our 2013 book *Strategic Narrative* and the subsequent 2017 volume *Forging the World*, in which a range of scholars addressed strategic narrative in their own field of expertise. We focused on narratives because we noted empirically their centrality to influence, communication and international affairs. We sought to highlight their strategic use, because we witnessed actors with intentions and purposes using communication as part of their repertoire to achieve their goals—including strategies to overcome narratives of other actors and states—and the interactions which develop from that.

We have enjoyed participating in policy discussions, attesting to how the concept spoke to multiple audiences, adding vocabulary to some of the more implicit workings of narrative in world politics and public diplomacy. It was not that narratives were absent, but it surprised even us how much of a chord it struck with policymakers when we began articulating a more systematic approach, from the vantage point in universities with a degree of independence from policy—a luxury practitioners do not have. Pressure to get public diplomacy 'right' and signal influence is a constant challenge for practitioners; for those working in think tanks, demonstrating policy relevance to maintain traction in policy circles to secure funding and links to political actors is equally demanding; for journalists, news outlets demand constant headlines that a narrative is failing or causing disaster. We felt that a focus on expressions of public diplomacy, freed from a pressure to get it right, enabled the concept and theory to simultaneously open up possibilities of application and critical analysis.

In those spaces we observed that some actors aimed for clear and simple narratives for specific target audiences, but others intentionally aimed to create ambiguous narratives to avoid over-commitment, or to leave other actors in the dark, or to leave a looseness of meaning that allows a wider set of actors to "buy in" to a consensus for a policy direction

We want to thank Ilan manor and the contributors to this special issue for their thoughtful engagement with strategic narrative and its relationship to Public Diplomacy. We very much welcome the opportunity to reflect on the evolution of research on strategic narratives emerging from the incisive articles presented here

We are grateful for recent discussions on the topics in this article with Babak Bahador, Christiane Cromm, Chris Hanretty, Pauline Sophie Heinrichs, Hilde van Meegdenburg, Will Youmans and Jinghan Zeng. We are honoured that Ilan Manor has convened this special issue on our strategic narrative research and for developing our dialogue on questions of the future of public diplomacy

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(O'Loughlin and Miskimmon 2025). Narrative coherence is challenging within any organisation, let alone a nation-state or international organisation made of many, and more so if we factor in the uncertain dynamics at every stage of formation, projection and reception of narratives. Some narratives exist independently of any one creator or originator. No single person has driven the narrative shift from global warming to climate change to climate emergency, but the story has changed in global conversations. The traditional question of the levels of analysis problem remains ever-present – where do narratives exist and what happens if they exist nowhere? There are multidirectional and overlapping dynamics of levels, and not just narratives of states. businesses, NGOs, ordinary citizens, influencers. In addition, there are narratives that emerge outside of verbal expression, even when they are later made sense of in that way via the politics of affect, events and materialities. Yet, we have also reached the stage of strategic narrative analysis that necessarily gives attention to a multi-dimensional and interactive spaces of communication and power.

## Where are we now?

One strand of our current work on strategic narrative contends that international order is not simply in crisis or undergoing linear transition; rather, it is shaped by narrative contestation among diverse actors. Strategic narratives—stories used to frame the past, present, and future—are central to how states and institutions interpret global politics and justify policy choices. We seek to emphasize that in the EU's case its narrative has shifted over time from a civilian, normative power model promoting peace and multilateralism to a hard power identity stressing security and strategic autonomy. This evolution reflects responses to systemic rivalry, fragmentation, and the weaponization of interdependence—but it also aids the creation of a politics of inevitability and eternity, in Timothy Snyder's terms (Snyder 2018). In other words, the EU is not merely reacting to a changing international system, it also helped produce its change and the changes that are seen to describe the international order itself.

These shifts create fundamental tensions: the EU often projects its conception of order as universal, assuming its liberal rules-based model is generalizable. Actors outside Europe—such as China, India, and the African Union—hold alternative visions rooted in distinct histories, identities, and priorities. These competing narratives challenge the EU's assumptions and influence, particularly on issues like colonial legacies, climate justice, and sovereignty. Where narratives align, cooperation is possible; where they diverge, contestation undermines credibility and hampers the EU's ability to shape outcomes.

