

Deconstructing Digital Rhetoric to Face Geopolitical Challenges: A Social Media Narrative Analysis Framework

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Abstract: Skyrocketing technological advancement along with changes in environment dynamics allowed people, states and governments to influence each other's diplomacy, security and international relations, using words and images, strings of events, to construct narratives. The rhetoric of power and conflict is distributed in chameleonic volatile environments, targeting members of the society to challenge security status and power balance, while new media instruments feed people's thirst for information to challenge their beliefs into tailoring attitudes and behaviours. Defined by many as a "portrayal of events surrounding change" (Dunford and Jones, 2000) or as "central feature of modern influencing across borders" (Wagnsson and Lundström, 2023) in a continuous "battle", (Van Noort, 2017), strategic narratives bear multiple meanings, generated by the versatility of the digital dissemination channels. Understanding these meanings enlighten many directions, like international relations, diplomacy and politics, resulting in risk-free engagement, vulnerability-awareness and controlled decision-making policies, just by using narrative analysis as the appropriate instrument. However, the classical analytical models do not provide enough lenses to grasp all the components generating meaning in a digitally disseminated content and many features are thus ignored, mutilating paramount intelligence otherwise needed to complete the picture. That is why, this paper advances a model framework for a digital narrative analysis that looks at components of the textual narrative backed by the features of the environment, the characteristics of the audience and the dynamics of the dissemination, coupled with more recent social media metrics. To this end, we reviewed literature on Russian formalism (Propp, 1928), (Tomashevsky, 1965) structuralist narratology (Todorov 1969, Genette 1988, Bal 1977), poststructuralism (Chatman, 1978) and postclassical narratology (Herman, Fludernik, 1999) to the most recent digitally related approaches (Georgakopoulou, 2020), (Bal, 2021) and then advanced our analysis framework that adds specific traits which social media environments enhance. We thus intend to contribute to the large body of literature with an analytical model, to render a mould of the strategic narratives in the security, defence, politics and international relations.. This paper is part of a larger study, the framework will be piloted in further research, where data will be gathered to validate the model.

Keywords: Strategic narratives, Digital rhetoric, Social media, Resilience, Analysis framework, Geopolitical challenges

1. Background

The ubiquity of handheld devices beyond barriers of age, demographics or geopolitics has transferred dialogues in the online environment, calling this communication 2.0. As a result, any type of human interaction is most frequently unfolded via images and words, while "narrative" and "rhetoric" have become buzz words. These appeal to a myriad of means to coagulate or polarise, to deceive and influence, to change behaviour and shatter confidence in a continuous exchange of information. Dialogues build on language whose syntax is different, shorter and simpler, while lexis is more versatile, changing meaning with every context it inhabits. Visuals are prevalent in front of the words, sounds and multimedia are better message vessels than words, even if this is done implicitly. The message, whose social context index has lowered its relevance in decoding, is able to regenerate itself and change form through user generated content, while control over shared information tends to zero.

Supported by this, international relations unfold differently now, focusing on visibility and transparency in decisions and measures. Governments have turned in favour of extra-linguistic communication with forms that do not replace language, they complete it instead, illuminate it, supplement it (Cohen, 1987), and cultivate foreign public opinion through soft power, through positive attraction and persuasion, to accomplish foreign affair goals through narratives, as a more attractive means, with cooperation rather than force, using the "ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes you want" (Nye, 2004). They thus develop an interaction at international actors' level, through personalities, organisations and institutions (Mavrodiava, Aleksandrina V., Okky K. Rachman, Vito B. Harahap, and Rajib Shaw, 2019) that meets goals in digital environments. The forms taken by the digital messages, narratives constructed with certain rhetoric, are delivered with a variation of decoding opportunities to allow engagement in digital interactions. (Bjola and Manor, 2024)

Multiplicity of meaning triggers ambiguity, and this sometimes might be a serious factor to impact diplomatic relations. Politicians use rhetoric to gain legitimation or the public acceptance of policy, as "rhetoric influences fundamental elements of grand strategy such as defining national interests, identifying threats, proposing policy options, and mobilising audiences (Goddard and Krebs, 2015). Rhetoric is the art of persuading an audience using

various language devices. The latter ones are contained in narratives, i.e. in stories that bear meaning and impact the audience as such. Similar to narratives, as vessels of meaning, rhetoric, as a delivering strategy, can also be expressed as speech, text or image.