We contend that effective EU strategy requires dialogue and reflexivity, acknowledging plural conceptions of order (including plural temporal conceptions) and avoiding the imposition of a singular liberal and linear model. Rather than framing global politics as "West versus the rest," the EU must engage with diverse imaginaries to be relevant in driving a (more) inclusive and adaptable international order. This approach recognizes that narrative alignment is not automatic but negotiated—and that ignoring contestation risks strategic failure in a multipolar, polycentric world. It also recognizes that alignment is different from domination or imposition where it is the outcome of negotiated and shared narrative work.

China is using the window of opportunity of narrative uncertainty in the West to assert specific historical narratives about world order. In September 2025 at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Tianjin, China, President Xi explicitly called what to the West is World War II, the World Anti-Fascist War (Leahy and Hille 2025). To an audience of leaders of Russia, India and other countries, and targeting domestic and Global South audiences, Xi said 'China and the Soviet Union were the principal theatres of that war in Asia and Europe respectively' (cited in ibid.: no page). The USSR defeated fascist Germany and China defeated militarist Japan. This narrative is an ontological claim about what the war was and what international order this historical legacy has produced. The US is absent in this historical narrative, furthering a sense that China and Russia played key roles in establishing the post-1945 world order, and that this normatively should be a multi-polar order. This move away from a US-centric rendering of history could go hand in hand with Washington's political or economic decline. For public diplomacy to contend with and work on narrative alignment an understanding of these narratives is important, but understanding also requires listening and not merely projecting. It is not contestation that works against narrative alignment—it is ignorance. Not all alignment needs to be normatively desirable, however, and we see this in the production of memory alliances and the preference of some histories over others.

This summit coincided with the 80th anniversary of Japan's defeat in World War II. The new Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's position on World War II history—particularly regarding the invasion of China—and her position on Taiwan are current and immediate drivers behind this renewed emphasis. From a Chinese perspective, if Japan is prepared to confront China militarily over Taiwan, then this is a breach of international law (Chen 2025). More existentially, the situation begins to echo the historical memory of World War II, when Japanese militarism seized

the island. A Chinese government spokesperson asserted that such differing Japanese historical narratives of World War II were sufficient to damage contemporary China-Japan relations. The current Japanese leader's view appears quite similar to fascism to many in China (Ning 2025).

From these official Chinese statements we observe that the current Chinese government's sovereignty claim over Taiwan is anchored in the post-World War II settlement, when Japan returned the island to China. This is not simply historical rhetoric. China's leaders are trying to shape the "correct" historical narrative of that sequence of events to reinforce China's present-day strategic position. In that sense, the narrative has very direct relevance to the evolving security landscape in East Asia, which is of hugely significant stakes in global geopolitics. This matters because it signals the degree to which global consensus on what happened is possible.

The question of who believes the narrative of the EU, US, Russia or China is important to examine. In a study of public trust in political institutions across 143 countries between 1958 and 2019, Valgarðsson et al. (2025) find that in the most recent decade trust has fallen markedly across Europe, North America and Latin American but not in much of Asia and the Pacific, Africa, or the Middle East. This, the researchers caveat, is especially in representative compared to implementing institutions, the former of which draw on narrative in particular to substantiate legitimacy claims. In that context a path for researchers is to establish which narrative voices have credibility to various publics at home and abroad, but also to identify where implementation is seen as the more powerful narrative to symbolism alone. Continued research is also needed to understand how and why states engage with or reject narratives of major powers as strategic competition increases (see for example Maloney and Ketterer 2025; Wallis et al. 2023; Xi 2024).

Artificial Intelligence (AI) adds new questions. AI makes it cheap and easy to produce and test narratives on multiple audiences. We expect actors to do more of this as a routine practice. The White House has used AI videos in 2025 to experiment with narrative forms. They are telling stories in new ways and posing challenges for audiences to discern what is correct in these new narratives.

Yet communication does not lead or determine politics. The US increased its public diplomacy outreach to global audiences after the 11 September 2001 attacks by Al-Qaeda but its narratives lacked credibility for many, because of how world politics is structured and negative experiences or memories of US conduct in world politics. Strategic narrative is a practice those diplomatic practitioners must learn but they must also have coherent explanations of how publics across regions of the world understand context and history. Strategic narratives might aim to 'sell' or justify certain renderings of law, history of politics, but there are also elements in conduct that escape the seemingly neat lines of narrative work. 'Make America Great Again' was not a narrative that emerged in a vacuum. It is designed to resonate with the grievances and identities of sections of US society which have existed for decades, because of how US democracy, culture and economy function. Here, again, scholars can assist practitioners achieve this form of analytical coherence, but also question where it renders politics void of meaning. Biden's insistence that the economy was fine, for example, did not help counter the perception of the contrary. We also see a role for scholars to question whether every narrative must be responded to in all cases in real time, and whether time as a category of public diplomacy might require a bit more slack. Government offices, ministries and institutions spend a significant amount of energy on tracking events in real time, ready to respond. This can be useful but is likely mostly useful when policymakers do not lose the ability to discern between what merits responses, in what form, and what does not.