These are among the most serious reasons why a more complex understanding of the narrative is needed, to ensure a complete apprehension among participants, be they society at large or leaders in international relations, especially since the audience in transmedia is not represented by “readers, players or spectators but invariably fans, a term that suggests fanatic and uncritical devotion to story worlds” (Ryan, 2016)

Secondly, the online environment makes ambiguity prevalent over precision, while ever evolving technologies ubiquitously invade the public sphere, bearing marks on what public engagement was before; openness is more valuable than politeness, emotion is blamed to the detriment of reasoning, discreteness is sold for transparency. All these generate confusion, scaffolded by the characteristics of the online environment where “information overload, visual enhancement, emotional framing, algorithmic-driven engagement” (Bjola, C., Cassidy, J., & Manor, I. 2019) trigger a rise in the number of social movements, with impact on geopolitics, international relations, diplomacy and individuals (Kay, Freely, 2013). People’s interaction has changed patterns of communication, styles of interaction, relationships, actions and decisions in the international online environment. As a consequence, diplomatic dynamics may suffer and geopolitics may be translated into a different framework of analysis, threatened by narratives decoded with inappropriate digital keys.

In this context, while large bodies of literature perform critical discourse analysis on international, state or non-state actors’ speeches that construct realities or change behaviours through social media, little has been said, yet, about the architecture of information building up strategic narratives, especially when international relations are at stake. The present paper draws on narratology and social media metrics to generate a two tier analytical model for the digital strategic content that impacts power relationships and re-calibrates geopolitics of information. The aim is to bring forth an assessment model that can transfer narrative analysis into the social media environment, where the message should be looked at from a variety of angles, garnering a more complex understanding, especially since current conflicts bear chameleonic changes and challenges, capitalising on words, images and their semiotics.

To meet our goal, we formulated the research question that sets the ground of this paper: What elements should an analytical framework include for a social media narrative analysis to cover all the meaning-generated components in a message, looking at the features of the textual narratology and the metrics of the virtual dissemination environment ?

To answer this question, we reviewed the most representative contributions to textual narratology based on an evolutionary approach. Also, more recent contributions have been called forth, to add the variables brought by the digital characteristics. Integration of the recurrent features and then of the specific digital environment ones resulted in an analytical framework applicable to strategic narratives in social media environments. The use of the resulted model consists in sensible intelligence better revealed, compared to a critical discourse analysis, as a reflection of the concept “good stories are the basis of excellent sociology” (Clegg, 1993) The model will be validated in further research case studies.

2. Textual Narrative Analysis- Narratologists’ Evolutionary Linear Approach

While social networks can be used with positive narratives but equally with terror and fear incentives through negative messages, a multi-faceted, multi-strata analysis framework is needed, to let users understand the new form messages take and how an online identity can trigger changes in social behaviour, how it can perform social influence or generate engagement and activism. The analysis should focus on the fluidity of messages that coagulate into narratives, appealing to emotions, to values, to individuals’ collective unconsciousness, on the strategies used, by placing targeted individuals in new contexts and giving them new meanings, the meanings intended by the sender. In what follows we will look at textual narrative frameworks and their applicability to online environments.

Considered by most authors as being connected to literary studies, narratives have now become “a type of story that gives meaning to a series of events and occurrences” (Cobaugh, 2019). The precursor of this vision was Todorov’s *narrative as a universe of representations* (1969), a vision reflective of the social media environments considering its characteristics- fluidity, multimedia content, versatility and volatility of messages brought by the user generated content possibility. Also, *multimedia communication environments* rely heavily on the user-generated -content in conversations, replacing feelings, ideas, attitudes, reactions, metaphors, dialogues, practically a substitute for anything language meant in real interactions.

If authors in the past saw narratives as structures that have *an actor, an action, an intention, a scene, and an instrument* (Burke, 1969), Todorov (1971) adds *equilibrium* (setting and characters presented), *disruption* (sudden outburst that brings imbalance), *recognition* (of the disruption, by the narrator or character, by action), then *resolution* (agent in a quest to restore the equilibrium), and a *new equilibrium* (reached by the character and the plot development) with concluding insight. These elements are useful in analysing the larger frame of a narrative, composed of multiple stories or multiple posts on the same topic, possibly with different meanings, where the action and its evolution can be traced, where the topic is revealed along with the actors involved, through the way they relate to one another and through their position to the topic and to each other.