We also see scholars and practitioners considering the directional relationship of strategic narrative to public diplomacy. In our reading, China sees public diplomacy as a tool of strategy. Although it has to this point offered slogans like Belt and Road, not narratives about past, present and future (Zeng 2020), there is increasing evidence of greater narrative work being developed in Beijing (Xi 2024). China's position paper to the UN Future Summit signalled a narrative of the development of international order:

> The great journey is long and arduous, and we firmly believe that the future of the world is full of glory and hope. China is willing to work hand in hand with all countries in the world to jointly implement global development initiatives, global security initiatives, and global civilization initiatives, promote the realization of an equal and orderly world multipolarization, and inclusive economic globalization, and create a better future for the community with a shared future for mankind! (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC 2024)

In contrast, until the second Trump presidency the US state appeared more focused on public diplomacy toolkit—media outreach, international exchanges, institutional partnerships – but often lacked an overarching strategy intelligible to many other countries. Yet both offer a mix of offensive and defensive communications, and learn through trial and error what is effective communication for different audiences overseas, and at home. Importantly, however, there remain open questions about what 'effectiveness' means in public diplomacy and whether reach is sufficient a metric to measure influence.

Finally, on the table now is how strategic narrative scholars could increase public understanding of diplomacy and foreign policy. Public opinion towards diplomats as a profession may be positive but, beyond what they glean from novels, tv and movies, how can ordinary people know how diplomacy works? Learning about that might help citizens understand how and why a country has certain kinds of relations with other states. At that point, they can potentially understand the value of diplomacy more or instead reinsert some praxiological and axiological questions about routines seen to fail the purpose of the conduct itself. They might come to appreciate that even in an age of transactional, often brutal geopolitics, some cooperation continues, and that neither transactionalism nor brutality happen as a tragic or inevitable outcome of geopolitics. At a time of fading established powers and assertive emerging powers, strategic narrative research made accessible can help citizens achieve diplomatic literacy where it also enables them to propose alternatives to the focus on narrative domination to narrative alignment as discussed above.

There have been several developments in strategic narrative research over the past number of years. We have witnessed a rapid empirical development of strategic narrative research involving many and diverse case studies across regions and issues. Scholars have applied the framework to statecraft (EU, US, China, Russia), public diplomacy, health diplomacy around for instance COVID-era vaccine narratives, Middle East politics, and more — showing the approach's portability to many contemporary political problems.

Second, we have seen a welcome methodological diversification — qualitative, mixed method and computational. Early work focused on discourse and interpretive narrative analysis (for example Madisson and Ventsel 2020). Since the late 2010s there has been a move to mixed methods and computational techniques (content analysis, topic modelling, social-network analysis of Twitter, bot/IO studies), enabling large-scale tracking of strategic narratives online. Attention is given to digital media, information operations and disinformation.

Third, the spread of social platforms and state-led information operations has pushed strategic narrative research toward studying how narratives are assembled, amplified, and weaponized online — and how non-state actors and platforms mediate narrative success (Starbird et al. 2023). Public diplomacy and government communications communities have adopted strategic narrative concepts to design and evaluate messaging strategies. That applied turn raises practical questions about measurement and effectiveness.

We have also seen important critical and normative work emerge focusing on ethics, and on power. Scholars have interrogated the ethics and democratic risks of strategic narrative practice that fits definitions of propaganda or overt manipulation efforts, and problematised who gets to "tell" stories.

Future research should continue measuring effectiveness and maintain attention to audience reception and third-party interpretations of strategic narratives. As indicated, research on automation and AI should focus on narrative generation, bot amplification, and detection challenges, alongside the ongoing need to understand influence over time. There is increase cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary uptake of strategic narrative which will aide our understanding of the complexity of strategic narrative in shaping global politics.