Focusing on a smaller scale or taking sequences of events that contribute to the whole picture, the narrative content has a *story, plot and pattern* (Forster, 1927); *story* is similar to what Prince (2003) would later define as ‘the set of narrated situations and events in their chronological sequence’, where *plot* is defined by the causal connection between events in a story and *pattern* is rendered by the connection between time and recurrent causality. The importance of the effect the plot has upon the *audience* was brought by Friedman (1955) who focuses on *who sees the story, how and with what effect* (i.e. mainly the receiver of the message). For Metz (1974) on the other hand, narrative characteristics add extra elements like music or voice-over, proper to movies, as a precursor of a social media narrative. These aspects complement features designed as important by Labov’s model (1972). Actually Labov’s vision best describes the live messages, the videos posted in social media and the photos as well, as follows: the *abstract*, seen as summary of the events, anchors the audience’s attention and stirs interest, and this is actually the introductory text to any posting in social media; the *orientation* is materialised in the tagging, the check-in and the title of the post; the *complicating action* is composed of events in the narrative, more events in a row, connected in a causal relationship and represented by share of thoughts, statements or actions. The *resolution* is more difficult to be identified in a non-textual narrative, due to the fluidity of the medium (online environment). *Evaluation* of the narrative content can be performed, according to Labov, in several ways, internally (while the story takes place) or externally, after the story is consumed, while an embedded evaluation can be provided by a character in the narrative or indirectly, through another event. Evaluation of the narrative generates another narrative in its turn, as it materialises in comments with text, reactions, i.e. sentiment and also reactions using other posts, photos, GIFs, memes. The value of the story and its real message is always given by the *coda* as Labov calls it, mentioning the connection between the story, the real time and real life events.

If the previous approaches look at the *narrative text*, Genette (1980) considers the *narrator’s perspective* and adds more features: *mood* (to show the detailed precision in a narrative and the accuracy of the information conveyed), *function* (speaks about the narrator who tells the story himself, or interrupts the one who does it and gets involved, showing the source of information, the precision and emotions), *voice* (the narrator as a character or as a presenter), *time* (what happened, what is going to happen or things as happening), *speed* (shows higher or lower intention to the narrative text) and *frequency of events* (seen as the number of times an event occurs in the story or the number of times this is mentioned in the narrative) These elements can be considered in relation to multiple postings and seen as events that create a narrative on a social media wall. In this respect, Genette (1980) mentions three categories: *Singulative narration*, for one or *n* times narrating what happened once or *n* times (in terms of multiple postings covering the same topic). *Repeating narrative*: Recounting more than once what happened once. *Iterative narrative*: Relating one time what happened several times (in terms of various events coagulated into one significant topic and unique but polyphonic posting) *The order of the narrated events* is important, since it gives information on the dynamics of the narrative, on the evolution or involution of topic’s importance in a story development. This can easily be monitored based on the information gathered from the sharing activity. Placing stories in a narration, in a certain order of events, has an explanatory role as well, stirring curiosity among the targeted individuals.

Beside the narrator’s perspective, along with his performance in the story, Bal (1997) advances the important *role of the character inside* the narration along with functions he can get, like a helper or an opponent, a sender or a receiver. Bal makes the distinction between a narrative text which tells a story, where a story is a series of related events, connected by causality and an event which is the transition from one state to another, in the story. Herman was yet the one who looked at cognitive sciences, just like Fludernik (1996) who saw narrative as an experience stored emotionally, since its meaning can generate emotions and reactions based on the content inside. Herman (2002) contributes to the vision seeing that humans, both readers and receivers, co-create worlds of stories based on common experiences, about current or future events. In Herman’s view, the individual is both a narrator and a subject of the story. Transposing this in the mediatic realm, the speaker’s identity arises out of discursive interactions and by looking at narratives through analytical lenses one can draw the identity of

the main actors inside, as Thornborrow and Coates (2005) put it. Therefore, our framework will contribute to a deeper understanding of the main actors' identity in their handling of strategic narratives.

What differentiates a strategic narrative from a textual narrative and what overlaps is seen by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle (2013) as : "representations of a sequence of *events and identities*, a *communicative tool* through which political actors—usually elites—attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives. Critically, strategic narratives integrate interests and goals—they articulate end states and suggest how to get there". Events are what the content in social media is mainly focusing on, identities are imagistic, built from the interactions and dialogue, built from the content disseminated. All these communicate about something and communicate to someone, at all times, while their logic allows the sender to accomplish planned goals. This, translated in the fluid social media environment, is completed by Arduser's view (2014) that looks at the characters' position inside a narrative, in relation to each other and to the events, measuring *interactions, relations and ties*, to judge dynamics, to see the architecture of social networks beyond the dialogue, exchanged information and sentiment analysis measured in reactions, format used for emotional exchange and metrics of participants and their role in the whole manifestation. These metrics generate adjacent information about the content, more data about the characters and supplementary lenses to understand the implications and the effects the message bears.

3. Digital Narrative Analysis- Narratologists' Multi Perspective Approach

The multi-dimensional analysis model we propose for decoding narratives in social media considers both characteristics taken from the most important textual models (as seen above) and features from the social media analysis perspective. Added to the textual narrative characteristics, we now follow with a literature review on digital environment features. In this respect, Granovetter (1973, 2012), Coser (1975), Burt (1992, 2004), Borgatti & Halgin (2011) concentrate more on the *online imagistic identities* and look at the importance of *ties* and their impact over the posting's itinerary and dissemination force, they look at *social interactions*, with particular focus on the concepts of time, place, person and the context of engagement. Speaking about ties, Haythornthwaite (2002) sees them as the foundation of social networks, as they bear a strong influence upon communicators and help disseminate important exchanges, while weak ties impact communicators in being dependent on protocols established by others. Weak ties are unable to self-sustain due to poor and low frequency exchanges.

Alternatively, Bamberg (2012) looks at narratives from several other perspectives. First of all, stories are seen as components of bigger interactive pictures, the topic narrative, as we would call it, to differentiate. In this context, along characteristics related to the text itself, the social media analysis looks at elements connected to *performance of the actors* in the story, like gestures, posture, facial expression and gaze, to be included, while the actors themselves (mentioned as well), are situated in certain focal places, taking part in certain suggestive events (both of them mentioned). It is important that the analysis nominates these and sets them in relation to one another. Beyond that, the story itself follows the structural linear pattern, considering the plot elements, but the modality of telling is added to this (Georgakopoulou, 2007). Going deeper, the author mentions *time* (with a reference to the teller's orientation-present, past or future, especially since there could be more tellers involved in more interactions and possessing various visions to the world) and *place* as well, to be most important in an interaction. Speaking about actors, *identities* are to be analysed from their role and the way they participate, their style of telling. Wortham (2000) and Georgakopoulou (2013) add the importance of *recurring language* to these approaches, along with a selection of *how deeds are presented*, which gives importance to the *actors' social position* and shows the way the social role builds a representative meaning for the interconnected audiences and users.

Later on, Georgakopoulou (2017) completes the analysis framework with a reference to the *content sharing practices* (notifications on *actor's recent activity*, on his *localization and tagging*, assessment of actors' attitude, *activity or emotional state*, and reference to their relationships) as well as to the *rescripting practices* (visual and verbal transformation of already existent stories, to generate new stories, by framing the original to adapt it to a larger different audience. We can mention here the *memes, mashups or parodies*) and *story's distribution* across sites routinely, after the plots have been recontextualized or redefined with various contributors' input. This gives rise to different meaning-making (Georgakopoulou 2014, 2015b) and represents evidence for the fact that moving a topic into a different context triggers its own meaning-making policies. This might be good for the polyphonics of the text but detrimental for the decoding and feedback. (e.g. Perrino 2017; Blommaert and Varis 2015). Another important aspect in what Georgakopoulou, Iversen, Stage, (2020) call is about the "*Numbers and measurements* [which] have also become crucial aspects of the actual stories shared on social