## More paths leading out of this special issue

Articles in this issue demonstrate the evolution of strategic narrative analysis in a range of disciplines from some of their leading proponents, with an interdisciplinarity we welcome. They also offer ideas that readers can take up in their research in coming years.

Crilley and Saunders examine how actors use the latest developments in media ecologies in creative ways that can challenge the very role of credible narratives in world politics. They compare William Connolly's (2005) account of that period's US evangelical-capitalist "resonance machine" with the more scattered, diverse, but still driven and wilful far right machine today, stretching across the US and many countries. The Trump government's use of "AI slop" and Wrestlemania optics does ensure a simplified, antagonistic communicative space reducible to victimhood grievances, as they argue. However, such communications do imply a narrative: Trump is projecting a sequence through time using all manner of tools to transform the US into a different country and society based on an idealised version of pre-tax US from 1912, and it is set out in the Project 2025 document for all to see (Bakst et al. 2023). America was great, then it was lamentable, but in 2025 it is becoming great again.

We very much enjoy their taking of our focus from literary studies of the performative, theatrical side of communicating narrative and renewing it to explain the various aesthetic registers actors use to enrage and enthral or deflect and distract in many countries, as the two scholars have consistently for years now (check their bibliographies). Yet they also draw attention to the economic, security and existential pressures that draw people to the MAGA narrative. Good strategic narrative analysis takes into account not just the content of a narrative but the context within which all actors interpret what is happening—the conditions, the structures, that dismay people enough to find a simple MAGA narrative appealing. We strongly encourage scholars to use this contextual lens. A materialist can be a narrativist too.

Hedling argues precisely that world politics is characterised by narrative contestation about longstanding identities and complex contexts—actors must navigate both. Actors' goals through these processes are to create certain actions, and promoting a strategic narrative is one way to convince others to follow you in that action. She takes us through how public diplomacy practitioners encounter the practices, processes and politics as they seek goals that further their country's foreign policy strategies. Hedling demonstrates that attention to strategic narrative is one way to gain analytical leverage on this activity. We enjoyed her own tale of the ways communication in world politics changed in the 2010s as practitioners learned to be more skilled and proactive, knowing any and everything they communicate can be contested. She argues this entwines public diplomacy in diplomacy per se—and this is exactly what we witnessed when we advised governments and international organisations in the 2010s. Her argument that strategic narrative is constitutive of politics itself makes sense if we acknowledge politics as a space of struggles and antagonisms that rarely end, and public diplomacy practitioners are learning to work with that on a daily basis.

Hedling offers tools to scholars too. We welcome her examination of the different kinds of analysis scholars can conduct on our spectrum of persuasion from "thin" rationalist analysis to "thick" constructivist or poststructural analysis – it all depends on the researcher's question and aims. Where Hedling goes further is by pointing to the need, and utility, of comparing and explain why some narrative practices work and some fail. Success is never guaranteed. We find in our work that actors experience cycles of conditions and they learn they have more narrative power or leverage over audiences at certain stages of these cycles. This is how the long game works, and we scholars can be explaining why some things work for certain actors in certain conditions.

Carolijn van Noort makes the case that strategic narratives are a vital tool for understanding how actors shape global politics through communication. She seeks to extend its reach into new domains such as ocean governance and the blue economy. Van Noort demonstrates that strategic narratives—representations of events and identities that give meaning to international order—operate across system, identity, and issue levels, influencing expectations and behaviours. This article shows how narratives legitimize infrastructure projects, secure buy-in for global policies, and frame technological and environmental agendas. By doing so, it positions strategic narratives as central to persuasion, coordination, and mobilization in international relations, but also as central to making sense of technology, governance and infrastructures.

Van Noort advocates for integrating strategic narrative analysis into Marine Social Sciences, arguing that ocean governance, maritime infrastructure, and blue economy planning are deeply political and communicative processes. The paper highlights how states and non-state actors use narratives to construct ocean identities, imagine sustainable futures, and negotiate complex issues such as biodiversity loss, climate change, and maritime security. It calls for interdisciplinary research that combines International Relations with marine studies to examine narrative formation, projection, and reception in contexts like port branding, AI adoption in shipping, and collaborative ocean science initiatives. This expansion underscores the explanatory power of strategic narratives in addressing emerging global challenges and shaping public diplomacy in maritime domains.