media and their mobilisation of users and action” The above mentioned authors state that all these measuring instruments allowed by the digital platforms to seize the communication process are closely concerned with which stories are good to be shared, with how to do that, with how stories appeal to people and how people in the stories make use of the content to present themselves or their lives to others, by counting *how often, for how long, in which order and where communication takes place*. Conversely, other authors speak about the concept of *metricization* (Lupton 2016; Marres 2017) in relation to the interaction and users’ behaviour, to the dialogues and activities participants of the narrative unfold, be they audience, authors, narrators or main characters. The indicators discussed so far allow both automatic and manual recording of metrics, but studies have revealed that computational analysis can even identify topics augmented in social media prior to becoming visible and important in mainstream media, from a combination of opinion, fact and emotion “uttered in anticipation of events that had not yet attained recognition through mainstream media (Papacharissi and Oliveira 2012) Numbers are thus important in narrative analysis, metrics in general, to allow us to get a sense of past and present, to identify the flaws and alleviate them, as Hacking (1990) considered.

4. A Social Media Integrated Narrative Analysis Framework

To put it all into a perspective, let us draw the following representation that emerged after the study of the literature in the field and that integrates all the relevant elements.

The model also stemmed from the need to have an instrument that can assess narratives in social media, given the versatility of dissemination channels and the volatility of the messages with user generated content availability. Moreover, with the uprising weaponization of words and images, with the surge in biometric data available in databases, disinformation and cyber-attacks are on the rise. Current analysis allows users to understand actors and their message, their actions and intentions, all characteristics of the environment. Using this model raises awareness among users, allowing them to become resilient in front of adversities. Since these strategies were scarcely disseminated, allowing for the state and non-state actors to use them against individuals, societies and foreign governments, deconstructing these strategies scaffold better understanding against hostile actions.

4.1 Discussion on Functionality

The analysis model developed subsequent to our literature review and discussion consists of four main clusters of information applicable to the textual narrative and four other main clusters applicable to the digital environment. These are events (consisting of the story itself), actors, narrators and characters’ identities on the one hand, and social interaction, non-verbal communication, recent activity monitoring, as well as a meta-perspective evaluation of the events, on the other. Each of the clusters can be understood by looking at their discrete elements, as can be seen in Figure 1 and in the description that follows:

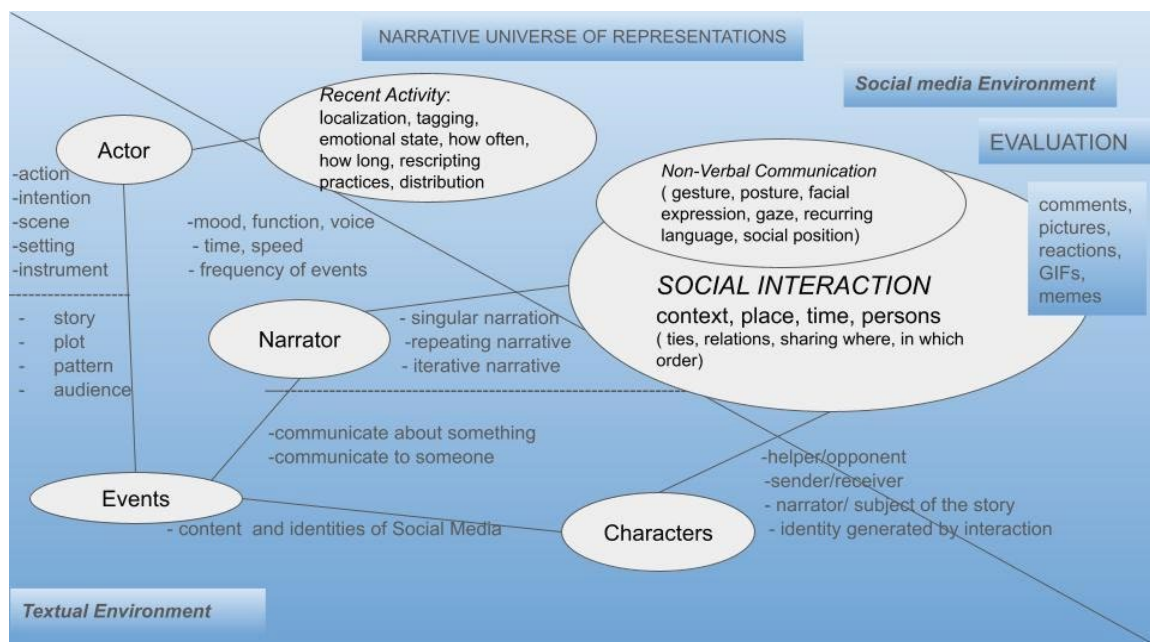


Figure 1: Social media integrated narrative analysis framework - Popescu M.M. (2024)

- **The actor** is usually responsible for the main message of the narrative and for the rhetoric embedded. He has an intention that makes him take action, on a scene and certain setting, while he uses communication (discourse, rhetoric) devices for that purpose. To attain his goal, the actor creates a story that has a certain plot, follows a persuasion pattern. The actor tailors all his message (form and content) to his targeted audience. Behind his story there is always an event that involves other identities, the narrator (s) and the character (s).
- **The narrator** can choose to insist more or less on the narrative he presents (singular/repeating/iterative narration) based on the planned and intended effects but also based on the audience's characteristics. Also, he can choose to just narrate the story or be part of it, presenting something that is developing, that was or will be, or he can just recount someone else's experience. This allows the analysed perspective to be more or less complete or reliable. The frequency of the narrated events and the order in which they are recounted give data for analysis as well.
- **The characters** are those drawing the context of the story, the helpers or the opponents, the senders or the receivers of the narrator's message, the ones who participate in the plot and bring the story back to equilibrium or take the story to another level. Their identity is important in interaction, and it is actually defined by social interaction.
- **Social interaction** concentrates on the narrator and characters defining the context, at a certain time and in a certain place, with certain contributors, yet the third party-contributors to the narration, those that generate comments, posts pictures in return to answer visually, count equally. Thus, the effect of the intended rhetoric and narratives is better seen, through GIFs and memes taken as reactions to the story presented by the narrator and supported by characters. The ties measured through interactions and reactions, through sharings, in which order and to which groups, all facilitate evaluation as well.
- **Non-verbal communication** is here to be seen in relation to the context, the narrator and characters, as all generate evaluation metrics on the quality of social interaction and implicitly on the effects the narration intends on the audience.
- **The recent activity** generates information on the actor's position, his emotional state, his contextual social connections, and from here the suggested framing for the whole story, narration and rhetoric.
- The fourth cluster in each perspective (textual and digital) are self-contained and reflective of all the others mentioned above. Therefore, they are not treated separately as we have included them in the descriptions already performed.

All data is compared to facts in a real-time environment. The research must still consider the difference between the organic, inorganic and viral posts, between the advertising library and the genuine content.

5. Conclusions

In the context of fulminant technological progress corroborated to a continuation of all activities into the digital environment, from communication to entertainment and from international relations and diplomacy to non-kinetic warfare, new assessment tools have to be designed to help us avoid finding ourselves in underestimated contexts that could bear important consequences for society at large. When the most discrete elements that coagulate all actions, be they in real environments or digital arena are the word and the image, constructed in stories, in narratives and delivered following a certain rhetoric, a thorough understanding would reveal data about actors initiating the hostile digital actions (seen today as cognitive or information warfare), about facts and actions, about decisions and plans to unfold. Awareness of all these can contribute to a better resilient attitude members of a society can have. That is why, the current paper comes to present a new model of analysis for a digital narrative, since we all inhabit a digital public sphere, where information is currency, where images have become weapons and where human interaction receives new semiotics.

The new model analyses the strategic narratives in social media, but this paper just advances the theoretical model. Its validation will continue this large study and gather data based on the metrics covered in this framework. The fluidity and evanescence of the digital environment, its volatility, triggered the need for a two sided model, a textual and a digital perspective that, combined, generate information for the general message. The textual angle lends itself to the message, the text per se, with each narrative, from 1 to n in the larger rhetorical discourse, while the Social Media angle is characteristic of the narrator and his characters, with what he does and how he does it in the narratives he builds, but also about what he does in the network where his narratives are, digitally disseminated. Gathering data from a pluralistic perspective allows us to adapt to the new strategies and counteract the new AI driven non-kinetic conflicts, as individuals, as nations and states altogether.

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