In his contribution J. P. Singh argues that strategic narratives are not monolithic or purely top-down constructs but emerge from complex, contested, and cooperative domestic processes involving multiple agencies and historical values. While these narratives appear cohesive externally, they are actually "best-fit" frameworks that reconcile competing priorities over time. Singh emphasizes that understanding strategic narratives requires empirical methodologies—both traditional content analysis and computational techniques—to uncover the tensions and overlaps within them.

Within this context, the article demonstrates that strategic narratives serve as governance tools that shape foreign policy and public diplomacy. Using UK examples in culture (British Council) and technology (AI policy), Singh shows how narratives like "cultural relations" and "pro-innovation AI" are crafted to project national identity and influence globally, while internally balancing autonomy, foreign policy goals, and regulatory concerns. Ultimately, Singh argues that strategic narratives are dynamic, historically rooted, and multi-layered, and that their complexity challenges simplistic notions of grand strategy. He concludes that in the age of AI, soft power and public diplomacy remain vital, complementing hard power to create "smart power," rather than being eclipsed by traditional power politics.

In her paper Moran Yarchi suggests that strategic narratives and image war are conceptually intertwined because both operate within the domain of perception management in international politics. Strategic narratives provide a structured way for political actors to frame events, construct shared meanings, and influence how audiences interpret the past, present, and future. They serve as sense-making tools that legitimize actions and policies, reinforce identity, and align actors with broader norms and values. Image war, by contrast, focuses on the high-stakes struggle over international perceptions during conflicts, where legitimacy and empathy can be as decisive as military power. Both frameworks emphasize, she argues, that success in contemporary

warfare depends not only on material capabilities but also on shaping meaning and controlling narratives. We would add that this has been the case for millennia, via evolving media technologies.

The linkage between the two lies in their complementary roles: strategic narratives function as the overarching interpretive framework, while image war represents the tactical arena where these narratives are contested and amplified. Political actors deploy strategic narratives as instruments within the image war to justify their conduct, delegitimize adversaries, and mobilize support among global audiences. This connection extends beyond communication to policymaking, as image considerations increasingly influence operational decisions. In essence, the paper contends that in the digital age—where conflicts are mediated through instantaneous, decentralized, and visual communication—the convergence of strategic narratives and image war reflects what Yarchi describes as a broader shift from battles of force to battles of perception, making narrative construction a core component of modern conflict strategy.

Dmitry Cherobrov's paper centres on how strategic narratives in public diplomacy have evolved in the digital age through participatory storytelling repertoires, particularly humour. Traditionally, strategic narratives aimed to shape shared understandings of international affairs through top-down communication from state actors. However, the rise of social media and digital platforms has decentralized this process, enabling non-state actors and ordinary users to co-produce and amplify narratives. Humour, as a competitive storytelling tool, plays a pivotal role because it attracts attention, encourages participation, and often goes viral, breaking through algorithmic barriers and filter bubbles. This participatory dynamic blurs distinctions between state and non-state actors, narrative creators and audiences, and even propaganda and diplomacy. While humorous content may not always change political views, it maximizes outreach, validates narratives through perceived authenticity, and exploits declining trust in governments by presenting messages as grassroots or non-official. Open remains the question of whether and how this changes humour itself and whether narrative alignment bears consequences for how we register humour and contempt.

The paper argues that strategic humour is increasingly deployed by states to contest adversaries' narratives, legitimize their own positions, and dominate the narrative space in a fragmented information environment. Examples such as Russian pranks and memes illustrate how humour simplifies complex geopolitical issues, reframes events, and creates memorable punchlines that feed into broader strategic claims—such as Russia's narrative of Western hypocrisy or Russophobia. These tactics leverage virality and audience co-production to circumvent traditional media gatekeepers and reach diverse publics, including those who might not engage with conventional diplomatic messaging. However, this participatory turn also introduces challenges: it fragments international discourse, reduces the emphasis on accuracy, and complicates measures of narrative success. Ultimately, the paper calls for rethinking strategic narratives as not merely top-down instruments of influence but as contested, multi-directional processes shaped by participatory and competitive digital storytelling.

Wang's paper argues that the World Expo serves as an interesting site for studying strategic narratives in public diplomacy because it transforms national messages into spatial and experiential forms. Unlike other mega-events, such as the Olympics, the Expo foregrounds narrative performance through national pavilions, which function as immersive storytelling environments. These pavilions compress complex national identities into brief encounters, requiring nations to balance credibility (plausibility and authenticity) with novelty (distinctiveness and emotional engagement). Drawing on Viktor Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization and Barry and Elmes' narrative view of strategy, the paper contends that effective strategic narratives disrupt habitual perceptions while remaining believable, thereby mobilizing meaning and shaping audience interpretation.

Jian Wang's study in this special issue seeks to apply narrative theory by analyzing how fictional and nonfictional modes coexist in nation branding. It demonstrates that successful pavilions weave factual claims with dramatized experiences to create symbolic authenticity, while acknowledging the interpretive agency of audiences. Furthermore, the paper identifies the convergence of national narratives around shared global themes such as sustainability, harmony, and progress. This convergence reframes strategic narrative not merely as a competitive tool but as a co-creative process that articulates visions of global order. The Expo thus becomes a microcosm of global discourse, revealing how nations simultaneously differentiate themselves and participate in a collective imagination. The paper makes three points. First, it operationalizes strategic narrative in a spatial-temporal context, showing how narratives are embodied in physical environments and experienced through visitor movement. This expands the concept beyond textual or media-based analysis to include architectural and multisensory storytelling. Second, it introduces the dialectic of credibility and defamiliarization as a criterion for narrative effectiveness, offering a nuanced framework for evaluating nation-branding strategies. Third, it highlights strategic narrative convergence as having the potential for shared meaning-making through the interplay between fiction, fact, and audience interpretation in shaping public diplomacy.

Yet, we question how new participatory media and repertoires are. There was empirical documentation of how "old"

or traditional media had been "renewed" by digital in 2007, constituting a "hybrid media system" in which legacy news media integrated citizens' digital content and citizens shared and digested each others' posts without the intermediation of legacy media (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2007; Chadwick 2010). Ditto pranks are nothing new. In 1957 the BBC documentary Panorama reported that in Switzerland spaghetti grows on trees even in winter—good news for the poor and hungry. Mihailidis (2020) points to a rich history of such pranks having political effects. Cherobrov argues there is an increasing volume of use of humour in politics but History and Anthropology show ordinary people have made fun of political elites for a long time. But what Cherobrov argues, alongside Crilley and Saunders, is the turn to harnessing virality and AI slop to a new (yet not original) technique. In the words of US MAGA node and former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon, since legacy news media are independent and critical and therefore the 'opposition' to MAGA then 'the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit' (Bannon, cited in Allsop 2020; no page). This flood of slop distracts journalists from any sustained analysis, and takes space and attention that might have been given to other parties' narratives.

This raises the question of whether this is strategic communication. There is an intention to flood the zone. There is a strategy to disarm and bury alternative perspectives. But this does not imply any attempt to convince audiences of MAGA's narrative or believe in the preferability of MAGA policy goals. This is not a technique based on establishing the veracity and credibility of the content of Trump's policies or Project 2025. It is not about narrative content but using macro or holistic communicative form in a given society to "win" the political space of discourse and contestation (Tittel et al. 2025), within which narrative is one of many communication formats. This is a negativity-based identity mobilisation: persuade people to vote against an opponent, not necessarily for your party (Lawall et al., 2025). Target those who feel alienated by mainstream politics who usually abstain from voting by provoking emotional responses to protect what they perceive as their in-group from a party they understand to be a threat (Phillips and Plutzer 2023). Leaders can pay communication teams to identify which emotions are stimulated by which cues and what content voters find credible. In this current context of how politics works, understanding how and to what degree 'truth' and 'narrative' are anchored or dislocated—what counts as meaningful to whom will be a primary task for future scholarship on strategic narrative and public diplomacy. If everything is 'live', 'viral', 'intense', and nostalgia for better times becomes the vibe, where does meaning go and what do actors find meaningful?

But that does not mean that narrative disappears! We close by emphasising that questions of contestation and context, power and communication, are illuminated by strategic narrative analysis. It is a necessary and now established lens to explain much of global politics in future years. Yet, what innovates this work is also subject to the contestation of the concept of strategic narrative itself. We are excited to see what is being negotiated and its consequences for public diplomacy. We are aware too that this might mean strategic narrative scholars can become strategically contested. Memory work and narrative contestation can be dangerous when read through the lens of domination. Space for scholarship to be that node and to have that freedom is essential also for public diplomacy to be understood with a critical eye concerning its role in the production of discontent and the future of the international order itself.

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## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors declare no competing interests.



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